ASSESSMENT OF GRAMMATICAL ERRORS
AND PRAGMATIC FAILURE

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RESUMEN

Este estudio explora la relación que existe entre la competencia gramatical (precisión en la estructura) y la competencia pragmática (el uso apropiado de la lengua de acuerdo con la situación en que se utiliza, los interlocutores y el contenido del mensaje). Se creó un instrumento que permitía evaluar aspectos gramaticales y pragmáticos de una serie de mensajes enviados por un grupo de estudiantes a sus profesores con el fin de determinar si los mensajes escritos correctamente también eran apropiados, si los hablantes nativos y los no nativos juzgan la seriedad de un problema de igual forma, y si los profesores hablantes nativos son más exigentes o más tolerantes que los profesores no nativos.

ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationship between grammatical competence (accuracy of structure) and pragmatic competence (appropriateness of utterances according to specific situations, speakers and content). A series of messages written by university students were used. A grammatical and pragmatic judgement task was developed to determine whether accurate messages are also appropriate, whether NSs and NNSs rate the severity of a given problem in the same way, and whether teachers who are NSs are harsher or more lenient in their judgements than teachers who are NNSs.

It is self-evident that acquiring a foreign language as an adult is a long, demanding process, yet teachers and learners alike are quite often unaware of many of the reasons why this is so. To begin with, researchers still do not have a comprehensive picture of all facets of the acquisition process. In addition, there is no universal agreement as to what constitutes "knowing a language," so when a person's understanding of the process is very simplistic, some of the major difficulties are missed altogether. The important concept of communicative competence underlies communicative approaches to language teaching, that is, those that aim at teaching a second or foreign language with the ultimate goal of communication with other speakers of the language. We must understand that concept in order to decide what it takes to "know a language."

Philosophers, anthropologists and sociolinguists have tried to define communicative competence, a term coined by Hymes (1972). He explained that communicative competence includes our ability not only to string words together into grammatical sentences but also to convey and interpret messages and to negotiate meaning. Later on, Canale and Swain (1980)

elaborated on the definition and proposed four components: grammatical competence (mastering the linguistic code), discourse competence (connecting sentences into stretches of discourse), sociolinguistic competence (using the sociocultural rules of the language appropriately), and strategic competence (using strategies to compensate for breakdowns in communication). More recently, Bachman (1990) has refined the components of what he simply calls "language competence." He subsumes Canale and Swain's grammatical competence and discourse competence into "organizational competence," that is, the speaker's ability to use language forms at either the sentence or the discourse level. A second component, pragmatic competence, is more inclusive than Canale and Swain's sociolinguistic competence. It incorporates illocutionary competence (the ability to match the meaning of an utterance with its pragmatic force and to understand functional aspects of the language) and sociolinguistic competence (culturally related aspects of the language such as politeness or formality). Finally, Canale and Swain's fourth component, strategic competence, becomes an entirely separate element of what Bachman calls "communicative language ability." This choice reflects current acknowledgement of the importance of training learners to use appropriate strategies not only to repair breakdowns in communication but also to enhance it.

The above-mentioned attempts to define communicative competence indicate that this is far from a simple concept. When learners start their journey towards the acquisition of a new language, they cannot limit themselves to learning the form or linguistic system, which is the part of the language that can be analyzed and evaluated the most objectively. Successful learners must also develop skills and strategies for using language to communicate meaning effectively. In addition, they must become aware of the social meaning of language forms. Achieving the latter goal can be problematic, especially in a foreign language environment, due to the fact that learners do not receive adequate input. It is important to establish, though, that authentic discourse is crucial not because students should imitate native speakers' (NS) action patterns in order to be successful. Rather, learners must build their own pragmatic knowledge of the L2 on the right kind of input. (For a discussion on this topic, see Kasper, 1997.) Another dimension to be considered is that most cultural conventions cannot be gleaned from the grammar of a language. Most learners need to be made aware of patterns. Furthermore, as Wolfson points out in her 1989 book which has become an important reference for discussions on the topic, "the rules of speaking, and more generally, norms of interaction are . . .both culture-specific and largely unconscious." These two characteristics make identification of what needs to be learned especially troublesome.

Saville-Troike (1996) argues that, although it is not known exactly how children do it, they learn social meaning as part of their native language intuition. In sharp contrast, proficient second and foreign language speakers seldom develop this special kind of sensitivity towards the language. Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998:233) agree. They found that "L2 learners often develop grammatical competence in the absence of concomitant pragmatic competence." Furthermore, the authors suggest that advanced learners might be unaware of this mismatch. They conducted a study of more than five hundred learners of English and their teachers in the United States (ESL) and in Italy (EFL). The subjects were asked to judge sentences that were pragmatically appropriate but ungrammatical, sentences that were grammatical but pragmatically inappropriate, and sentences that were both grammatical and appropriate. They found that whereas EFL learners and their teachers

consistently ranked grammatical errors as more serious than pragmatic errors, ESL learners and their teachers showed the opposite pattern. They concluded that this behavior may be due not only to lack of appropriate input in the EFL situation, but also to their teachers' focus on grammatical competence or accuracy.

The focus of the present report, the first in a series of studies, is interlanguage pragmatics, that is, "the study of nonnative speakers' use and acquisition of L2 pragmatic knowledge" (Kasper and Rose, 1999: 81). The first goal is to determine whether native and nonnative teachers of English as a foreign language, as well as other native speakers who are not trained in the area of EFL, assess accuracy and appropriateness in the same way. The second goal is to find out whether grammatical competence develops in the absence of concomitant pragmatic competence, as Bardovi-Harlig and Dörney (1998) have found. Since many of the instances of pragmatic failure clearly break the rules of politeness, House's and Kasper´s (1981: 158) question is also relevant: "Are such pragmatic errors due to the learners' simply not knowing the formal English equivalent of what they would say in their native language, or are there perhaps different social norms in the two speech communities which affect the linguistic behavior of native speakers in terms of its politeness?"

Method

Participants

Three groups of subjects participated in this study. The first were 18 learners of English as a foreign language, studying at three Latin American universities. They produced the data utilized in this study. Table 1 gives a general profile of these learners.

Table 1
Background Information on the Learners

Message	Gender		School			Level				
	Female	Male	1	2	3	First Year	Second Year	Fourth Year	Lic	M.A.
1	✓		✓						✓	
2		✓		✓					✓	
3	✓			✓					✓	
4		✓		✓						✓
5	✓			✓				✓		
6		✓		✓				✓		
7		✓		✓			✓			
8	✓			✓		✓				
9	✓			✓				✓		
10	✓			✓					✓	
11	✓			✓					✓	
12	✓			✓				✓		

Continuación Tabla 1

Message	Gender		School			Level				
	Female	Male	1	2	3	First Year	Second Year	Fourth Year	Lic	M.A.
13	✓				✓				✓	
14	✓				✓				✓	
15	✓				✓				✓	
16	✓			✓			✓			
17	✓			✓						✓
18		✓		✓						✓
19	✓			✓						✓
Total	14	5	1	15	3	1	2	4	8	4

The two remaining groups of subjects are the raters. Twelve professors who teach English language and literature at the School of Modern Languages at the University of Costa Rica formed the second group. Three professors are native speakers of English and nine are nonnative speakers (NNSs). The third group consisted of four U.S. college students who are native speakers of English but who are not language majors. These students were invited to participate in the investigation since their judgments were potentially revealing because they are familiar with university life in the United States, and consequently, with the pragmatic rules that govern the interaction between a professor and a student.

The Data

The data used in the present study consist of five e-mail messages students sent their professors as well as fourteen informal notes learners left in their instructors' offices. The addressees were three professors, two females and one male. The messages selected met two requirements: they were written in English, the students' L2, and the goal of the message was either to apologize or to make a request. These two language functions were selected because, to be appropriate, they require polite language and the use of mitigators to reduce the degree of imposition involved. In addition, a few messages written in Spanish, the students' L1, and which were pragmatically inappropriate were kept in the sample for the purpose of comparison.

Instrument

A pragmatic and grammatical judgement task was developed. Participants were instructed to read a series of messages written by EFL learners to their professors and rate them as "very good," "good," "borderline," "needs work" and "poor" in terms of accuracy and appropriateness. For those messages that were considered inaccurate (borderline or below), the evaluators were asked to mention the two most serious problems they found in the messages, and for those that were assessed as inappropriate (borderline or below), they were invited to justify their judgements.

The judgement task was preceded by a series of examples taken from Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998: 241) that clearly illustrate the concepts of accuracy and appropriateness.

(See the Appendix for abbreviated version of instrument.) Not all the data collected were used in the present study because of space constraints.

Procedure

The messages were typed but not edited for language or content. However, in order to keep the writer's and the addressee's identities anonymous, names of people, institutions and cities, as well as telephone and fax numbers, were deleted. After the raters determined whether or not the messages were grammatically correct and pragmatically appropriate, the scoring scale shown in Table 2 was used to convert descriptive phrases into numbers.

Table 2
Scoring Scale for Judgement Tasks

Judgement	Score
Very good	+2
Good	+1
Borderline	0
Needs work	-1
Poor	-2

After the judgement tasks were scored, results were compared to determine (1) whether accurate messages are also appropriate, i.e., whether pragmatic and grammatical development are perceived as taking place simultaneously or not, (2) whether native and nonnative speakers rate the severity of a given problem in the same way, and (3) whether teachers who are native speakers of English are harsher or more lenient in their judgements than teachers who are nonnative speakers.

Results

Table 3 summarizes the average score given to each message by four groups of raters: (1) all the 16 raters, (2) 3 NS teachers, (3) 9 NNS teachers and (4) 7 NS teachers and university students. The first column corresponds to the accuracy and the second to the appropriateness score. As explained above, possible scores go from 2 to –2.

Table 3:
Average Scores

Message	All Raters		NS teachers		NNS Teachers		All NSs	
	Acc	App	Acc	App	Acc	App	Acc	App
1	-1.6	-0.8	-1.3	-1	-2	-0.33	-1.14	-1.43
2	0	0.44	-0.3	1	0.11	0.22	-0.14	0.71
3	0.5	0.31	1	1	0.22	0.56	0.86	0
4	0.9	-0.6	0.3	-1.3	1	-0.44	0.71	-0.71
5	-0.3	0	0.3	1	-0.56	-0.11	0.14	0.14
6	0.2	0.13	0.7	0.33	0.11	-0.11	0.28	0.43
7	-0.8	-0.7	-0.3	-0.3	-1	-0.56	-0.43	-0.85
8	1.1	1.38	1.7	1.33	0.89	1.33	1.43	1.43
9	-1.2	0.38	-0.7	1.33	-1.33	0.11	-1	0.71
10	0.6	0.81	0	0.33	0.67	0.67	0.57	1
11	1.4	0.06	2	-0.3	1.33	0.11	0.57	0
12	0.9	0.38	1.3	1	1.11	0.22	0.57	0.57
13	0.4	0.38	0.3	0.33	0.44	0.22	0.28	0.57
14	-1.4	-1.1	-1.7	-1.3	-1.67	-1.11	-1	-1
15	-1.7	-1.4	-1.7	-1	-1.89	-1.89	-1.43	-0.86
16	-0.7	-0.8	-0.3	-0.3	-0.67	-0.89	-0.71	-0.57
17	1.1	0.94	1.3	1.67	1.22	-0.78	1	1.14
18	1.1	0.88	1	1.33	1.33	-0.78	0.71	1
19	1.4	-0.5	1.7	-0.7	1.22	-0.44	1.57	-0.57

Question 1: Are grammatical and pragmatic development simultaneous?

Results indicate that, for the most part, judges found that grammatical and pragmatic development are parallel. Figure 1 summarizes how raters (n= 16) scored the messages.
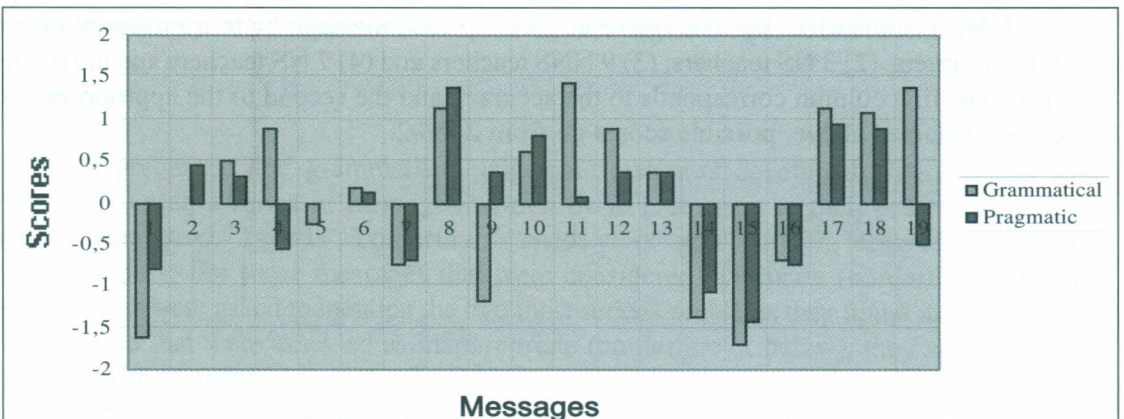

Fig. 1. Grammatical and Pragmatic Judgement Task(All Subjects, n = 16

Nine of the messages (47.4%) received positive scores (i.e., above zero) in both accuracy and appropriateness while six messages (31.6%) received negative scores (i.e., zero or below) in both areas. However, there was a mismatch in a few messages. Two of them (10.5%) received positive accuracy scores but negative appropriateness scores. The opposite was true for the final two messages (10.5%). In short, only messages 2, 4, 9, and 19 (21%) were scored in such a way that the judgements indicate that the development of one of the areas lags behind.

Another way to analyze Figure 1 is to say that eleven messages (57.9%) were considered accurate while eight (42.1%) were classified as inaccurate. Likewise, eleven messages (57.9%) were considered appropriate while eight (42.1%) were classified as inappropriate. However, although there is a tendency to rate accurate messages as appropriate and inaccurate messages as inappropriate, sometimes there is a mismatch.

Question 2: Do NSs and NNSs of English rate the severity of grammatical and pragmatic problems the same way?

Figures 2 and 3 compare the ratings of the accuracy and appropriateness of the messages produced by native speakers (n=7) and nonnative speakers of English (n=9). In general terms, they are close.
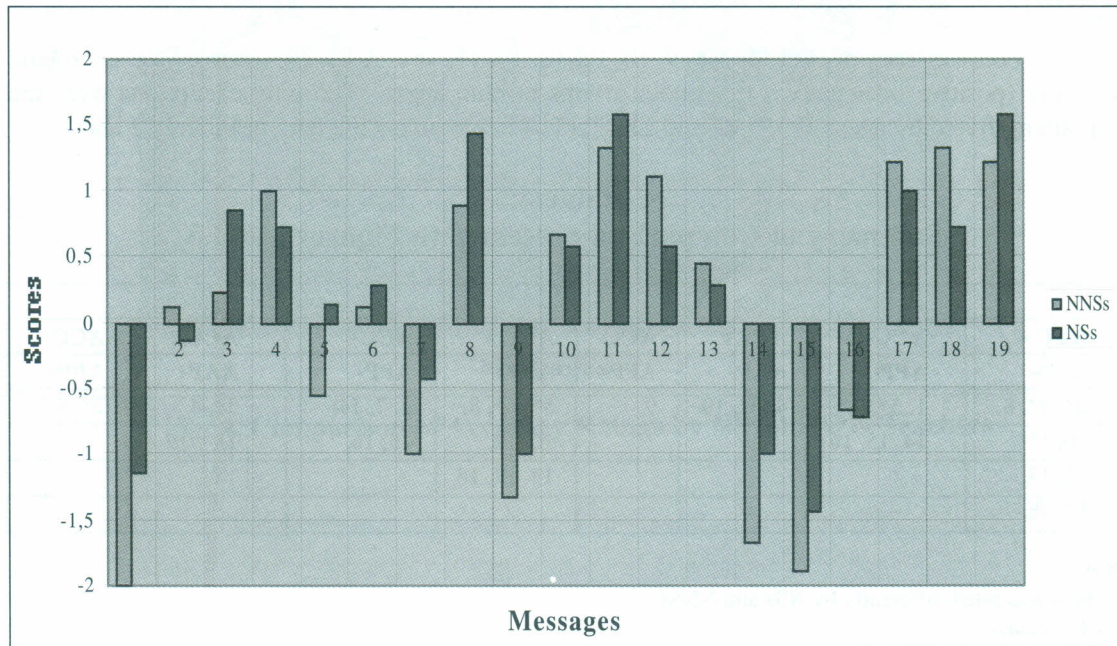

Fig. 2. Comparison of Accuracy Ratngs by NSs and NNSs
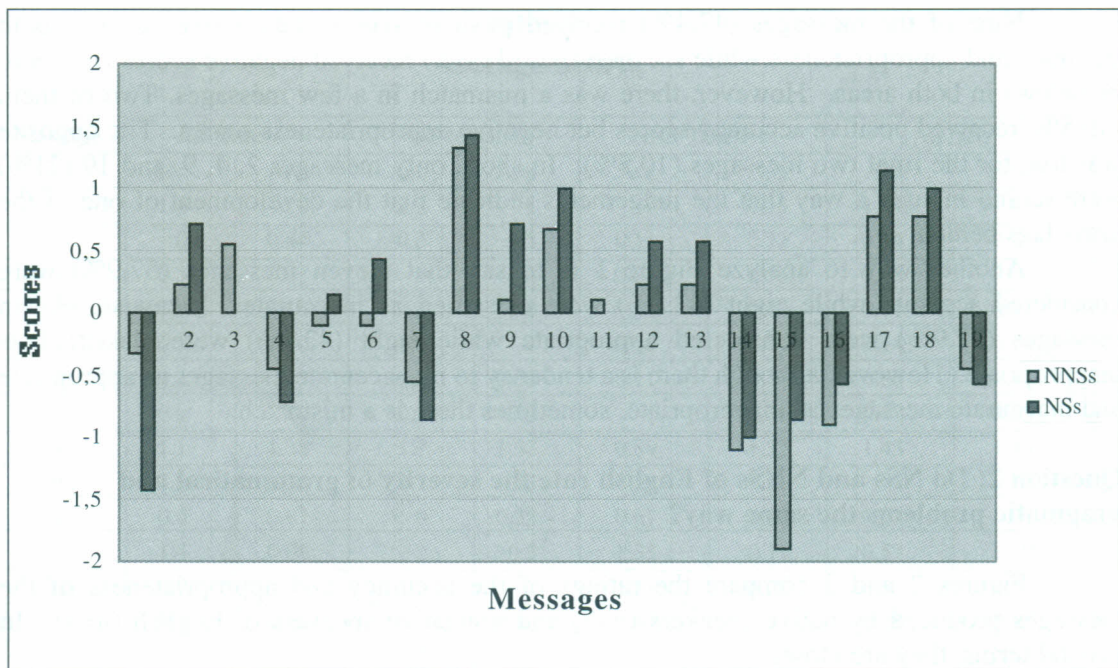
Fig. 3. Comparison of Appropriateness Ratngs by NSs and NNSs

Fourteen messages (1, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19) received the same kind of score (positive or negative) from both groups in both areas. The only exceptions were the remaining five messages: 2, 3, 5, 6, and 11. Table 4 summarizes the data in Figures 2 and 3.

Table 4:
Summary of Comparison presented in Figures 2 and 3

NNSs				NSs			
ACC +	ACC-	ACC+	ACC-	ACC +	ACC-	ACC+	ACC-
APP+	APP-	AAP-	APP+	APP+	APP-	AAP-	APP+
2*, 3*, 8,	1, 5*, 7	4, 6*, 19	9	5*, 6*, 8,	1, 7, 14,	3*, 4	2*, 9
10, 11*,	14, 15, 16			10, 12,	15, 16,	11*, 19	
12, 13,				13, 17, 18			
17, 18,							

Note:
*: Item was rated differently by NSs and NNSs
ACC: accuracy
APP: appropriateness

For 26.3% of the messages, there was a mismatch in the type of score (positive or negative) received from native and nonnative speakers. However, as Figures 2 and 3 show, the difference in messages 2, 5 and 11 is small. More significant divergences are in messages 3 and 6. In a future study, these dissimilarities will be analyzed in detail.

Question 3: Are NS teachers harsher or more lenient in their judgements of accuracy and appropriateness than NNS teachers?

The focus of this question is not whether the two groups gave either a positive or negative score but which group gave a higher score. Figures 4 and 5 show that NNS teachers were stricter in both accuracy and appropriateness more frequently than NS teachers.
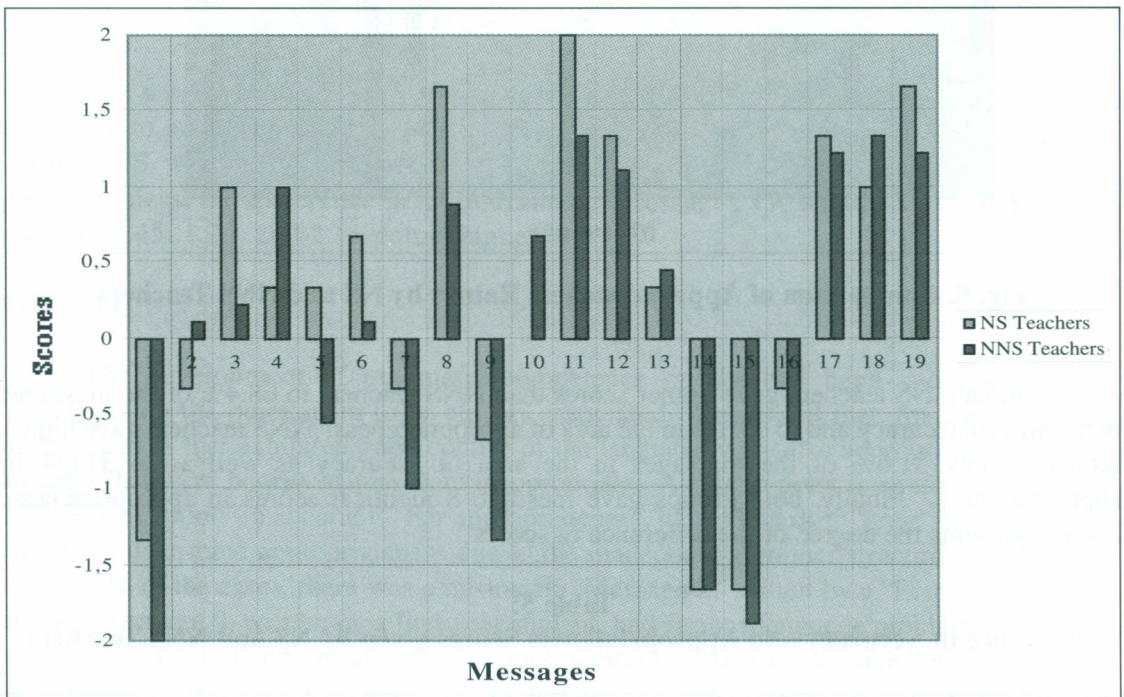

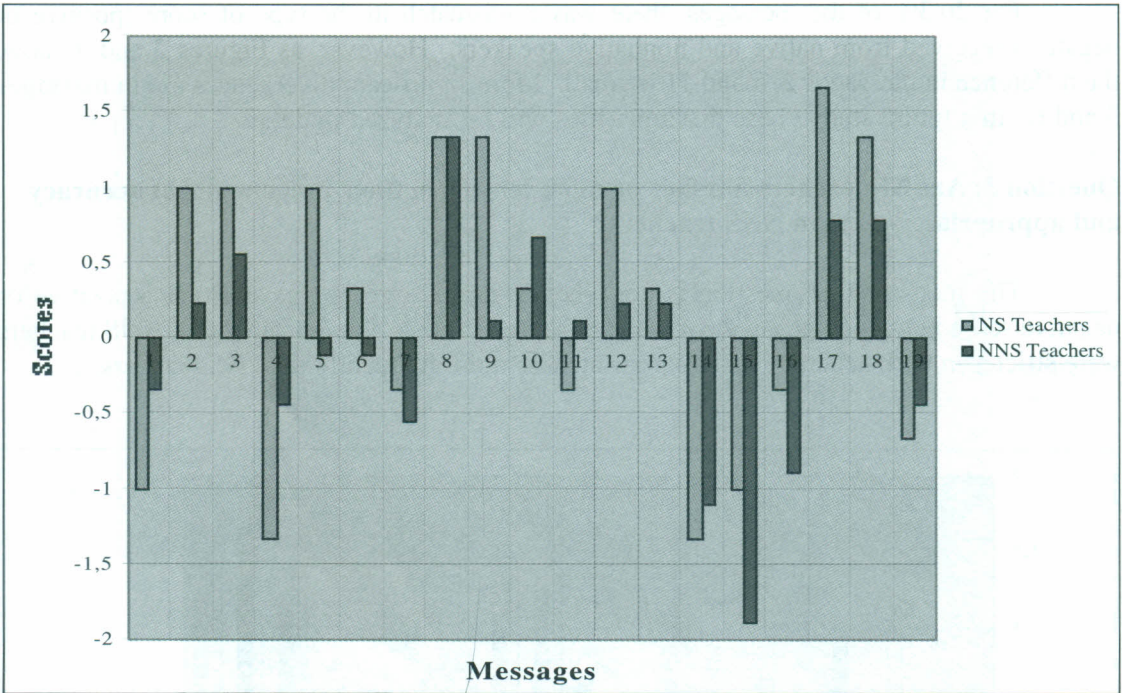**Fig. 4. Comparison of Accuracy Ratngs by NS and NNS Teachers**

Fig. 5. Comparison of Appropriateness Ratngs by NS and NNS Teachers

In fact, NS teachers gave higher scores than NNS teachers to 68.4% of the messages in the area of accuracy and to 63.1% in the area of appropriateness. NNS teachers gave higher scores to only 31.6% of the messages in the area of accuracy as well as to 31.6% in appropriateness. Finally, both groups gave message 8 identical scores in appropriateness. Table 5 presents the degree of the difference in scores.

Table 5:
Difference in Accuracy and Appropriateness Scores given by NS and NNS Teachers

Message	Difference in Accuracy Scores	Difference in Appropriateness Scores
1	0.7	-0.67
2	-0.41	0.78
3	0.78	0.44
4	-0.7	-0.86
5	0.86	1.11
6	0.59	0.44
7	0.7	0.26
8	0.81	0
9	0.63	1.22
10	-0.67	-0.34

Cntinuación de Tabla 5

Message	Difference in Accuracy Scores	Difference in Appropriateness Scores
11	0.67	-0.41
12	0.19	0.78
13	-0.14	0.11
14	-0.03	-0.19
15	0.19	0.89
16	0.37	0.59
17	0.08	2.45
18	-0.33	2.11
19	0.48	-0.26

Note: A positive number indicates NS teachers gave a higher score while a negative number shows that NNS teachers did.

The data in Table 5 further indicate that NS teachers tend to give higher scores. In the area of accuracy, the biggest differences are found in messages 5 and 8 where the average NS teacher score was 0.86 and 0.81 points higher respectively. In appropriateness, the difference is more dramatic. Messages 17, 9 and 18 received scores that were 2.45, 1.22, and 2.11 points higher.

Discussion

The development of pragmatic competence on the one hand and grammatical competence on the other seem to be closely associated. Raters felt that, for the most part, those messages that exhibited good control of the language were also appropriate. Likewise, messages that were poorly written were inappropriate. A case in point is a rater who marked message 1 as "poor" in accuracy. For appropriateness, he also marked "poor" but explained, "Unable to determine appropriateness due to the inadequate grammar structure." Nevertheless, in 21% of the cases, there was a mismatch. Message 2, written by a "Licenciatura" student, and message 9, written by a first year student, had serious language problems; however, they were considered appropriate. For instance, a rater referring to message 2 noted that "polite language helps make it acceptable." In contrast, messages 4 and 19 were quite accurate but were rated as inappropriate, nonetheless. For example, raters said of message 4, "It is more of a command than a request" and "I find this offensive since students seem to expect teacher to do their work for them." What is puzzling about this finding is the fact that the two messages rated as accurate but inappropriate (4 and 19) were written by advanced learners of English, both graduate students.

NSs and NNSs of English tend to find the same messages accurate and/or appropriate. Although scores vary, there is general agreement as to what constitutes a grammatically correct and pragmatically appropriate message.

Finally, NNS teachers' rating-scale assessments of accuracy and appropriateness overall tend to be stricter than those of NS teachers. This finding is interesting because it is rather unexpected. Common sense seems to indicate that since NS teachers are fully competent in the areas of grammar and pragmatics of their own language, they are more likely

to find fault with the messages. However, in this particular group, they were more tolerant than their NNS colleagues were. For example, reacting to message 11 (see appendix), a NNS teacher argues, "Needs to soften request because it sounds like an imposition. Idem with last sentence (You'd better be there because I'm calling . . .). Student takes it for granted that day and time are ok for professor." In sharp contrast, a NS teacher rates appropriateness as "very good" "assuming this professor has office hours at that time." For the NNS teacher the problem resides not only on the professor's availability at the time but also on the request being impolite. Possible variables such as gender, formal training and degree of bilingualism do not seem to explain this difference between NS and NNS raters. However, when comparing accuracy and appropriateness scores given by each group, results indicate that while NS teachers ranked pragmatic errors as more serious than grammatical errors, NNS teachers showed the opposite pattern. This finding is consistent with Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's conclusions.

In the present study, the methodology used was to have NS and near native speakers rate a series of messages. The resulting data provide information as to how messages written by language learners are perceived. The next step in this line of research is to have students at various levels judge the messages to determine learners' degree of awareness of grammatical and pragmatic rules.

If we accept the fact that pragmatic competence is as important as grammatical competence, if NS teachers rank pragmatic errors as more serious than grammatical errors, and if many of our advanced learners are still breaking pragmatic rules, we must press for genuine efforts to incorporate pragmatic objectives in the curricula and to design appropriate activities to implement in our classrooms.

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APPENDIX

Dear colleague:

I am conducting a study on the relationship between grammatical competence (accuracy of structure) and pragmatic competence (appropriateness of utterances according to specific situations, speakers, and content).

Examples:

1. It's Anna's day to give her talk in class, but she's not ready.
    Teacher: Anna, it's your turn to give your talk.
    Anna: I can't do it today but I will do it next week.
    Anna's response is accurate but not appropriate.

2. Peter has borrowed a book from his friend, George. George needs it back, but Peter has forgotten to return it.
    George: Do you have the book that I lent you last week?
    Peter: I am really sorry, but I was in a rush this morning and I didn't brought it today.
    Peter's response is appropriate but not accurate.

3. María invites her friend to her house, but she can't come.
    María: Would you like to come over this afternoon?
    Anna: I'm sorry. I'd really like to come, but I have a difficult history test tomorrow.
    Anna's response is accurate and appropriate.

Instructions:

1. Imagine that a fourth-year student at the UCR sent the following message to a professor.
2. Read the message and decide whether, as a whole, it is accurate and appropriate
3. Check (✓) the alternative that best describes your opinion.
4. Answer the question that follows whenever applicable.

ACCURACY				
Very good	Good	Borderline	Needs work	Poor
If you marked "borderline," "needs work" or "poor," please list the two most serious language problems in the message.				
1.				
2.				

APPROPRIATENESS				
Very good	Good	Borderline	Needs work	Poor
If you marked "borderline," "needs work" or "poor," please justify your choice.				

Message 4

Ms. (professor's last name)
This is a draft for Monday's presentation. (Student's first name), (student's first name) and I (student's first name) want you to ready it.
Thanks for your help
(Student's first name)

ACCURACY				
Very good	Good	Borderline	Needs work	Poor
If you marked "borderline," "needs work" or "poor," please list the two most serious language problems in the message.				
1.				
2.				

APPROPRIATENESS				
Very good	Good	Borderline	Needs work	Poor
If you marked "borderline," "needs work" or "poor," please justify your choice.				

Message 11

To: (female professor's first name) Important
These are the kind of results I'm getting.
(Summary of results of research project)
-I am open to suggestions, comments, criticism, etc.
-I would like to listen to your comments as soon as possible so I can start working on this research project.
-I'll call you on Friday at 11 a.m. at your office.
(Student's name) (Telephone number)

ACCURACY				
Very good	Good	Borderline	Needs work	Poor
If you marked "borderline," "needs work" or "poor," please list the two most serious language problems in the message.				
1.				
2.				
APPROPRIATENESS				
Very good	Good	Borderline	Needs work	Poor
If you marked "borderline," "needs work" or "poor," please justify your choice.				