CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter Five presents a brief summary of the study and the summary of findings from Chapter Four. The implications in methodology, theory, and pedagogy are also presented. Finally, the recommendations for future studies are provided in this chapter.

5.1 Research summary

This study reports the investigation of pragmatic ability in the context of hotel Front Office Department of the fourth year Thai university students who majored in the field of hospital and tourism management. The purpose of the present study firstly aimed to assess the pragmatic ability of the fourth-year Thai students in hospitality oriented programs by using the Front Office Pragmatic Test (FOP-Test). Secondly, it aimed to study whether the levels of English proficiency have a significant effect on the students' pragmatic ability in a specific context of hotel Front Office Department including the investigation of similarities and differences of the linguistic forms related to the pragmatic ability of students with different levels of English proficiency. Finally, it investigated the pragmatic knowledge that interferes with students' pragmatic abilities and pragmatic failures produced by the students from different levels of English proficiency.

The construct of the FOP-Test was based on the theoretical framework of Austin's speech acts (1962), Brown and Levinston's politeness (1987) as well as studies concerning assessment of pragmatic ability in different learning contexts.

The participants of the study were the fourth-year students from Bangkok University, Dhurakit Pundit University, and Kasetsart University majoring in the field of hotel and tourism management. They were classified into three groups of the high, average, and low language ability according to their GPA in English courses taken through the curriculum. The stratified randomly 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 in the study consisted of the needs assessment questionnaire, the FOP-Test, and pragmatic questionnaire. 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 from the hotel Front Office staff from four and five starred hotels in Bangkok. The 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 test method of the FOP-Test was an oral elicitation test which was designed through the computer mode. Both instruments were validated by the practitioners related to hotel services and experts in language instruction and testing.

Data were 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 the three language ability groups of the test takers were significantly different. In addition, a Scheffé post- hoc test was conducted to find 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 also used to examine the major features of inappropriateness of responses which could lead to pragmatic failures in the context of hotel Front Office department. Finally, the responses from the pragmatic questionnaire were computed by the descriptive statistic and one-way ANOVA. .

5.2 Summary of the findings

Concerning the first research question, the total mean scores of the FOP-Test obtained from the test takers in the high language ability group was higher than those of the average and low language ability groups. More specifically, when compared all components assessed, namely the correct speech acts, the expressions and vocabulary, the amount of information, and the degree of appropriateness, it was found that the mean scores obtained from the test takers with the high language ability was more than those of the average and low groups 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 scores and the component scores.

Therefore, the findings supported the hypothesis that the FOP-Test could differentiate the students' pragmatic ability related to the hotel Front Office context into high, average, and low levels of pragmatic ability.

Regarding the second research question, there was a significant main effect of the test takers' levels of English proficiency on pragmatic ability in all components assessed (i.e. the correct speech acts, the expressions and vocabulary, the amount of information, and the degree of appropriateness) at the .001 level. More specifically when employing a Scheffé 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 of the high, average, and low levels of English proficiency differed significantly.

In addition, the findings obtained from the frequency counts revealed the similarities and differences of the students' pragmalinguistic ability in the context of hotel Front Office department. The major linguistic features were 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 findings revealed that there were two distinctive features which appeared to differentiate the linguistic forms related to the pragmatic ability of the students with different levels of English proficiency. They were the use of politeness markers and the use of address forms. 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 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, about half of them. 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 errors were also analyzed. It was found that the high proficient students preferred to use 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 higher 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 of 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; however, it did not appear to be so distinctive when comparing to the other two groups. 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 in a very low degree and with a small difference in all groups.

Regarding the third research question, it was found that there was no significant difference in pragmatic knowledge among the three language ability groups reflected in the questionnaire. The result suggests that the test takers can recognize the pragmatic violations and the degree of appropriateness whether the utterances were pragmatically correct by using the questionnaire. Then, the interference or pragmatic failures or pragmatic inappropriateness that could lead to misunderstanding or communication breakdown between hotel staff-guest was further investigated. From the content analysis of inappropriateness of language use in the context of hotel Front Office Department, the errors were grouped into seven failures. The failures in giving correct speech acts, necessary information, appropriate formulaic expressions, complete information, and correct information 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 failures were also perceived impolite leading to the end of hotel staff-guest relations.

5.3 Conclusions

This study attempted to elicit and assess the pragmatic production of Thai students majoring in the field related to hotel and tourism management from different levels of English proficiency and to study whether the levels of English proficiency have a significant effect on the   pragmatic ability related to hotel Front Office Department context. It also examined the similarities and differences of pragmalinguistic forms and pragmatic failures produced by the students. The students' recognition of pragmatic knowledge obtained from a questionnaire was also investigated.

The findings indicated that the FOP-Test could differentiate 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 scores in all components assessed. 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 to construct their utterances to fit the given situations due to the lack of linguistic knowledge and pragmatic ability. The findings agreed with some previous studies (Matsumara, 2003 & Roever, 2005) in that the high proficient students had better performance in the pragmatic test than the low language proficient students and the overall level of proficiency in the target language played an important role in the acquisition of 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.

As regards the students' production in pragmaticlinguistic forms, the qualitative analysis of frequency of the linguistic features responding to the five speech acts suggested similarities and differences. The distinct features that can differentiate among the students from different levels of English proficiency are the use of politeness markers and the use of address forms. The high proficient students exhibited more politeness markers than the other two groups. Some markers such as *"would you mind...?"* and *"Can you possibly...?"*, and the hedge markers like *"I'm afraid that ..."* and *"I think..."* require the syntactic structures to lengthen the utterances and complete sentences. The high 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. Thus, proficiency is seen to play a role in the frequency of the use of politeness markers in this study. Besides, the high awareness in social appropriateness rules and the students' English proficiency may be factors to enable them to make their speeches pragmatically appropriate by applying their grammartical knowledge to lengthen their intention in English. Moreover, a greater degree of the use of the address forms through the use of *"Sir"* and *"Madam"* among the higher proficient students: the high and the average proficient students, could be the evidence to claim that they had more power-hierarchy consciousness in hotel staff-guest communication in English than the low proficient students.

Linguistic features performed similarly in all proficiency levels also varied. A number of frequencies differed, but the degree of differences was rather small. The high frequency of the following strategies ranged from the use of formulaic expressions of regrets, routine patterns, affirmation markers, adverbials, and the use of *"we"* form respectively. The features of occurrences depended on the types of speech acts and given situations in the test. Owing to the retrospective semi-structure 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 instruction, textbooks, and the typical simulated activities of role-play in hotel setting. Thus, classroom instruction is a key factor 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 students tend to use one particular pattern to produce their responses in a certain speech act. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the high occurrences of formulaic expressions of regrets including the use of routine patterns might not be able to represent the students' pragmatic comprehension. Schmidt (1993) concludes that L2 learners seem to use politeness features before they acquire 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 more or less, 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. Nonetheless, the evidence of low occurrences of other strategies in handling complaints and apologizing does not suggest that the students

could not perform those strategies in real-life communication due to the lack of negotiation in the test method.

Even the findings of this study could provide the evidence that English proficiency was an variable which had a great effect on the test takers' pragmatic ability, but their proficiency did not affect the degree of recognition reflected from the pragmatic questionnaire. They showed the same degree of awareness by recognizing the errors of some kinds in pragmatic items. Then, the errors that interfere that test takers' pragmatic knowledge were investigated. The major features of inappropriateness of responses collected from the students which could end customer relations in the hotel business is referred to as pragmatic inappropriateness or pragmatic failure (Thomas, 1983). The consideration of appropriateness is to see whether the students know what is appropriate to say in the given situations in the FOP-Test. In addition, the degree of seriousness in the hotel-staff and guest communication depends on whether it is pramalinguistics or sociopragmatics. The error of the former is more forgiven because it is perceived as a linguistic problem while the latter is the most serious because it relates to the inappropriateness of a linguistic behavior. The failures were grouped into seven features (See Figure 4.4 in Chapter 4) based on the descriptors of ineffectiveness along with the inappropriateness of the FOP-Test rating scales. Ineffectiveness of giving correct speech acts, irrelevant or unnecessary information, and inappropriateness in the use of formulaic expressions appears to be less serious because they do not really harm the hotel staff-guest interaction. The first two failures apparently reflect their lack of grammar, vocabulary, including inexperience in real job performance. These incompetencies appear to impede the students from giving the correct speech act and informative responses related to a particular given situation. Blum-Kulka (1982: 53) stated 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 from learning from previous classroom instructions, particularly from the textbooks. 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 a spontaneous interaction. Those predictable patterns could not help the students to communicate in real life communication. As a result, the errors in giving the correct speech acts, precise information, and appropriate formulaic expressions might not really damage

the hotel staff-guest communication, but they could highly affect the guest's perceptions towards an individual as an unprofessional and incompetent practitioner.

The failures in giving complete information and correct information could potentially cause misunderstanding. The students were expected to give information related 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 of giving sufficient amount of information was rated the lowest and the less proficient students tended to perform these errors. 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 & Harun (2003) mentioned that the characteristics of the hotel encounters are informative and purposive; thus, giving insufficient or incorrect information may not end the transactions, but it might create undesirable effects if the complicated problems or difficult situations have been unsolved, particularly in complaining.

Inappropriateness in politeness strategies and the use of phrases or verb forms are perceived to lead to the potential for the most serious misunderstanding and could end the customer relations. In terms of politeness in any hospitality services, the guest's face should not be imposed by any means or reasons. From the data collected, the students used overly direct strategies such as using the imperative form when making requests. Considering the social distance between hotel staff-guest, the use of the imperative form to the guest is considered impolite, though the occurrences of this failure may be caused by the lack of awareness in sociopragmatic judgment concerning the size of imposition, cost-benefit, and social distance. A number of students' responses were linguistically acceptable but pragmatically ineffective utterances. Blum-Kulka (1982) confined that second language learners might fail to realize indirect speech acts in the target language in terms of both communicative effectiveness and social appropriateness. The speeches collected from the test takers in this study reveal that they faced a difficulty task in acquiring ways to communicate language functions effectively and appropriately. As noted in the literature section, the hotel encounters are purposive, but directness could not be applied in all speech acts which occur in the hotel staff-guest communication. The hotel staff also need to consider the risk of the hotel guest's face loss and the three social variables, which are the social distance, the degree of familiarity between the

hotel staff and the hotel guests, and the rank of imposition, as mentioned in Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. In ESP/EOP, the lack of mastering politeness strategies in any transactions can fail the business. This agrees with Boxer & Pickering (1995) who stated that errors in grammatical patterns are often forgiven as an incompetence of native like in language use while sociopragmatic errors are typically interpreted as impolite. As a result, there are no return customers.

5.4 Implications of the Study

5.4.1 Methodological implications

The test method of the FOP-Test was modified from the oral discourse completion test (ODCT) proposed by Hudson and Brown (1995). Even though the test method of this study limited the multiple-turn exchanges or opportunity to negotiate between the interlocutors, the FOP-Test allowed the students to perform the best of their pragmatic ability and the students' pragmatic behavior could be assessed from their various responses. Due to the limitation of test authenticity, it should be noted that the FOP-Test was designed for the research purpose rather than to test naturalistic speeches.

As suggested by Roever (2004), test items for constructing pragmalinguistics should be from real language use which could be collected from ethnographic studies representing the real world language use. In ESP/EOP, ethnography could provide rich information in tasks, interaction patterns, and language involved; however, many hindrances such as the premise of organizations or cooperation from the practitioners may impede the ideal of "naturalistic". This study could be best in governing the prompted situations to be the test items by collecting authentic situations and problematic speech acts reflected by the real practitioners. Thus, the FOP-Test could initially be administered as a diagnostic test for the novice hotel students or the hotel personnel in in-service training in order to help them to be aware of the aspects in pragmatics when communicating with foreign guests.

5.4.2 Theoretical implications

The aspects of speech acts and politeness of this study were based on Austin's (1962) speech act theory and Brown and Levinson's (1987) universal politeness theory. The speech acts performed in hotel Front Office Department could be focused correspondingly to the four typical stages of guest cycles: pre-arrival,

arrival, occupancy, and departure (Kasavana, cited in Blue & Haran, 2003). This routine is associated with a certain language function based on its job description or responsibilities. Types of speech acts that are the functions of language in each stage could be focused specifically and taught explicitly since language functions in the guest cycle are performed repeatedly.

Brown and Levinson (1987) refer to the politeness rules as universal rules, despite the fact that different cultures have different aspects of being polite like the culture in business settings. Thus, the hotel culture has its own norm of politeness. However, it cannot be denied that profit is involved in hotel staff-guest communication consequently. Certain politeness strategies in particular language functions corresponding to the FOP-Test should be highlighted in order to enhance guests' satisfaction and maximize the hotel revenues. In ESP/EOP, it would be beneficial to specify types of speech acts which differ from one another and which employ different politeness strategies in different types of service encounters because success of many important businesses depends on mastering the maxim of politeness.

5.4.3 Pedagogical implications

Several pedagogical implications can be drawn from the findings as follows:

1. The evidence from the students' demographic information in this study suggests that only one or two English courses related to hotel services were given throughout the curriculum. Thus, the institutions should offer more courses related to English for hotels in the curriculum rather than giving the students options to learn a number of courses that seem to be irrelevant to their communication needs in their majors related to hotel and tourism management.

2. Pragmatics including the politeness aspect should be integrated into English courses. It is generally acceptable that being English competent, students do not only need grammar knowledge and vocabulary, but they also need pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics in particular contexts. Even though these components seem complicated, they need to be taught in order to raise students' awareness of politeness because profitability comes from the hotel staff-guest interactions. The awareness could be raised, as a starting point, by explicit instructions that involve realization of the target speech acts in different situations.

3. Teachers should not rely on the needs of general business English.

It is too broad in ESP/EOP contexts and does not serve specific needs in a particular business. Communicative needs and occupational needs assessment in specialized contexts or particular careers should be considered in both teaching and testing.

4. There is a need to have teachers who have equivalent knowledge in both pragmatics in English and subject knowledge in ESP/EOP teaching. It is presumable that many Thai teachers may feel uncomfortable to teach pragmatics due to the lack of native intuition and having less direct exposure to cultures where English is used. In addition, there are not enough English teachers who know the subject knowledge. Thus, incompetence in both pragmatics and subject knowledge weakens their confidence in teaching. Because of this, it may be hard to recruit the qualified ones. Inviting experienced ex-hoteliers or the practitioners to be the guest speakers or work with teachers who understand pragmatics cold help solve this problem.

5. Owing to the shortcoming of textbooks in English for hotels, it is vital for institutions to work out in materials development as suggested by Boxer and Pickering (1995: 44) who claim that "there is a critical need for the application of sociolinguistic findings to English language teaching through authentic materials that reflect spontaneous speech behavior". English for hotels should also be an urgent one. Available textbooks should not be used as a center of teaching. As teachers are still role models in language use for Thai students, to teach pragmatically and socially appropriateness in business settings seems to demand teachers who are not only experts in language teaching, but also are more sophisticated in the corporate world as well.

5.5 Recommendations for future research

1. This study did not attempt to investigate the relationship between grammatical ability and pragmatic ability; however, its findings showed that English proficiency is a variable which has a great effect on the test takers' pragmatic ability. However, it seems unclear how grammatical and pragmatic competencies correlate. There should be more studies that show the relationship of grammatical competence of the students in ESP/EOP and pragmatic ability in a specific context.

2. It will be more fruitful if both linguistic and sociolinguistic dimensions are investigated. This study may contribute to test developers or researchers in the testing field to develop other methods which require more authentic oral productions

that would give them more insightful data of both pragmalinguistic and sociolinguistic features. In fact, English teachers who fully understand pragmatics and the subject knowledge in hospitality industry would be best test developers in examining their students' pragmatic competence in the hotel services.

3. Further research might replicate this study in terms of using the computer as the means of testing; however, some adjustments are needed. The virtual reality environment may be an attractive test method for the future. More natural and authentic methods are also suggested. Additionally, if naturalistic data can be collected, there should be room for observing small talks as social talks happening in the hotel encounters.

4. The FOP-Test has the potential to be further developed since it provided evidence of Thai hotel students' pragmatic ability in a specific purpose and context. It is hoped that more studies will investigate the students' pragmatic ability in ESP/EOP in different contexts such as English for nursing, fight attendance English, tourism English, and/or even English for hotel services in different departments such as Food and Beverage department or Housekeeping where communication needs differ.

5. In addition to the specifications of five problematic speech acts assessed in this study, other speech acts should be considered as well. Besides, future studies should explore particular speech act in the hotel context in depth like conversational analysis in naturalistic utterances between the hotel Front Office staff and guests.

6. Apart from the observation of materials presented in EFL/ESL context from previous studies, there is room for examining English for hotel textbooks generally used in Thai institutions. There are many interesting aspects to observe such as types of speech acts, degrees of directness and formality, the use of expressions, and so on. These aspects should be analyzed in order to help teachers see usefulness or drawbacks of their teaching materials and then find alternative ways to facilitate their students to be competent hoteliers in language use.

7. Since types of hotels vary, further studies should investigate practitioners' communicative needs in different types of hotels as well. The more sophisticated, the greater demand of the guests appears. In terms of politeness, it would be interesting to see whether language use differs from types of hotels or not. Besides, for future studies, the test constructs should depend on the stakeholders' needs in a particular context as well.

8. For replicable purposes, it is suggested to use the scores from standardized proficiency tests like TOEFL, IELTS, or even TOEIC to classify the levels of proficiency between the test takers and to see whether the scores from those tests are correlated with pragmatic competence instead of using the students' GPA.

9. The data collected provide a good evidence of nonlexical intonation signals like *uh, um,* or *hum.* Studying these common features is recommended. Additionally, combining paralinguistics and nonlinguistic components like pitch changes, gestures, facial expressions should be explored in future studies.

10. Finally, in terms of testing, more triangulation methods for both qualitative and quantitative data to gain rich insights regarding pragmatic competence should be employed. For example, how students' politeness strategies and their opinions on learning experience influence their pragmatic behaviors and judgment.