The OSCAR PUBLISHING Services
International Journal of Pedagogics

VOLUME Vol.06 Issue11 2026
PAGE NO. 30-34
DOI 10.37547/ijp/Volume06Issue11-06

Developing Prospective English Language Teachers' Pragmatic Competence Through Authentic Discourse Materials

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Received: 24 September 2026; **Accepted:** 22 October 2026; **Published:** 09 November 2026

Abstract: This article examines the pedagogical potential of authentic discourse materials for developing the pragmatic competence of prospective English language teachers. Pragmatic competence is considered as the ability to interpret intended meaning, select contextually appropriate linguistic resources, recognize interpersonal and sociocultural variables, and manage interaction effectively. Drawing on research in interlanguage pragmatics and instructional pragmatics, the article analyses the value of naturally occurring conversations, interviews, classroom interaction, institutional discourse, audiovisual texts and authentic digital communication. Particular attention is paid to noticing, discourse analysis, speech-act interpretation, pragmatic inference, role-play, reflection and pedagogical adaptation. A staged methodological framework is proposed in which authentic discourse serves not merely as exposure to real English but as data for systematic pragmatic analysis and professional teacher preparation.

Keywords: Authentic discourse, pragmatic competence, prospective English teachers, instructional pragmatics, discourse analysis, speech acts, pragmatic awareness, contextual appropriateness, teacher education.

Introduction: Contemporary English language education increasingly recognizes that successful communication depends on more than grammatical accuracy and lexical range. Language users must understand what speakers intend, how meanings change across contexts, which expressions are socially appropriate, and how interaction is organized in real discourse. These abilities constitute important dimensions of pragmatic competence. For prospective English language teachers, pragmatic competence has an additional professional dimension: they must not only communicate appropriately themselves but also learn how to help future learners notice, interpret and produce context-sensitive language.

One persistent difficulty in developing pragmatic competence is the gap between decontextualized instructional language and naturally occurring communication. Pedagogical dialogues may be useful for presenting structures, yet they can simplify turn-taking, politeness, hesitation, indirectness, repair and other interactional features. Authentic discourse materials provide access to language produced for genuine communicative purposes and therefore offer rich evidence of how linguistic forms, communicative functions and social contexts interact.

The purpose of this article is to examine the didactic potential of authentic discourse materials in developing the pragmatic competence of prospective English language teachers. It considers theoretical foundations, types of authentic discourse, instructional procedures and principles for selecting and adapting materials. The article also proposes a staged framework that links pragmatic noticing and analysis with communicative practice and professional reflection.

Pragmatic competence has been conceptualized as part of broader communicative competence. Bachman distinguishes organizational competence from pragmatic competence and includes illocutionary and sociolinguistic dimensions within the latter [1]. This distinction is pedagogically important because a learner

may produce a grammatically well-formed utterance without successfully performing the intended communicative function or without matching the social situation. For future teachers, the ability to identify such discrepancies is central to both personal language proficiency and professional methodological competence.

Authentic discourse can be understood as spoken, written or multimodal language generated in genuine communicative contexts rather than created primarily to exemplify a predetermined language item. Examples include naturally occurring conversations, interviews, service encounters, classroom exchanges, workplace meetings, public talks, emails, messages, podcasts and video interactions. Their pedagogical value lies not simply in being "real" but in preserving contextual relationships between participants, purposes, linguistic choices and interactional consequences.

Gilmore's review of authenticity in language learning shows that the concept is multidimensional and that authentic materials may offer learners exposure to features of natural discourse often underrepresented in textbooks [2]. His analysis also cautions against treating authenticity as an automatic guarantee of pedagogical effectiveness. For teacher education, this means that authentic materials need purposeful selection, appropriate task design and scaffolding. A difficult natural conversation without a clear analytical focus may overwhelm learners, whereas a carefully selected short extract can reveal important pragmatic patterns.

One major advantage of authentic discourse is its capacity to make the relationship between form and communicative function observable. A request, for example, may be realized through an imperative, a conventional interrogative, a statement of need, a hint or a sequence of preparatory moves. Naturally occurring discourse enables students to see that speakers rarely rely on a single formula. They combine lexical, grammatical, prosodic and discourse resources in response to social distance, status, urgency and the degree of imposition.

Authentic materials are equally valuable for studying indirect meaning. Grice's account of conversational implicature explains how interlocutors routinely communicate more than the literal semantic content of their utterances [3]. In an authentic exchange, a response such as "I'm teaching at eight tomorrow" may function as a reason for declining an invitation without explicitly saying "no." When teacher candidates analyse such examples, they practise identifying contextual evidence, reconstructing likely speaker intentions and considering alternative interpretations.

Speech act theory provides another important analytical lens. Searle's work demonstrates that utterances perform actions and that illocutionary force cannot always be identified from sentence form alone [4]. Authentic discourse allows learners to examine requests, apologies, refusals, compliments, suggestions and disagreements as they unfold across turns rather than as isolated model sentences. This helps reveal supportive moves, mitigation, negotiation and sequential organization that are central to pragmatic performance.

Thomas's distinction between pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failure is particularly relevant to authentic-material work [5]. Pragmalinguistic difficulty may involve selecting a form whose pragmatic force differs from what the speaker intends, whereas sociopragmatic difficulty concerns judgments about what is appropriate under particular social conditions. Authentic discourse provides contextual information that makes both types of difficulty visible. Students can ask not only whether an expression is linguistically possible but also why it is used with this interlocutor, at this moment and in this manner.

Kasper argues that pragmatic development involves input, attention, interaction and opportunities for use [6]. Authentic discourse can contribute to all four when it is embedded in an instructional sequence. It provides input, but learners must be directed to notice relevant features; it can become the basis for analytical interaction; and patterns discovered in the data can subsequently be practised in new communicative situations. Exposure alone is therefore insufficient. The pedagogical task is to transform authentic discourse into evidence that learners can observe, interpret and use.

A first methodological stage is contextual orientation. Before analysing an extract, students identify who the participants are, where the interaction occurs, what relationship they have, what they are trying to accomplish and what has happened previously. This

stage prevents language from being detached from the circumstances that give it pragmatic force. It also trains future teachers to recognize contextual variables when selecting or designing classroom materials.

The second stage is pragmatic noticing. Learners mark linguistic and interactional features associated with communicative meaning: modal verbs, hedges, intensifiers, address terms, discourse markers, pauses, repetition, laughter, intonation, supportive reasons and turn-taking devices. The aim is not to catalogue every feature but to connect selected forms with their local functions. For instance, students may observe how speakers soften disagreement or prepare the ground before making a high-imposition request.

The third stage is discourse-based interpretation. Students identify the speech act or interactional goal, explain how it is realized across one or more turns, and justify their interpretation with evidence from the discourse. This procedure is particularly important for pragmatic inference. Rather than giving a single "correct meaning," the teacher can ask learners to compare plausible interpretations and identify which contextual cues make one interpretation more likely.

The fourth stage is comparative analysis. Different authentic examples of the same pragmatic function can be placed side by side. Students may compare two refusals, two requests or two instances of disagreement produced in different relationships. Such comparison helps them discover pragmatic variability. It also discourages prescriptive assumptions that one formula is universally polite. Learners begin to see pragmatic competence as the capacity to make informed choices among alternatives.

Rose and Kasper's work on pragmatics in language teaching demonstrates that pragmatic features can be brought into instruction through awareness-raising, explicit discussion and practice [7]. Authentic discourse is especially suitable for awareness-raising because it supplies contextualized evidence. However, the teacher's mediation remains important: guiding questions, transcripts, replaying short segments and focused comparison can make subtle pragmatic features accessible to learners.

Ishihara and Cohen provide extensive pedagogical guidance for teaching pragmatics, including observation of language use, analysis of speech acts, learner reflection and classroom practice [8]. Their approach is highly relevant to prospective teachers because authentic discourse can serve two purposes simultaneously. Teacher candidates study pragmatic phenomena as language learners and then evaluate how the same material could be transformed into a lesson, task or assessment activity for their future students.

The fifth stage is pedagogically contextualized production. After analysing authentic models, learners perform comparable communicative acts in new situations. Role-play scenarios should specify relevant social variables rather than merely name a speech act. For example, instead of "refuse an invitation," students can be told who invited them, how close the relationship is, why they cannot accept, and whether future cooperation matters. The resulting performances can then be compared with patterns observed in authentic discourse.

The sixth stage is metapragmatic reflection. Learners explain why they selected a particular strategy, what effect they intended, how the interlocutor might interpret it, and what alternative wording could produce a different interpersonal effect. Such reflection develops conscious pragmatic awareness. For future teachers, it also builds the explanatory language needed to give learners feedback about appropriateness without reducing pragmatics to rigid rules.

Digital environments substantially expand access to authentic discourse. Public interviews, educational podcasts, recorded lectures, institutional webpages and ethically usable samples of online communication provide diverse registers and interactional settings. Yet digital authenticity introduces additional responsibilities. Materials should be legally and ethically accessible, personal data should be protected, and extracts should be selected for educational relevance rather than merely because they are available online.

Selection criteria are therefore essential. An authentic discourse sample should have a clear connection with the target pragmatic feature, sufficient contextual information, manageable linguistic complexity, appropriate length, intelligible audio or visual quality when relevant, and suitability for the learners' educational setting. Cultural and interpersonal content should also be considered carefully. The goal is to

preserve meaningful contextual richness while preventing irrelevant difficulty from obscuring the pragmatic focus.

Authentic discourse can also strengthen the professional identity of prospective English teachers. Classroom interaction itself is a pragmatic domain: teachers invite responses, give instructions, mitigate criticism, encourage participation, disagree, clarify and manage interpersonal relationships. Analysing authentic classroom discourse can help teacher candidates observe how language choices affect authority, solidarity, learner participation and face. Thus, pragmatic training becomes directly connected with future professional practice.

Assessment of work with authentic discourse should go beyond reproduction of model expressions. Receptive tasks may evaluate recognition of speaker intention, implied meaning and contextual appropriateness. Analytical tasks may require students to justify interpretations with discourse evidence. Productive tasks may assess the ability to choose and adapt pragmatic strategies in new contexts. Reflection can additionally reveal whether learners understand why a particular choice was effective or problematic.

Taguchi's scholarship on second-language pragmatics emphasizes the multidimensional and developmental nature of pragmatic competence [9]. This perspective supports the use of multiple assessment formats rather than a single test. A teacher candidate may understand an implicature accurately but struggle to produce an appropriate response under time pressure; another may know conventional expressions but fail to adjust them across social situations. Authentic discourse tasks can help identify these distinct profiles.

A systematic methodology may therefore organize authentic-discourse work into a recurring cycle: contextualization, noticing, interpretation, comparison, production, feedback and reflection. At early stages, short and transparent exchanges can be used. Later, learners can analyse longer sequences involving ambiguity, negotiation and competing interpersonal goals. Progression should increase not only linguistic difficulty but also pragmatic complexity.

Importantly, authentic discourse should not be used to impose a single native-speaker norm. English is employed in diverse multilingual and intercultural contexts, and pragmatic practices vary across communities, relationships and individuals. Authentic materials are most valuable when they demonstrate options and consequences rather than prescribe one obligatory way of speaking. Teacher candidates can learn to evaluate likely interpretations while retaining agency over their own communicative choices.

From a teacher-education perspective, the strongest value of authentic discourse lies in its integration of knowledge and practice. It connects theoretical concepts such as speech acts, implicature, politeness, contextual appropriateness and discourse organization with observable language data. At the same time, it gives prospective teachers experience in selecting materials, constructing analytical questions, scaffolding difficult input, designing follow-up practice and formulating pragmatic feedback.

Accordingly, the development of pragmatic competence through authentic discourse should be viewed as a planned component of professional preparation rather than an occasional supplementary activity. When authentic data are systematically analysed and transformed into pedagogical tasks, future English teachers gain a more realistic understanding of language use and a stronger methodological basis for helping learners communicate effectively across contexts.

Authentic discourse materials provide a powerful resource for developing the pragmatic competence of prospective English language teachers because they make visible the relationship between linguistic form, communicative intention, social context and interactional organization. Their pedagogical value is greatest when authentic input is accompanied by structured noticing, contextual interpretation, comparative analysis, communicative production and metapragmatic reflection.

The reviewed scholarship indicates that exposure to authentic language alone does not guarantee pragmatic development. Materials must be selected purposefully and mediated through tasks that direct learners' attention to relevant pragmatic features. For prospective teachers, this work should have a dual outcome: improved personal pragmatic competence and increased pedagogical capacity to teach context-sensitive language use.

A staged cycle of contextualization, noticing, interpretation, comparison, production, feedback and reflection can provide a practical methodological framework. Further empirical research may test this framework with prospective English teachers and compare its effects with more traditional decontextualized instruction using measures of pragmatic comprehension, production, awareness and pedagogical decision-making.

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