

Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Improving Pragmatic Competence Regarding Acquiring Global and Professional Verbal Communication Speech Acts

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Abstract: The ability to communicate aptly in a given social situation is paramount for any global and professional interaction. For learners of English as a Foreign/Second Language (EFL/ESL), acquiring pragmatic competence is particularly difficult to master, often due to the lack of attention provided by ‘grammar-first’ approach’ to language teaching. This article synthesizes findings from a broader exploration to help understand the teaching, learning, and assessment of pragmatic competence in the context of verbal communication and speech acts. It analyzes the common challenges learners and teachers face in typical EFL/ESL contexts, examines effective, evidence-based instructional strategies aimed at raising pragmatic awareness, and discusses various assessment strategies. The findings confirm the need to shift the focus from grammar to explicit teaching of pragmatics in context, especially in the use of authentic materials. In addition, the article critiques the use of traditional assessment tools, particularly Discourse Completion Tests (DCTs), calling for the use of more valid approaches such as the analysis of naturally occurring data and multi-dimensional assessment frameworks. In conclusion, the findings collectively argue for an integrated comprehensive action-oriented approach where the teaching and assessment of pragmatics are core components of language education, preparing learners for the nuanced demands of real-world communication.

Keywords: Pragmatic competence, social norms, appropriateness, pedagogy of pragmatics, teaching model, audiovisual input, naturally occurring data, discourse completion test, multi-componential assessment, metapragmatic awareness.

Introduction: The growing importance of boundary-less communication in an increasingly globalized world is underlined by the fact that it would be great to communicate across cultures and professional boundaries equally importantly. Such effectiveness does not qualify only on the what is said (grammatical competence) but rather, critically, on how it is said (pragmatic competence). Pragmatics is the study on language from the user's perspective as they make choices against constraints within social settings and the subsequent effects on others through the use of their language (Hapsari, 2013). Its cover includes speech acts like appropriate interpretation and production, e.g. request, apology, refusal), conversation principle adherence, and implied meaning comprehending. Pragmatic competence is the

ability of the speaker to effectively use the language within social settings, understanding speech acts together with the social norms and contextual appropriateness in the use of language (Taguchi, 2011).

However, pragmatic competence is hardly any less critical as a challenge for EFL/ESL learners. There is no guarantee that a person who knows the grammar well will use grammar appropriately in every situation. Historically, grammatically flawless sentences might still be socially inappropriate and thus bring about miscommunication or cultural misunderstandings. The development of pragmatic competence in an EFL situation is, however, often confronted with additional challenges posed by the use of languages in the typical language learning environment. These include a lack of exposure to real use in language, an over-dependence

on textbooks that present pragmatics in a somewhat naive or improper way, and classroom dynamics that result in the limited opportunity for true social interaction.

Workplace language use has been studied from many angles in which speech acts figure prominently as a bedrock for the description of the communicative interaction (Koester, 2006). It is undeniable that speech acts exist in a state of theoretical incompleteness, and yet their application makes them practically accessible to learners, thus demonstrating how language users can actually reach their goals in the workplace.

The learning of speech acts, especially directives, is imperative for the upcoming English teachers. Directives largely exist in the workplace, and their effective use can create a big difference in the dynamics of organizations (Vine, 2004). Some students may have difficulty performing or recognizing some of the other forms of directives, which complicates the communicative competence. This is because most effective instructive strategies would require going through, understanding, and practicing command functions and mitigative ones with a possible understanding of the use of contextual power status.

Research indicates that directives in workplaces often manifest beyond traditional imperative forms, with many expressed in declarative and modal constructions (Vine, 2004). Future educators should familiarize themselves with these varied linguistic structures to aid students in navigating real-world professional communication.

In addition, cultural awareness is key in understanding speech acts. Non-native speakers may be using directives with indirectness that may be typical within their own culture. It is the educators' task to foster awareness of cultural diversity and teach learning strategies to empower students to adapt their speech acts according to workplace context without losing their identity (Li, 2000).

Disagreements at work can be complex and may require extended negotiation to find a resolution. The following shows a conversation in a form of scenario-based communicative dialogue acts representing a functional-communicative (discursive) speech between an English teacher, Nuriya, and her principal, Alex, on how two professionals can address differences in their views over the span of a minute brief discussion.

It starts with Nuriya questioning the principal's proposal regarding purchasing new language software.

NURIYA: "Okay, but hold on, what are our other options here? We've also got Laura, our new teaching assistant, who could help support the students who are

struggling."

Alex listens, allowing for about minutes of expansion in the discussion about general staffing issues and Nuriya's move to take advantage of the new teaching assistant.

Alex then transitioned the conversation back gently to the early topic of conversation, also to moderately disapprove of Nuriya's counter-argument while agreeing with her edge.

Nuriya: "Just seems a bit silly to me to spend that much on software for a single semester."

NURIYA: "I just don't think it's worth it for a two-week trial period, I mean..."

NURIYA: "I suppose it's just the extra money, but you say that's not an issue."

ALEX: "We can afford it."

ALEX: "No. Yeah, but there's no need for you to struggle on with oversized classes, okay?"

This is indicative of the relational work in professional disagreement. Superior, Alex invests a lot of effort to manage the conversation affording her employee's input. The learners will get demonstration of how it offers not only specific languages to disagree politely, but also how significant culture is in an organization regarding arrangements of these interactions.

Researchers focusing on these gaps have moved increasingly toward effective identification of both teaching and assessment approaches to the improvement of students' pragmatic skills. This paper presents important findings from the latest research to give an overview of this field. It answers the following research questions:

1. What are the primary challenges in teaching and learning pragmatic competence in EFL/ESL contexts?
2. What instructional strategies have been identified as effective for enhancing learners' pragmatic awareness and performance?
3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of different methods used to assess pragmatic competence?

By examining these questions, this article aims to consolidate the current understanding of how to effectively teach, learn, and assess pragmatics to better prepare learners for the complexities of global and professional verbal communication.

METHODS

This article delivers a systematic review and thematic analysis constituting the methodology for collecting data of relevant papers and comparing and analyzing

instructional experiences on pragmatic competence in EFL/ESL learners. This research primarily used empirical studies, theoretical papers, and literature reviews that addressed issues in the area of pedagogy of pragmatics, assessment, and other challenges related to pragmatics.

The analysis sought to distill major themes across the selected articles, which were distributed into three domains corresponding to the research questions:

1. Challenges in Pragmatic Language Acquisition: This theme collates findings regarding the drawing of learners' and instructors' attention to contextual limitations, resource inadequacies, and the very nature of pragmatic knowledge.

2. Instructional Strategies for Pragmatic Competence Development: This theme brings together evidence regarding effective teaching techniques, including explicit teaching, use of authentic materials, and awareness-raising task design.

3. Methods and Challenges in Assessing Pragmatic Competence: This theme evaluates and critiques various assessment devices ranging from traditional discourse completion tests (DCTs) to analyses of naturally occurring data and innovative, multi-level assessment frameworks.

RESULTS

The thematic analysis of the studied research reveals a consensus on the major challenges, effective instructional designs, and evolving assessment practices in the field of pragmatic language learning.

Challenges in Teaching and Learning Pragmatics

Research consistently identifies several key obstacles that hinder the development of pragmatic competence in institutional settings.

Contextual Limitations: In a typical EFL/ESL classroom, the circumstances surrounding the acquisition of pragmatics seem to be placed in a straightjacket. Classrooms are mostly teacher-centered, following a syllabus, and do not generally allow for any major amount of authentic, spontaneous interaction required for developing pragmatic fluency. In contrast to ESL learners who are immersed in the target language everyday, EFL learners have very minimal exposure to English outside the classroom, severely curbing their chances to perceive and practice real-life pragmatic norms.

Inadequacy of Teaching Materials: Materials for instruction, and especially textbooks, are rather poor sources of reliable pragmatic input. They are largely influenced by the author's intuition rather than empirical studies, and they often represent pragmatic norms that are either inadequate, naive, or

inappropriate. In some cases, these may present formulaic expressions of apology without laying down the crucial information for the sociopragmatic understanding of when and how to apply them correctly.

Language education needs to become a powerful agent in developing the intercultural communicative competence of our students, i.e., a combination of language skills with knowledge, skills, and attitudes that make them "intercultural citizens" (Byram 2018), who engage in intercultural communication, who can think and act critically, and who negotiate the realities of today.

Teacher Competence: Many language instructors are not adequately trained in pragmatics. This tends to bizarrely overshadow grammaticality with pragmatic appropriateness. Furthermore, "non-native teacher talk" might have some distinctive characteristics, e.g. an excessive use of direct strategies due to the asymmetric power relationship in the classroom, which would not be modeling natural language use.

Nature of Pragmatic Competence: Pragmatic competence is a much more complicated and multifarious skill. It is different from linguistic competence such that development in one does not automatically entail development in the other. The much articulated but unfortunately neglected complexity renders teaching as well as assessment of pragmatic competence through simple rule-based methods a sheer impossibility.

Instructional Strategies for Developing Pragmatic Competence

Research has illustrated how targeted instructional interventions work in solving such problems. There are well-known findings that immediate instruction, through either implicit instruction or simple exposure, is more effective. Role-play and simulation activities, along with explicit instruction of speech acts, are promoted by Fatah & Ibrahim (2020) and Yang (2015). Successful teaching models include the following techniques:

Explicit Instruction with Awareness-Raising: Highly effective instruction draws students' attention to certain pragmatic features: the ways to express them linguistically and when they are appropriate to use. This type of instruction allows learners to move from merely noticing the linguistic forms to understanding their pragmatic function and social implications.

Use of Authentic Audiovisual Input: EFL students sometimes lack real-life exposures, and entering video sequences from films or TV series is a helpful resource. These audiovisual input examples provide learners with

contextualized instances of speech acts as they play out in natural discourse, supplemented by paralinguistic elements that are frequently absent in the dialogues published in textbooks. Alcón Soler & Guzmán Pitarch (2010) have used parts from the TV series *Stargate* to successfully teach the speech act of refusals at the discourse level.

Discourse and Interaction Focus: Effective instruction should not teach speech acts in isolation but in the sequential context in which they actually occur. Teaching proposals now highlight how certain speech acts, such as refusals, are often co-constructed over multiple turns. Thus, instruction should emphasize the interactional character of conversation and enable learners to manage entire communicative sequences.

Sequenced Communicative Activities: It should also guide learners from more controlled to less-controlled forms of activities. This may be achieved through the main three-step procedure: 1) supplying input with authentic language samples, 2) adding comprehension and production task after the input, and 3) introducing the pragmatics in parallel with the rest of instruction.

Assessment of Pragmatic Competence

The assessment of pragmatic competence is as challenging as its instruction and requires methods that can capture the complexity of language use in context.

Critique of Traditional Methods: The most commonly used methods, namely Discourse Completion Test (DCT) and roleplays, have considerable drawbacks. DCTs are written scenarios followed by a prompt for the subjects to respond. It serves the purpose of data collection efficiently, but very often the answers are short, unnatural, and do not reflect a true competence in speech act from the perspective of a learner. While there is some interaction in roleplays, they are short in duration and may not yield adequately rich or natural data. The study conducted by Pan (2023) shows that learner performance on the three methods differed significantly; therefore, they are not equally valid in assessing pragmatic ability.

Regarding Naturally Occurring Data (NOD): Analyzing naturally occurring spoken data is a more valid method since it presents a direct and representative picture of a learner's pragmatic use. In her study, Pan indicate that while learners had their 'best' performance in DCT (most probably benefiting from preparation time), their performance in the NOD was perceived as the most natural, exhibiting the most pragmatic information. The crucial aspect is that a significant correlation between grammatical competence and pragmatic competence was found, and only through NOD, indicating that this relationship is most salient in a natural and unplanned discourse.

Multi-componential Assessment Frameworks: More novel and precise assessment tools are discourse-based and recognize that pragmatic competences are not simply a single ability but a cluster of related skills. Ifantidou and Tzanne (2012) propose an assessment tool that evaluates learners on three distinct but interrelated levels:

Pragmatic Awareness: The ability to correctly interpret the overall force and implied meaning of a text or utterance.

Metalinguistic Competence: The ability to use correct terminology in analyses of linguistic features.

Metapragmatic Awareness: The ability to make successful links between linguistic features and their pragmatic effect.

This graded approach would allow for more fine-grained diagnosis of a learner's capabilities since it recognizes the fact that a learner may have the ability to correctly interpret an intention (high pragmatic awareness) but at the same time show an inability to explain which linguistic cues led to that interpretation (low metapragmatic awareness).

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal a clear trajectory in the field of pragmatic language instruction. The data show a well-established evolution in pragmatic language training. The already-recognized challenges facing traditional language instruction have stimulated a movement towards more defensible, evidence-based pedagogical and assessment practices. The EFL context lays bare its limitations, especially with regards to authentic input, thereby emphasizing the necessity of explicit instruction that raises awareness. Pedagogic approaches that utilize authentic audiovisual resources and focus on interaction at the level of discourse are not merely adjunct but rather vital in bridging the gap between the classroom environment and the communicative demands of the real world.

Moreover, the maturation of assessment practices also speaks to a higher sophistication in the area. While the criticism of various measures like DCTs and their corresponding support for working with naturally occurring data mark one movement toward greater ecological validity, Pan's (2023) finding raises another potent issue: that meaningful link between grammatical and pragmatic competence only materializes in real-life communication. This brings into focus that linguistic resources may be vital, but their effective use for pragmatic purposes is a distinct skill. Practically, this is the skill that ought to be observed and evaluated in the spontaneous use, thereby advocating for the distinct status of pragmatic

instruction as an avenue separate but integrated in the curriculum, instead of being viewed as an assumed by-product of grammar instruction.

The multi-componential assessment framework proposed by Ifantidou and Tzanne (2012) provides a powerful diagnostic tool in consonance with this view. It enables educators to distinguish between pragmatic, metalinguistic and metapragmatic awareness, enabling them to compare specific areas of strength and weakness in their learners and respond with targeted instruction. It is establishing that pragmatic competence is a scaleable ability which develops over time, and assessment of it ought to be jogged through these development stages instead of superficial inclusion of a binary correct/incorrect judgement.

Findings expose a serious deficit in the training of pre-service English language educators with respect to pragmatic competence. Explicit instruction and systematic assessment strategies are lacking, so that newly trained educators may not be able to teach their students the necessary pragmatic skills. Evidence-based best teaching practices will promote better understanding of the verbal part of communication, the basis of really effective professional interaction in English.

Training must increase attention to pragmatics, ensuring the strategies match the communicative needs of learners in a range of settings. This can be achieved through reforming the curriculum with respect to theoretical knowledge and practical skills concerning speech acts and their application in communication around the world.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, teaching, learning, and assessment practices focusing on pragmatic competence are essential in shaping effective pre-service English language educators. By addressing the current shortcomings in pragmatic training and developing robust assessment methods, education systems can better prepare future teachers and, subsequently, their students for successful global communication. A paradigm shift is required to effectively facilitate the pragmatic competence of EFL/ESL learners for global and professional communication. This shift entails moving from a narrow focus on linguistic form toward an integrated curriculum explicitly teaching the functions of language in context. It includes authentic materials that model real-world interaction and an assessment toolkit that is valid, reliable, and able to capture changes in pragmatic ability over time. With these evidence-based practices in place, language teaching can equip learners with the requisite tools to navigate the complex social landscape of intercultural

communication.

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