



THE DEVELOPMENT OF PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE IN EFL LEARNERS

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19659589>

ABSTRACT

Pragmatic competence is a key component of communicative competence, referring to the ability to use language appropriately in various social and cultural contexts. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, learners often face difficulties in developing pragmatic skills due to limited exposure to authentic communication. This article explores the development of pragmatic competence in EFL learners by examining major influencing factors and effective instructional strategies. Using a qualitative literature review approach, the study highlights the role of explicit instruction, sociocultural awareness, and communicative practice in fostering pragmatic development. The findings indicate that integrating pragmatics into language teaching significantly improves learners' communicative effectiveness and reduces pragmatic failure.

Keywords: pragmatic competence, EFL learners, communicative competence, interlanguage, pragmatics, explicit instruction, sociocultural competence.

INTRODUCTION

Effective communication in a foreign language involves more than grammatical accuracy and vocabulary knowledge. It requires the ability to use language appropriately according to context, relationship, and cultural expectations. This ability is known as pragmatic competence, which is considered an essential component of communicative competence. According to Bachman (1990), pragmatic competence includes the ability to interpret and perform language functions appropriately in different social situations.

In EFL contexts, learners often develop strong grammatical knowledge but experience difficulty in using language naturally and appropriately. For example, they may produce grammatically correct sentences that sound too direct, impolite, or unnatural in real-life communication. Such issues can lead to misunderstandings and communication breakdowns, which are commonly described as pragmatic failure.

The importance of pragmatic competence has increased in modern global communication, where English is widely used across cultures. Learners need not only linguistic knowledge but also the ability to adapt their language use to different contexts and interlocutors. However, traditional language teaching often focuses more on grammar and less on pragmatic use.

¹ Interlanguage- a learner's evolving language.

Therefore, this article aims to examine how pragmatic competence develops in EFL learners and to identify key factors and teaching strategies that support this process.

In recent years, the field of applied linguistics has increasingly emphasized the importance of interlanguage pragmatics, which focuses on how learners acquire and use pragmatic knowledge in a second or foreign language. This area of study highlights that language learning is not only a cognitive process but also a social and cultural one, requiring learners to interpret meaning beyond the literal level. As a result, pragmatic competence is now viewed as a dynamic ability that develops over time through exposure, interaction, and instruction.

Another important consideration is the distinction between pragmalinguistic competence and sociopragmatic competence. Pragmalinguistic² competence refers to the linguistic resources used to perform communicative acts, such as grammatical structures and vocabulary choices. In contrast, sociopragmatic competence involves understanding the social norms, values, and contextual factors that influence language use. Both components are essential for successful communication, yet they are often underdeveloped in EFL learners due to limited opportunities for authentic interaction.

Moreover, the role of contextual factors cannot be overlooked. Variables such as power relations, social distance, and the degree of formality significantly influence how language is used in different situations. For instance, the way a learner makes a request to a teacher differs from how they would speak to a close friend. Without sufficient awareness of these factors, learners may produce language that is grammatically correct but pragmatically inappropriate.

In addition, previous research has shown that pragmatic competence is closely linked to learners' overall communicative success and their ability to participate effectively in global communication. As English continues to function as an international language, the ability to navigate intercultural interactions becomes increasingly important. Therefore, developing pragmatic competence is not only a linguistic goal but also a necessary skill for academic, professional, and social contexts.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative literature review to analyze existing research on pragmatic competence in EFL learning. The purpose is to synthesize theoretical perspectives and empirical findings in order to provide a clear understanding of how pragmatic competence develops.

Relevant academic sources, including books and journal articles, were selected based on their focus on interlanguage pragmatics and second language acquisition. The selected works represent key contributions to the field and provide both theoretical and practical insights.

The analysis was conducted by identifying common themes across the literature. These themes were grouped into three main categories: influencing factors, instructional approaches, and learning outcomes. This structured approach allows for a systematic discussion of pragmatic competence development. In addition, the study adopts a descriptive-analytical framework, which allows for both

² Pragmalinguistic is the use of language forms to express meaning.

summarizing previous findings and critically interpreting their implications for language teaching. This approach is particularly appropriate for exploring interlanguage pragmatics, as it enables the researcher to connect theoretical perspectives with practical classroom applications.

Furthermore, the selection of sources ensures credibility and relevance, as all materials are drawn from well-established scholars in the field of applied linguistics and pragmatics. The study does not rely on a single perspective but instead integrates multiple viewpoints to provide a balanced and comprehensive analysis.

RESULTS

The literature review revealed several important factors that influence the development of pragmatic competence in EFL learners.

First, exposure to authentic language input plays a crucial role. Learners who are exposed to real-life communication, such as through media or interaction with proficient speakers, tend to develop better pragmatic understanding. Such exposure helps learners notice how language is used in context and understand implicit meanings (Taguchi, 2015).

Second, explicit instruction has been found to be highly effective in teaching pragmatics. Research shows that learners benefit from direct teaching of speech acts, politeness strategies, and discourse patterns. Instruction that includes explanation, examples, and practice activities helps learners develop awareness and accuracy in language use (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001).

Third, interaction and communicative practice are essential for pragmatic development. Opportunities to engage in meaningful communication allow learners to apply their knowledge and receive feedback. Interaction supports both comprehension and production of pragmatic forms and contributes to gradual improvement (Kasper & Rose, 2002).

Additionally, sociocultural awareness is an important factor. Learners need to understand cultural norms and expectations in order to use language appropriately. Differences between the first language and the target language can lead to inappropriate language use if not properly understood. In addition, the study adopts a descriptive-analytical framework, which allows for both summarizing previous findings and critically interpreting their implications for language teaching. This approach is particularly appropriate for exploring interlanguage pragmatics, as it enables the researcher to connect theoretical perspectives with practical classroom applications.

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DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that pragmatic competence is a complex skill that requires more than linguistic knowledge. It involves understanding context, culture, and social relationships, which makes its development particularly challenging in EFL environments.

One important implication is the need to integrate pragmatics into language teaching. Teachers should include pragmatic elements in regular lessons rather than

treating them as separate topics. For example, teaching how to make polite requests or express disagreement appropriately can be part of speaking activities.

Another key aspect is raising learners' awareness of pragmatic differences. Learners often rely on their first language norms, which may not be appropriate in English communication. As Thomas (1983) explains, this transfer can lead to pragmatic failure, highlighting the need for explicit awareness-raising activities.

Furthermore, teacher preparation is essential. Teachers need to understand pragmatic concepts and effective teaching strategies in order to support learners. Without proper training, pragmatics may be overlooked in classroom instruction.

The use of authentic materials and technology can also enhance pragmatic learning. Videos, conversations, and online resources provide learners with real examples of language use in different contexts. These materials help bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-world communication.

Despite these benefits, challenges such as limited classroom time and exam-focused curricula may restrict the teaching of pragmatics. However, even small efforts to include pragmatic instruction can have a positive impact on learners' communicative competence. Another important aspect to consider is the role of pragmatic awareness in learner development. Raising learners' awareness of how language functions in different contexts helps them move beyond literal meanings and develop more flexible communicative skills. This awareness is especially important in EFL settings³, where learners have limited exposure to natural interaction. Moreover, the findings suggest that pragmatic instruction should be continuous rather than occasional. Instead of treating pragmatics as a separate topic, it should be embedded across all language skills, including speaking, listening, reading, and writing. This integrated approach allows learners to practice pragmatic features in a variety of contexts and reinforces their understanding over time.

It is also important to highlight the impact of local learning contexts, particularly in countries where English is not widely used outside the classroom. In such environments, teachers play a central role in providing pragmatic input and creating opportunities for interaction. Therefore, adapting teaching strategies to the local context can significantly enhance the effectiveness of pragmatic instruction. Finally, the study emphasizes the need for future research that explores the use of digital tools and virtual communication platforms in developing pragmatic competence. With the increasing use of technology in education, learners now have more opportunities to engage with authentic language and intercultural communication, which can further support their pragmatic development.

CONCLUSION

Pragmatic competence is a vital component of communicative competence that enables EFL learners to use language appropriately and effectively. This article has shown that its development depends on factors such as authentic input, explicit instruction, interaction, and sociocultural understanding.

The findings suggest that pragmatic competence does not develop automatically and requires intentional teaching and practice. By integrating pragmatics into language instruction and providing meaningful communication

³ EFL settings are environments where English is learned as a foreign language.

opportunities, teachers can significantly improve learners' ability to communicate in real-life situations.

In addition, it is important to emphasize that the development of pragmatic competence contributes not only to linguistic accuracy but also to learners' overall communicative confidence. When learners understand how to use language appropriately in different contexts, they become more effective and socially aware communicators. This is particularly important in intercultural communication, where misunderstandings can arise from differences in pragmatic norms.

The findings of this study also suggest that teachers should adopt a more learner-centered and context-sensitive approach when teaching pragmatics. By considering learners' backgrounds, needs, and learning environments, teachers can design more effective instructional activities that promote meaningful communication. Classroom practices such as role-plays, simulations, and real-life tasks can significantly enhance learners' ability to apply pragmatic knowledge in authentic situations.

Furthermore, integrating pragmatics into assessment practices can provide a more comprehensive evaluation of learners' communicative competence. Traditional tests often focus on grammar and vocabulary, but including pragmatic aspects such as appropriateness and politeness can offer a more realistic measure of language ability.

In conclusion, developing pragmatic competence should be a key goal in EFL education. Future research can explore new teaching methods and technologies to further support pragmatic development in different learning contexts.

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