



DEVELOPMENT OF PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE AMONG EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract. Pragmatic competence is a vital component of communicative competence because successful interaction depends on appropriate language use in relation to context, intention, and social norms. This article examines the development of pragmatic competence among learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). The study aims to synthesize major theoretical perspectives and empirical findings concerning how EFL learners develop pragmatic awareness, speech-act performance, and context-sensitive communicative behavior. The article also reviews foundational and recent scholarship on interlanguage pragmatics, with attention to pragmatic failure, speech acts, formulaic expressions, explicit and implicit instruction, and technology-mediated learning.

Keywords: pragmatic competence, EFL learners, interlanguage pragmatics, speech acts, communicative competence, pragmatic awareness

Introduction

Communicative success in a foreign language depends not only on linguistic accuracy but also on the ability to interpret and produce language appropriately in social interaction. This ability is generally referred to as pragmatic competence. It includes knowledge of how meaning is shaped by context, including power relations, social distance, politeness expectations, cultural values, and discourse conventions.



In EFL settings, learners often study English in environments where exposure to authentic interaction is limited, so pragmatic development may lag behind grammatical or lexical growth (Kasper & Rose, 2001; Taguchi, 2022). The need to focus on pragmatics becomes especially clear when learners experience pragmatic failure. Speakers may produce grammatically correct utterances that nevertheless sound rude, overly direct, vague, or culturally inappropriate. Thomas (1983) showed that such communication breakdowns are often caused by pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic mismatch rather than by grammar alone. This insight helped establish pragmatics as a central concern of applied linguistics and language teaching. Subsequent research in interlanguage pragmatics has confirmed that EFL learners do not automatically acquire pragmatic competence simply by learning grammar and vocabulary. Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) demonstrated that learners often notice grammatical errors more readily than pragmatic ones, which means that socially inappropriate language may go unrecognized in classroom learning. For this reason, pragmatics has become an important area of inquiry in second and foreign language education.

Methods

This article uses a qualitative review design. Rather than presenting original experimental data, it synthesizes major theoretical and empirical works in interlanguage pragmatics and EFL pedagogy. The goal of the review is to identify recurrent patterns in how pragmatic competence is conceptualized, how it develops in foreign language settings, and how instruction can facilitate that development.

The reviewed sources were selected according to four criteria: relevance to pragmatic competence in EFL or second language learning; recognized contribution to the field; clear connection to teaching, development, or assessment; and representation of both foundational and more recent perspectives. The body of literature therefore includes classic studies on pragmatic failure and awareness,



influential works on pragmatics instruction, and recent syntheses of second language pragmatics (Thomas, 1983; Kasper, 1997; Taguchi, 2011, 2022).

The literature was coded thematically into the following categories: definitions and components of pragmatic competence; learner difficulties and developmental patterns; instructional approaches, especially explicit and implicit teaching; development of speech acts and conventional expressions; and technology-mediated support for pragmatic learning. After thematic coding, the studies were compared in order to identify convergences, tensions, and implications for EFL pedagogy.

Because this is a review article, the Results section presents a synthesized interpretation of findings reported in the selected scholarship. The value of this method lies in its ability to integrate evidence from diverse studies and produce a coherent account of pragmatic development in EFL contexts.

Results

The reviewed literature shows that pragmatic competence is multidimensional. It includes pragmalinguistic knowledge, which refers to the linguistic means used to perform social actions, and sociopragmatic knowledge, which concerns the social meanings and contextual conditions governing those choices. Recent overviews describe pragmatic competence as involving production, comprehension, interpretation, and assessment of context-sensitive language use rather than only isolated speech-act formulas (Taguchi, 2022; Taguchi, 2022b).

A consistent finding is that EFL learners often have difficulty recognizing pragmatic violations. Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) found that learners were more sensitive to grammatical than pragmatic errors, suggesting that pragmatic appropriateness is less salient in traditional instruction. This problem is intensified in foreign language settings where opportunities for authentic interaction are limited



and where classroom discourse may not fully represent the complexity of real-world communication.

Research on speech acts shows that requests, refusals, apologies, compliments, and compliment responses pose persistent difficulty for EFL learners. For example, Allami and Naeimi (2011) found that learners' refusals were strongly influenced by proficiency level and contextual variables, while also showing traces of first-language transfer. Such findings indicate that pragmatic competence develops unevenly and does not emerge automatically from general language proficiency.

The literature also confirms that instruction can significantly support pragmatic development. Alcón Soler (2005) reported that both explicit and implicit instruction improved learners' awareness and use of requests, but that explicit instruction produced stronger results. Takimoto (2008) similarly found that both deductive and inductive teaching promoted gains in pragmatic competence, with noticeable benefits for learners' use of speech-act strategies. These studies suggest that classroom intervention can accelerate pragmatic growth when learners receive contextualized input and guided practice.

Another important area concerns formulaic and conventional expressions. Bardovi-Harlig and Vellenga (2012) demonstrated that instruction supported learners' oral production of conventional expressions, especially when teaching drew attention to the relationship between context and formulaic language. Because routines such as mitigated requests and socially appropriate responses are central to natural interaction, their explicit treatment appears to be a productive pathway for improving pragmatic performance.

Recent research further points to the value of digital and computer-mediated environments. Studies of online interaction and technology-supported instruction suggest that computer-mediated communication can provide learners with additional exposure to pragmatic norms, especially when combined with teacher guidance and



metapragmatic explanation. Zhang's work on compliment responses, for example, indicates that computer-mediated communication paired with data-driven instruction can strengthen pragmatic performance more effectively than unguided online interaction alone (Zhang, 2021).

Finally, the literature emphasizes that pragmatic development is dynamic and non-linear. Taguchi (2011) describes development as a complex process in which learners progress at different rates across different pragmatic domains. This means that pragmatic competence should be approached as an evolving capacity rather than a fixed achievement.

Discussion

The results of this review support the claim that pragmatic competence should be treated as a core component of EFL instruction. If learners are expected to participate successfully in academic, professional, and intercultural communication, then they must learn more than correct forms; they must also learn how to choose language appropriately in relation to context. The studies reviewed here consistently show that pragmatics is teachable and that instruction makes a measurable difference, particularly in EFL settings where naturalistic exposure is limited (Kasper, 1997; Taguchi, 2011).

One important implication is the value of explicit teaching. Explicit instruction appears especially useful because it helps learners notice pragmatic features that may otherwise remain invisible. Metapragmatic explanation, comparison of discourse samples, role-play, reflective discussion, and feedback all contribute to making pragmatic norms more accessible. Such practices do not eliminate the value of communicative experience, but they help learners interpret that experience more effectively (Alcón Soler, 2005; Takimoto, 2008).



Another implication is that pragmatics should be integrated into all language skills. Speaking lessons can include requests, refusals, and turn-taking; listening can focus on implied meaning, indirectness, and mitigation; writing can address email politeness and professional register; and reading can analyze how dialogue reveals relationships and attitudes. This integrated model is more realistic than treating pragmatics as a separate and occasional topic.

Materials development is equally important. Many textbooks simplify dialogue and underrepresent hesitation markers, softeners, formulaic routines, and discourse variation. Therefore, teachers may need to supplement materials with authentic or semi-authentic conversations, corpus-informed examples, email exchanges, service encounters, interviews, and digital communication samples. Such materials help learners see how pragmatic choices actually function in context (Kasper & Rose, 2001; Taguchi, 2022b).

The review also highlights the need for pragmatic assessment. If pragmatic competence matters, it should be evaluated through contextualized tasks such as role-plays, oral interviews, email writing, scenario-based responses, and reflective journals. Assessment should not aim to enforce one rigid norm, but rather to evaluate appropriateness, flexibility, awareness, and strategic choice. This is especially relevant in a global English environment where pragmatic success may involve negotiation across diverse varieties and identities.

At the same time, several challenges remain. Teachers may lack training in pragmatics, learners may have limited access to authentic interaction, and institutional assessment systems may continue to prioritize grammar. Future research should therefore focus on long-term classroom-based development, digital pragmatics, EFL contexts outside major research centers, and the role of learner identity, motivation, and multilingual experience in pragmatic growth (Taguchi, 2022).



Conclusion

The development of pragmatic competence among EFL learners is both necessary and achievable. The reviewed studies show that learners often struggle with context-sensitive language use even when they possess acceptable grammatical knowledge. Pragmatic growth depends on exposure, awareness, interaction, formulaic knowledge, and especially well-designed instruction. Explicit teaching, contextualized practice, and guided use of technology all emerge as effective supports. For applied linguistics and language education, the major conclusion is clear: pragmatic competence should be integrated into curriculum, materials, pedagogy, and assessment if EFL learners are to become genuinely effective communicators.

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