



An analysis of activities that develop pragmatic competence skills among English language learners

Azhar Wazir Thealib Al-Mayali

Open Educational College, Center of Najaf, General Directorate of Education, Najaf, Iraq.

Correspondence should be addressed to Azhar Wazir Thealib Al-Mayali; alameer120@gmail.com

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Abstract

Pragmatic competence is very important for English language learners. Learners of any foreign language must know how to use language, vocabulary, expressions, and gestures within specific contexts. Learning a language involves more than just vocabulary and grammar; it also includes pragmatic abilities, which are the capacity to understand and convey the implicit meanings of the language. Therefore, this study focused on explaining and analyzing some activities that can develop the communicative ability of English language learners, as these activities are an important part of the language learning process. This study examines activities designed to develop pragmatic competency among ESL learners in school settings. It aims to identify effective strategies that enhance learners' communicative skills. A qualitative analysis of selected classroom activities was conducted. The findings indicate that interactive and context-based activities significantly improve pragmatic use of ESL. The study highlights the importance of incorporating pragmatic-focused tasks in ESL instruction.

1. Introduction

Communicative competence has long been acknowledged in second language acquisition research as a multifaceted concept that encompasses sociolinguistic, discourse, and pragmatic competence in addition to grammatical accuracy. Because it allows language learners to employ linguistic forms effectively in accordance with context, social norms, and communicative intents, pragmatic competence has a key place among these components. Because pragmatic norms are frequently tacit, culturally specific, and never taught clearly in standard language courses, ESL learners find it especially difficult to gain pragmatic competence. Pragmatic competence refers to the ability to understand and perform language functions such as requesting, apologizing, refusing, suggesting, and expressing opinions in ways that are socially and culturally appropriate. Failure to acquire these skills may result in pragmatic failure, where utterances are grammatically correct but pragmatically inappropriate, potentially leading to misunderstandings or negative social judgments. Consequently, modern ESL pedagogy increasingly emphasizes the need for instructional activities that explicitly target pragmatic development.

Writing, as a productive language skill, plays a crucial role in the development of pragmatic competence. Unlike speaking, writing allows learners more time to reflect on language choices, audience expectations, and contextual variables. Through guided and purposeful writing tasks, ESL learners can become more aware of how meaning is shaped by context, power relations, politeness strategies, and discourse conventions. Writing activities thus provide an effective platform for integrating pragmatic instruction within language learning. With the rapid development in all areas of life, including education, there is a growing need to develop learning methods. One such method is pragmatic competence, which second language learners need to achieve a comprehensive and holistic language learning experience. Previous studies have not given sufficient importance to

pragmatic competence, a concept that second language teachers must be familiar with and understand thoroughly before using it effectively as a tool for teaching and using the language. One of the most important and significant problems in this area is whether all language teachers or those responsible for language teaching are fully aware of the importance of pragmatic competence for learners, and whether language teachers use modern methods that encourage the use of pragmatic understanding as a fundamental pillar of learning—that is, the practical use of language within specific contexts and understanding the words and the meaning to be conveyed according to those contexts. This study aims to highlight some important and essential activities that second language learners need and that language teachers should be familiar with in order to use them with learners. In addition, this study summarizes these activities in a series of points that language teachers can use during practical language training. It is important for second language teachers because language teaching is not limited to learning vocabulary, grammar, and syntax. Rather, the pragmatic understanding of how to use these words and grammatical rules is a fundamental pillar of language learning. Therefore, language teachers must master certain activities that enhance the learner's pragmatic competence. This is especially important for learners who follow a self-directed learning approach, a modern form of learning where learners use resources such as podcasts, books, and other materials to develop their skills independently. In such cases, learners must be aware of the importance of these points for effective learning.

Pragmatics is the study of language in use and focuses on how meaning is constructed and interpreted in context rather than from the literal meaning of words alone. It examines how speakers convey their intentions and how hearers interpret those intentions based on contextual factors such as situation, culture, and shared knowledge (Yule, 1996).

According to Paul Grice (1989), successful communication depends on the ability of interlocutors to recognize the speaker's intended meaning, not just the linguistic form of the utterance. This means that understanding language involves more than decoding grammar; it requires inference and interpretation. For example, if someone says "It's cold here," they may not simply be stating a fact but indirectly requesting to close a window. This shows that meaning in pragmatics goes beyond literal interpretation and depends on context and intention. Thus, pragmatics plays a crucial role in communication because it connects language with real-life use and helps explain how people understand implied meanings and indirect expressions (Levinson, 1983).

The concept of competence in linguistics refers to the internal knowledge that speakers have about their language. Noam Chomsky (1965) defines competence as the mental system that enables individuals to produce and understand an infinite number of sentences based on grammatical rules.

However, this definition was later expanded to include not only grammatical knowledge but also the ability to use language appropriately in communication. Dell Hymes (1972) introduced the concept of communicative competence, emphasizing that knowing a language involves understanding how to use it in social contexts. For example, a learner may know the grammatical structure of a request, such as "Open the door," but may not realize that it is too direct in formal situations. This shows that competence includes both linguistic knowledge and contextual appropriateness. Therefore, competence is now viewed as a multidimensional concept that integrates grammar, context, and communication skills (Canale & Swain, 1980).

Pragmatic competence is a key component of communicative competence and refers to the ability to use language appropriately according to context, intention, and social norms. It involves understanding not only what to say but also how, when, and to whom it should be said (Bachman & Palmer, 1996).

According to Leech (1983), pragmatic competence enables speakers to interpret implied meanings, politeness strategies, and indirect expressions in communication. It also includes the ability to perform speech acts such as requesting, apologizing, and refusing appropriately. For instance, instead of saying "Give me your notes," a learner with pragmatic competence may say "Could you please share your notes with me?" This reflects awareness of politeness and social context.

Research in interlanguage pragmatics shows that learners often face difficulties in this area because pragmatic knowledge is not always explicitly taught and is strongly influenced by cultural norms (Kasper & Rose, 2002).

Pragmatic competence can be divided into two main types: pragmalinguistic competence and sociopragmatic competence. Pragmalinguistic competence refers to the linguistic resources used to express communicative intentions, such as grammar, vocabulary, and levels of directness or indirectness. It focuses on how language forms are used to perform communicative functions (Kasper & Rose, 2002). For example, a request can be expressed in different ways, such as *Open the window* (direct) or *Could you open the window?* (polite). Meanwhile, sociopragmatic competence relates to understanding the social and cultural norms that influence language use, including politeness, power relations, and social distance (Yule, 1996). For instance, the way a student speaks to a teacher is usually different from how they speak to a friend, reflecting an awareness of social context.

Pragmatic competence is essential in second language acquisition because it enables learners to use language effectively in real-life situations. Dell Hymes (1972) emphasized that successful communication requires both linguistic accuracy and appropriate language use.

However, studies show that learners do not automatically acquire pragmatic competence even if they achieve high grammatical proficiency. This is because pragmatics depends heavily on exposure to authentic language use and interaction (Taguchi, 2019). For example, learners may produce grammatically correct sentences but still sound inappropriate due to lack of awareness of cultural norms. Therefore, pragmatic competence must be developed through explicit instruction and practice (Ishihara & Cohen, 2021).

ESL learners often face pragmatic problems because of the complex relationship between language and culture. One major issue is pragmatic transfer, where learners apply rules from their native language to English, leading to inappropriate expressions (Kasper & Rose, 2002). Another problem is the misuse of speech acts, such as requests and apologies, which may sound too direct or unclear. Learners also struggle with understanding implied meanings like sarcasm and indirect requests, as these require contextual and cultural knowledge (Taguchi, 2019).

Additionally, limited exposure to authentic language input and overemphasis on grammar in classrooms contribute to weak pragmatic development (Bardovi-Harlig, 2020). These problems may result in pragmatic failure, where communication breaks down despite grammatical correctness. This can negatively affect learners' academic and social interactions.

To address these issues, researchers recommend integrating pragmatic instruction into teaching through role-play, real-life tasks, and exposure to authentic communication (Ishihara & Cohen, 2021).

Pragmatic competence does not develop through learning grammar rules and vocabulary alone. Instead, it grows through exposure to real language use and active participation in meaningful communication. In English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts, both teachers and learners rely on a range of classroom practices that help learners use language appropriately according to social and cultural expectations

One of the most frequently used practices is role-play. In this activity, learners act out everyday situations such as apologizing, making requests, refusing politely, or giving suggestions. This allows them to practice choosing suitable expressions depending on the context, the relationship between speakers, and the level of formality. It also gives learners the chance to try different ways of speaking and receive feedback on their choices.

Another common activity is the Discourse Completion Task. In this task, learners are given short situations and asked to respond in a way they think is appropriate. This helps reveal how they produce different speech acts and whether their responses match acceptable social norms. It also increases awareness of differences between the learner's first language and English.

Using authentic materials is also important in developing pragmatic competence. These materials include films, television programs, recorded conversations, and real-life dialogues. By engaging with such content, learners can observe how language is actually used in context, including tone of voice, levels of politeness, indirect expressions, and cultural meanings. This kind of exposure helps learners understand implied meanings and subtle aspects of communication.

Another useful approach is metapragmatic instruction, where teachers directly explain the social rules of language use. For example, learners may be taught how to make polite requests or how to express apologies appropriately in different contexts. This type of explanation helps learners become more aware of how language functions in social interaction.

Interaction among learners also plays a key role. Through group work and discussions, learners exchange ideas, interpret each other's intentions, and adjust their language based on the situation. These interactions create opportunities to practice pragmatic skills in a supportive environment and help develop flexibility in communication.

Feedback is an essential part of this process. Teachers may correct inappropriate expressions or suggest more suitable alternatives. This helps learners gradually improve their ability to use language in a socially appropriate way.

In addition, practicing language outside the classroom supports further development. Communicating with proficient speakers, participating in online discussions, or engaging in multicultural settings allows learners to apply what they have learned in real-life situations.

In general, these activities represent common practices in ESL teaching that aim to develop learners' pragmatic competence. They focus on helping learners move beyond knowing the language to using it effectively and appropriately in different communicative contexts.

2. Method

2.1. Develop Pragmatic Competence

This chapter of the study includes activities related to developing the communicative competence skills of learners, which were identified after researching many sources. Each of these activities has special importance and an important role in the language learning stage. In some of these activities, the teacher plays the biggest role, while in others, the learner plays the biggest role by giving them the opportunity to practice the language.

2.2. The Data Collection procedures

To achieve the objectives of this study, several procedures were followed, including searching through second language teaching materials for skills related to developing and enhancing pragmatic understanding among learners. Also, researching and developing clear and specific definitions for each skill-development activity to present them clearly in the study.

3. Results and Discussion

In order to arrive at a clear enumeration and analysis of the activities that develop learners' pragmatic abilities, a qualitative approach was used in selecting and ranking these activities. Many activities and procedures can accelerate the learning process and guide learners correctly, but the activities included in this chapter were chosen based on their importance and impact on learners' thinking in developing their pragmatic comprehension skills. Consideration was given to selecting diverse activities that affect the majority of learners, most of which rely on the interaction between vocabulary, grammar, and syntax, and the influence of context on them, and how the learner can connect the context with the meanings of words.

3.1. Activities of Developing Pragmatic Competence

These activities were categorized by type and presented sequentially as point.

3.1.1. Role-Play Activities

Role-play is a commonly used classroom activity in which learners act out real-life situations such as making requests, apologizing, or refusing. This activity allows learners to practice language in context by considering factors like social distance, power relations, and level of formality. Its importance lies in providing a safe environment for experimenting with language before using it in real situations.

For example, a student may act as a customer in a restaurant and say: *"Could I have the menu, please?"* instead of *"Give me the menu."* This shows awareness of politeness strategies.

According to Kasper (1997), role-play helps learners develop pragmatic awareness through simulated interaction. From this, it can be said that using role-play enhances learners' ability to select appropriate expressions, which leads to better pragmatic understanding.

3.1.2. Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs)

DCTs involve giving learners written situations and asking them to respond appropriately. This activity focuses on how learners produce speech acts such as requests or apologies.

For instance, a learner may be asked: You are late to class. What would you say to your teacher? A suitable answer might be: *"I'm sorry for being late, it won't happen again."*

As noted by Blum-Kulka (1989), DCTs are effective in analyzing learners' pragmatic production. This suggests that such tasks improve learners' ability to form socially acceptable responses.

3.1.3. Authentic Material Analysis

This activity involves using real-life materials such as movies, TV shows, or recorded conversations. Learners observe how language is used naturally in context.

For example, students may watch a scene and notice how a speaker indirectly refuses an invitation by saying: *"I wish I could, but I have other plans."*

According to Bardovi-Harlig (2001), exposure to authentic input enhances pragmatic development. This indicates that real-life examples help learners understand implicit meanings and cultural norms.

3.1.4. Explicit Teaching of Speech Acts

In this activity, teachers directly explain how to perform speech acts like requesting, apologizing, or thanking.

For example, learners are taught different forms of requests:

Direct: *"Open the door."*

Polite: *"Could you open the door, please?"*

Research by Rose (2005) shows that explicit instruction improves pragmatic competence. This means that clear explanation helps learners understand when and how to use language appropriately.

3.1.5. Group Discussion and Peer Interaction

Learners engage in discussions where they exchange ideas and respond to each other.

For example, during a discussion, a student may soften disagreement by saying: *"I see your point, but I think..."*

This aligns with Vygotsky's social interaction theory, which emphasizes learning through interaction. It can be concluded that peer communication improves pragmatic flexibility.

3.1.6. Video-Based Observation

Learners watch video clips and analyze both verbal and non-verbal communication such as gestures, tone, and facial expressions. For example, a learner may notice that a speaker's tone changes when being sarcastic. According to Goffman (1967), communication includes both verbal and non-verbal elements. This shows that video analysis enhances understanding of implied meaning.

3.1.7. Jumbled Dialogue Activities

Learners are given mixed-up parts of a conversation and asked to reorder them correctly.

For example:

"Thanks."

"Here you are."

"Can I have a coffee?"

Correct order helps learners understand conversational structure. This activity improves awareness of turn-taking and coherence, which are essential for pragmatic competence.

3.1.8. Metapragmatic Discussion

Learners discuss why certain expressions are appropriate in specific contexts. For example, discussing why *"Shut the door"* may sound rude compared to *"Could you close the door?"*. This reflective activity increases awareness of language use rules and helps learners think critically about communication.

3.1.9. Real-Life Interaction Practice

Learners practice language outside the classroom, such as talking to strangers or participating in online conversations. For example, asking for directions politely in public: *"Excuse me, could you help me?"*. This type of practice allows learners to apply their knowledge in authentic situations, strengthening their pragmatic skills.

3.1.10. Storytelling and Narrative Activities

Learners tell or analyze stories, focusing on characters' intentions and language use. For example, discussing why a character apologized indirectly instead of directly. According to Bruner, storytelling supports meaning-making and interpretation. This suggests that narrative activities develop deeper pragmatic understanding.

4. Conclusion

Pragmatic competence is an important aspect of second language learning because it helps learners use language appropriately and effectively in different social and cultural contexts. This study shows that grammatical knowledge alone is not enough for successful communication, since learners also need to understand politeness, speech acts, cultural norms, and contextual meanings. The development of pragmatic competence can be supported through activities such as role-plays, peer interaction, discourse completion tasks, and exposure to authentic materials like movies, conversations, and online communication. The findings also reveal that no single activity is sufficient to develop pragmatic competence completely; therefore, an integrated approach combining interaction-based activities, authentic input, and explicit instruction is considered the most effective strategy.

Based on the findings, teachers are encouraged to integrate various instructional activities to improve learners' pragmatic competence comprehensively. Authentic materials, explicit feedback, and reflective discussions should be incorporated into language learning to help learners understand appropriate language use in different contexts. In addition, teachers and curriculum designers should recognize that pragmatic competence is as important as grammar and vocabulary in second language acquisition. Learners should also be encouraged to develop communication skills that focus not only on grammatical accuracy but also on the appropriate use of language in real-life situations.

Data Availability

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

Author in this publication declare no conflict of interest regarding the title, data, location, and results of the research.

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Supplementary Materials

This study does not include any supplementary materials.

Declaration on AI Use

Author declare that no artificial intelligence (AI) or AI-assisted tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript. AI were used only to improve readability and language under strict human oversight; no content, ideas, analyses, or conclusions were generated by AI.

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