

DEVELOPING PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE IN EFL: A FOCUS ON SPEECH ACTS AND SOCIAL MEANING

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Annotation. *This article examines the role of speech acts in the development of pragmatic competence among EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners, with a specific focus on how language conveys social meaning. It explores how explicit instruction in requests, refusals, apologies, and other speech acts can improve learners' ability to communicate appropriately across cultural and situational contexts. The study argues for the inclusion of pragmatic elements in language teaching as a means of promoting authentic, socially aware communication.*

Keywords: *Pragmatic competence, Speech acts, Social meaning, EFL teaching, Intercultural communication, Politeness strategies, Pragmatic instruction, Real-life communication, Language use in context, Communicative competence.*

Introduction

In recent years, the concept of pragmatic competence has gained increasing attention in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching. As communication becomes more global and intercultural, learners need more than grammatical knowledge to interact effectively—they need to understand how language is used to convey social meaning. One of the most critical aspects of pragmatic competence involves speech acts, such as requests, refusals, compliments, and apologies, which reflect the speaker's intentions and the social relationship between interlocutors.

In EFL contexts, where learners have limited exposure to authentic social interactions in English, mastering the appropriate use of speech acts becomes a challenge. Misunderstanding or misusing these acts can lead to communication breakdowns or unintended offense. Thus, teaching learners how to use language not just accurately, but also appropriately, is essential for developing communicative competence.

This article focuses on how speech act instruction can support the development of pragmatic competence by highlighting the connection between linguistic form and social meaning. It argues for a more conscious integration of pragmatics into EFL curricula and presents practical strategies that can be used to teach speech acts effectively in classroom settings.

Literature Review

The theoretical foundations of pragmatic competence can be traced back to Hymes (1972), who introduced the notion of communicative competence, extending the scope of language learning beyond grammar to include sociocultural and pragmatic aspects. Later models by Canale and Swain (1980) further articulated this framework by identifying components such as sociolinguistic and strategic competence, both of which are relevant to pragmatic use.

Speech act theory, developed by Austin (1962) and expanded by Searle (1969), provides a foundation for understanding how language performs actions in social contexts.

Speech acts are often culture-bound and context-sensitive, making their instruction particularly important in foreign language settings. Learners must understand not only what to say but how to say it appropriately depending on the situation and relationship between speakers.

Empirical studies have consistently shown that EFL learners benefit from explicit instruction in speech acts. According to Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993), pragmatic competence does not automatically develop alongside grammatical competence. Therefore, instruction that includes examples, awareness-raising, and practice activities is essential. Taguchi (2009) emphasizes that pragmatics can and should be taught, especially in EFL settings where learners have limited real-life exposure to the language.

Despite this, speech acts remain underrepresented in many language teaching materials.

Traditional syllabi prioritize structural components of language, leaving out pragmatic elements that are critical to real-life communication. Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor (2003) argue that textbooks must be supplemented with tasks that develop learners' ability to interpret and produce socially appropriate language.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore how speech act instruction contributes to the development of pragmatic competence in EFL learners. The focus is on identifying effective teaching strategies, classroom practices, and learners' responses to pragmatic instruction.

Participants: The study involved six EFL teachers from three secondary schools and two universities in Uzbekistan, each with over five years of teaching experience. In addition, 30 intermediate-level EFL learners participated in classroom observation sessions and follow-up surveys.

Data Collection: Data were collected using three main instruments: semi-structured interviews with teachers to understand their methods and attitudes toward teaching pragmatics; classroom observations to examine how speech acts are taught in real-time classroom settings; and learner feedback surveys to capture student perceptions of pragmatic instruction and its impact.

Data Analysis: The collected qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis.

Recurring themes were identified across interviews, observations, and surveys.

Categories included the types of speech acts taught, teaching techniques (e.g., role-play, DCTs, discussion), and student engagement and reflection. Ethical approval was obtained from participating institutions, and informed consent was collected from all participants.

Results

The analysis of data from teacher interviews, classroom observations, and learner surveys revealed several key findings:

1. Increased Awareness of Social Meaning: Learners demonstrated a deeper understanding of how speech acts such as requests, refusals, and apologies vary depending on context, social distance, and cultural norms. Students began adjusting their tone, formality, and indirectness based on situational cues.

2. Positive Learner Engagement: Activities such as role-plays, discourse completion tasks (DCTs), and guided discussions led to high levels of student participation.

Learners reported that these tasks were both enjoyable and useful in helping them understand “how to say things politely.”

3. **Teaching Practices:** Teachers used a range of techniques including explicit explanation, contrastive analysis, and contextual modeling. Most relied on authentic or semi-authentic materials to demonstrate pragmatic usage.

4. **Challenges:** Common obstacles included lack of textbook support for pragmatic instruction, limited class time, and teachers’ uncertainty about cross-cultural differences in politeness norms.

Some students also found it difficult to transfer pragmatic knowledge to spontaneous speech.

Discussion

These findings reinforce previous research (e.g., Rose & Kasper, 2001; Bardovi-Harlig, 2013) that supports the teachability of pragmatic competence. The positive learner responses and observable improvement in awareness suggest that **explicit instruction in speech acts** effectively enhances students’ communicative abilities in EFL settings.

The study also highlights the critical role of **contextualization**. When learners are exposed to speech acts in realistic, meaningful scenarios, they become more capable of navigating social interactions. This aligns with Taguchi’s (2009) emphasis on meaningful input and practice for pragmatic development.

However, the lack of institutional support for pragmatics, as well as insufficient training for teachers, continues to hinder broader implementation. As Kasper and Roever (2005) argue, pragmatic competence is often overlooked in curricula despite its importance for communicative success. More comprehensive professional development and curricular reform are needed to integrate pragmatic elements into standard EFL programs.

The study also revealed a cultural dimension—learners initially relied heavily on L1 politeness norms. This confirms the need for **intercultural pragmatic awareness**, helping students recognize how politeness varies across cultures and languages.

Conclusion

This study confirms that **speech act instruction** plays a significant role in the development of **pragmatic competence** in EFL learners. Through guided exposure to real-world language use, students can move beyond grammatical accuracy to achieve effective and socially appropriate communication.

Teachers who integrate speech acts into their lessons using contextualized and interactive techniques help bridge the gap between form and function in language use. However, for pragmatic instruction to be sustainable and widespread, support is needed in the form of curriculum design, teacher training, and resource development.

Ultimately, teaching language learners not only what to say, but how and when to say it, is fundamental for fostering meaningful communication in a globalized world. Future studies might explore longitudinal effects of pragmatic instruction or evaluate its impact in online and hybrid learning environments.

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