

# ***Raising Pragmatic Competence in Foreign Language Classrooms***

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## **Abstract**

Second language pragmatics has recently been a prevailing topic in the field of second language teaching. While many studies have been conducted about why, how, and what to incorporate regarding the teaching of pragmatic competence, there are still unsolved issues about them. This study addresses the possibility of developing pragmatic competence in EFL classrooms through well-designed curricular courses. The study also examined the impact of proficiency in expediting pragmatic production in English L2 learners. Fifty senior university students (25 males; 25 females) with English high proficiency attended the course, participating in a pre-test before instruction began and a post-test upon the course completion. The study addresses several significant questions, namely the relationship of proficiency and development of pragmatic competence, the impact of class-based curriculum in raising competence, and the role of gender as an influencing factor affecting competence and students' preference of assessment methods. Unlike previous studies, this study covered more than one aspect of pragmatic production, including inference, implicature, structural errors in meaning and interpretation, and speech act (requests, refusals, apology and offer). The study produced key findings that can help inform and improve the incorporating of pragmatic competence in language study; proficiency level significantly impacts pragmatic competence; pragmatic-based curricula are supportive in constructing competence; gender factor does not affect learning pragmatics, as both genders performed similarly in the tests. Eventually pragmatic competence can expectedly be raised in classrooms-based courses.

**Keywords:** *Pragmatic Competence, Curriculum, Gender Difference, Assessment, Foreign Language.*

## **Yabancı Dil Sınıflarında Pragmatik Kapasitenin Yükselmesi**

### **Özet**

Son zamanlarda ikinci dil pragmatığı ikinci dil öğretme alanında önemli bir konu haline geldi. Aynı zamanda niçin, nasıl pragmatik kabiliyeti öğretmede neler eklenmeli ile alakalı belli sayıda incelemeler yapılmış. Hala onlarla alakalı gözölmemiş konular var. Bu araştırma pragmatik kabiliyeti geliştirme olasılığından bahs ediyor, yabancı dil olarak ingilizce sınıfında iyi bir kurs dizayın etmek yoluyla aynı zamanda bu araştırma ingilizce öğrenen öğrencilerin hızlı pragmatik kullanmasında dil kabiliyetlerinin etkisini inceliyor. üniversite son sınıfından 50 öğrenci (25 erkek 25 kız), ingilizceleri üst düzeyde olan öğrenciler kursa katılıyor, ilk başta bilgi edinmeden önce ön sınava katıldılar ve kursun sonunda da son sınava katıldılar. Bu araştırma birkaç önemli sorulardan bahs ediyor, mesela pragmatik kabiliyetin gelişmesiyle dil kabiliyetin arasındaki ilişki, pragmatik kabiliyeti yükseltmede sınıf içerisindeki programın etkisi, cinsiyetin rolü pragmatik kabiliyetin üzerinde etkili bir faktör olarak nedir? Diğer araştırmaların tersine, bu araştırma pragmatik kullanmanın bir yönünden fazla yönleri içeriyor. Örnek: (çıkarsama, sezdirim, anlam ve yorumlama yapısal hatalar ve konuşma eylemi (istek, ret, özür ve teklif). Bu araştırma belli neticelere ulaşmış, bu neticeler bilgi vermede ve dil incelemede pragmatik kabiliyeti birleştirmede yardımcı oluyor. Dil seviyesi pragmatik becerikliğı üzerinde olumlu bir etkisi var, becerikli liğı oluşturmak için pragmatik programı faydalıdır. Pragmatik öğrenmede cinsiyetin etkisi yoktur, çünkü her iki cinsiyet sınavda aynı puan aldılar. Sonunda da pragmatik becekliliğın kabiliyeti sınıflarda yükseltileceğı bekleniyor.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Pragmatik kabiliyeti, program, cinsiyet farklılığı, değerlendirmek, yabancı dil.*

## **Introduction**

Communication is the base-line definition of language production, and English has been the language of social media, scientific resources, studies and businesses. Good communication guarantees good comprehension, but the challenges that English L2 speakers face center on understanding the interlocutor's meaning which can simply be introduced as pragmatic competence. Pragmatic competence is understood to be a central component of communicative competence and growing interests have been noted in addressing pragmatics in L2 curriculum as seen in (Crandall & Basturkmen 2004, p. 38-49). There have been various investigations on the validity and dependability of different ways for obtaining pragmatic comprehension and production (such as written and oral discourse completion tasks, multiple-choice tasks (MDCT), role-play self-assessment, role-play tasks and discourse self-assessment tasks) for L2 contexts. Those assessing tools are mostly executed with well-trained raters under empirical status (Brown 2001, p. 301-325).

### **1. Literature Review**

Recent studies have made initial efforts to produce constructional instruments in relation with introducing practical aspects to be suitable for classroom assessment, for example written DCT, role plays, discourse rating assignment and multiple choices for assessing pragmatic competence. Ishihara & Cohen studied different levels of learners' development of pragmatic competence through general developed classroom-based tasks and instruments which comprised rubrics for assessing pragmatic awareness and use as well as the awareness of meta-pragmatic such as reflection of the pragmatic norms that recently learnt, learner's self-assessment of pragmatic production and community interpretation, assessments relying on the socio-cultural theory of Vygotsky (2010, p. 75-97).

There are many studies that compared L2 learners' performances of a particular pragmatic feature cross wising over various proficiency levels dictated by institutionalized exams, grade level, or length of formal study (Taguchi 2007: 28, 113–135). Garcia realized that proficiency has sufficient impact on comprehension but the distinction of high proficient speakers and native speakers is little to some extends. He also found that the each kind of speech act has own effect

on comprehension level (2004: 13, 96–115). Mohammed realized the remarkable effect of instructional courses for developing pragmatic competence, particularly when given explicit instruction of speech acts of refusals and requests to the EFL learners (2012: 40, 1 -2). Ishihara investigated the value of teacher assessment of classroom-based pragmatic teaching through the application of few assessing tools over the students who were part of the controlled group via few rubrics for assessing the learners' competence in class despite the lack of resources in the field of raising pragmatic competence (2009, p. 445–70).

According to Schneider & Barron (2008, p. 15), during the process of teaching and assessing pragmatics several difficulties arise within changeability of pragmatics in various sociocultural practices because of the macrosocial differentiation such as gender, regional, social, , ethnic, and generalization of dissimilarities in pragmatic standards), a suitable or proposed scope of patterns of linguistic manner demonstrates unlikely due to the speakers' own characteristics and social history (McNamara & Rover 2006, p. 43-79).

1. Is gender a factor affecting the L2 pragmatic competence?
2. Can classroom-based courses develop pragmatic competence?
3. Is there a relationship between L2 proficiency level and pragmatic competence?

### **3. Methodology**

The participants of this study have been nominated at the University of Sulaimanyah (one of the Northern Iraq state universities) as fourth year English language students. There were 50 adult students (25 females; 25 males) in two experimental groups, were participating this experiment with the mean age of (23.02). The students were randomly assigned out of 120 students based on their English proficiency which was indicated by their GPA or its equivalence based on the previous three years exam results. Those who have got % 75 and above were considered as high proficient students. The participants attended pragmatics sessions twice a week for 90 minutes, for the total of two months. GPAs in English courses was also used in (Shmais 2003, p. 84), that can authenticate students' proficiency. Written Discourse Completion Tasks (WDCT) was applied to give credit to the results achieved in the study. The test (see the APPENDICES) focused on the written competence of classroom students; this comprises of 15 different items in

four independent parts; the first part of the test assesses participants' inference recognition capacity in which three statements are presented and students should infer what is meant by them. The second part of the test intends to evaluate the students for their implicature competence through three declarative statements. The students need to guess the speakers' meaning when reading those statements. Part three of the test consists of five items testing students' comprehension given multiple choices to decide whether the items are grammatical, meaningful, or appropriate with justifying their responses, where the students should concentrate on structural meaning and interpretation. Four situational scenarios envisage the last part of the test, exploring the readers' proper responses of speech acts' most useable categories such as polite requests, apologies, refusals and offer and various ways that the test takers may apply in responding them and their accuracy in distinguishing between polite, impolite, formal or informal answers. The main resource of the course is "*Introduction to Pragmatics*" by Betty J. Birner which was published in 2013. The students were supposed to study pragmatic as one of the compulsory courses before they have graduated. They have intensively learnt a lot of pragmatic related significant subjects, namely Definition of Pragmatics, Discourse, Implicature and its types, Referring expression and Deixis, Presupposition, Inference and Grice's maxims; Quality, Quantity, Relation and Manner and Speech Acts' Request, Offer, Refusals and Acceptance and Apologies. Those topics would constantly teach variety of communication types that facilitate the development, production and recognition of pragmatics in context. Generally speaking, they are commonly practiced in any illocutionary acts so recognizing those linguistic terms in context will indisputably enhance the learners' competence. The session was run for 45 minutes twice a week for 8 weeks. In this experimental study, the participants have undergone a pre-test and a post-post which intentionally covered the few widely used topics in pragmatics such as speech acts, inference and implicature and structural meaning and interpretation. The study was conducted in the academic year (2015 – 2016). The students had 60 minutes to respond the pre-test and the same time was devoted to the post-test. The test was a written-based test with no multiple choices to evaluate participants' written capacity of pragmatic competence. The aim of the pre-test was to exhibit the participants' prior knowledge of pragmatic use in sociocultural context. Following the pre-test, the participants have intensively attended the two

months class-based sessions about pragmatics and pragmatics production; the topics were specifically mentioned above in the instructional materials sub-section.

**4. Data Analysis**

The quantitative data in this study was collected via a sit-down test and WDCT where students have taken a pre-test and the post-test. SPSS was used to analyze the obtained data. Regarding the research questions of the study, the table below has responded the first research question;

**Table 4.1: The Relationship between Gender and the Pre-test**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>S.D</b>	<b>Std.error</b>	<b>F-test</b>	<b>Sig.</b>	<b>T-test</b>	<b>Sig</b>
<b>Male</b>	25	34.44	6.57	1.31				
					0.99	0.323	-0.13	0.89
<b>Female</b>	25	34.72	8.19	1.63				

It is obvious in the Table 4.1 that there was not statistically significant difference between male and female students in the pre-test because the p-value was bigger than the common alpha ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ). As a result, male and female students can possibly get similar level in pragmatics when learnt English as a second language and no sufficient difference was noted in the pre-test.

**Table 4.2: The Relationship between Gender and the Post-Test**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>S.D</b>	<b>Std.error</b>	<b>F-test</b>	<b>Sig.</b>	<b>T-test</b>	<b>Sig</b>
<b>Male</b>	25	44.64	6.8	1.36				
					1.17	0.283	-.808	0.423
<b>Female</b>	25	46.16	6.1	1.22				

Table 4.2 indicates that gender did not have an impact on raising pragmatic competence. Though the female students performed better than the male ones, the difference between the means are not statically meaningful. In other words, there was not statistically significant difference

between male and female within taking the course (post- test) because the p-value was bigger than the common alpha ( $\alpha =0.05$ ). Resultantly, the male and the female participants have been raising their pragmatic competence in classrooms similarly even during the course attendance. This finding is in line with (Aslan, 2008, p. 108).

The table below responds the last two research questions of the article as they are about the power of proficiency and the impact of class-based courses on the development of L2 pragmatics.

**Table 4.3: The Impact of the Activity on the Students**

Test	N	Mean	S.D	Std. error	95%		T-test	Sig
					Confidence Lower	Upper		
<b>Pre-test</b>	50	34.58	7.35	1.04	-12.98	-8.62	-9.94	0.00
<b>Post-test</b>	50	45.38	6.45	0.91				

As for the second and the third research questions of the study, Table 4.3 has demonstrated the course-based curriculum and high proficiency were effective on the course participants. The mean and standard deviation of pre-test’s results were (34.58, 7.35) respectively and when students have done the course, the mean result of post- test has increased to (45.38) and standard deviation has decreased to (6.45), which indicates that the group has become more homogeneous. Moreover, there was statistically significant difference between the results in the pre-test and the post-test because a p-value of t-test were smaller than the common alpha ( $\alpha =0.05$ ). This is compatible with the study of (Ishihara, 2009, p. 445–70) in proficient students and (Mohammed, 2012: 40, 1 -2) in designed course materials. .

**5. Conclusion**

The current study addresses the impact of class-based course in raising pragmatic competence. Competence can interestingly be raised on the condition that the class environment is entirely designed to pragmatic production and development in terms of well-developed curriculum,

learners' interaction and engagement in the activities, instructors' awareness of the participants' needs, and application of multi-curricular activities in class. Gender was not relevant in the development of pragmatic competence, but rather participants' willingness to learn pragmatic was of utmost importance. Consequently, the duration of English study was beneficial particularly in the pre-test but was less practical in the post-test.

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