



## THE ROLE OF PRAGMATIC AWARENESS IN EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between pragmatic awareness and communication skills among EFL university students. Using a mixed-methods approach, 150 students from one of university in Medan participated in a 4-week study involving pragmatic awareness tests, communication skills assessments, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations. Results revealed a strong positive correlation between pragmatic awareness and overall communication abilities. Students who received explicit pragmatic instruction demonstrated significant improvements in both pragmatic competence and communication skills compared to the control group. Qualitative data highlighted enhanced cultural sensitivity, improved interpretation of implicit meanings, and increased adaptability as key benefits of pragmatic awareness. The study concludes that integrating pragmatic instruction into EFL curricula is crucial for developing effective communicators in diverse cultural contexts. Implications for EFL pedagogy and suggestions for future research are discussed.

**Keywords:** Pragmatic Awareness, EFL, Communication Skills, Intercultural Communication, Language Instruction.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 17-10-2024

Revised 10-12-2024

Accepted 30-12-2023

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### INTRODUCTION

In the realm of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, the development of effective communication skills has long been a central goal. While traditional approaches have emphasized the importance of grammatical competence and vocabulary acquisition, recent research underscores the significance of pragmatic awareness in achieving true communicative competence. Pragmatic awareness involves understanding how language is used in various social contexts, enabling learners to navigate complex intercultural interactions. This is particularly relevant in today's globalized world, where successful communication often hinges on more than just grammatical accuracy; it also requires sensitivity to cultural norms and contextual cues (Li & Gao, 2017).

Studies have increasingly shown that pragmatic competence plays a pivotal role in enhancing students' communication skills. For instance, Alcón-Soler (2015) examined the effects of pragmatic instruction and length of stay in study abroad programs, concluding that



pragmatic learning can be significantly enhanced through targeted teaching interventions. Additionally, Bardovi-Harlig (2013) argued that the development of L2 pragmatics requires deliberate practice and exposure to authentic communicative situations, supporting the idea that pragmatic competence can be fostered through focused instruction.

Further research highlights the practical applications of these findings. Cohen (2018) emphasizes the importance of both native and non-native language teachers in fostering pragmatic competence, arguing that their insights can provide learners with valuable perspectives on how language functions across different cultures. Similarly, García-Gómez (2018) explored how digital storytelling can serve as an effective tool for developing both pragmatic competence and cultural awareness, offering learners opportunities to engage in authentic intercultural communication scenarios. These insights suggest that developing pragmatic awareness not only enhances communication skills but also equips EFL learners with the tools necessary for successful intercultural exchanges.

Ultimately, enhancing pragmatic competence has profound implications for EFL education, as it enables learners to go beyond the mechanical aspects of language learning and engage meaningfully in real-world interactions. As research by Taguchi and Roever (2017) indicates, pragmatic competence is critical for achieving the broader objective of communicative competence, which encompasses not only the correct use of language but also the ability to navigate the subtleties of intercultural communication effectively.

Pragmatic awareness, defined as the ability to understand and use language appropriately in various social contexts, has gained increasing attention in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) over the past decade (Chen & Yang, 2019). Despite this growing recognition, there remains a significant gap in our understanding of how pragmatic awareness specifically impacts the communication skills of EFL learners at the university level. This research seeks to address this gap by examining the ways in which pragmatic competence influences students' ability to navigate complex social situations, interpret implicit meanings, and adapt their language use to different cultural contexts.

The primary research aims of this study are:

1. To assess the current level of pragmatic awareness among EFL university students.
2. To investigate the correlation between pragmatic awareness and overall communication skills.
3. To identify effective strategies for enhancing pragmatic competence in EFL instruction.
4. To explore the impact of improved pragmatic awareness on intercultural communication success.

By addressing these objectives, this study seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on pragmatic competence in SLA and provide practical insights for EFL educators and curriculum developers.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Pragmatic Awareness in Second Language Acquisition

The concept of pragmatic awareness has its roots in the broader field of pragmatics, which explores how context and implied meanings influence language use and interpretation. In the context of SLA, pragmatic awareness refers to learners' ability to recognize



and produce language that is appropriate to specific social situations and cultural norms (Taguchi, 2018). This includes understanding speech acts, conversational implicatures, and politeness strategies across different cultures.

Recent studies have emphasized the importance of pragmatic awareness in developing overall communicative competence. For instance, Kim and Brown (2016) found that EFL learners with higher levels of pragmatic awareness demonstrated greater success in navigating complex social interactions in English. Similarly, Wang et al. (2020) reported a strong positive correlation between pragmatic competence and the ability to avoid misunderstandings in intercultural communication settings.

### **Communication Skills in EFL Contexts**

Communication skills in EFL contexts encompass a wide range of abilities, including oral proficiency, listening comprehension, and sociolinguistic competence. Traditional approaches to EFL instruction have often prioritized grammatical accuracy and vocabulary breadth as the primary indicators of communicative ability. However, recent research has challenged this notion, suggesting that effective communication in a foreign language requires a more nuanced understanding of cultural and contextual factors (Zhang & Papi, 2021).

Liu and Huang (2017) conducted a comprehensive review of communication skills development in EFL learners, highlighting the need for a more integrated approach that incorporates pragmatic awareness alongside traditional language skills. Their findings suggest that students who receive explicit instruction in pragmatic aspects of language use demonstrate significant improvements in their overall communication abilities.

### **The Intersection of Pragmatic Awareness and Communication Skills**

The relationship between pragmatic awareness and communication skills in EFL contexts has emerged as a critical area of inquiry in recent years. Rafieyan (2018) investigated the impact of pragmatic instruction on Iranian EFL learners' communicative competence, finding that students who received targeted pragmatic training showed marked improvements in their ability to engage in natural, context-appropriate conversations.

Moreover, Chen et al. (2019) explored the role of pragmatic awareness in facilitating successful intercultural communication among Chinese EFL students studying abroad. Their results indicated that students with higher levels of pragmatic competence were better able to adapt to new cultural environments and establish meaningful relationships with native English speakers.

### **Strategies for Enhancing Pragmatic Awareness**

As the importance of pragmatic awareness in EFL education has become increasingly apparent, researchers have begun to investigate effective strategies for enhancing this aspect of language learning. Taguchi and Roever (2017) proposed a framework for integrating pragmatic instruction into EFL curricula, emphasizing the need for authentic materials and opportunities for learners to engage in meaningful, context-rich interactions.

Lee and Cho (2020) examined the effectiveness of technology-enhanced pragmatic instruction, finding that the use of digital tools and multimedia resources can significantly boost students' pragmatic awareness and, by extension, their overall communication skills. Similarly, García-Gómez (2018) explored the potential of social media platforms as a means of exposing



EFL learners to authentic language use and fostering pragmatic competence in online environments.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate the relationship between pragmatic awareness and communication skills among EFL university students. The research design incorporated both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

### **Participants**

The study involved 150 EFL university students (aged 18-25) from one of university in Medan. Participants were selected using stratified random sampling to ensure a representative distribution across different proficiency levels and academic majors.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

1. Pragmatic Awareness Test (PAT): A validated instrument designed to assess participants' ability to recognize and interpret pragmatic features of language use in various contexts.
2. Communication Skills Assessment (CSA): A comprehensive evaluation of participants' oral and written communication abilities, including measures of fluency, accuracy, and sociolinguistic appropriateness.
3. Semi-structured interviews: Conducted with a subset of 30 participants to gather in-depth insights into their experiences with pragmatic aspects of language use and perceived communication challenges.
4. Classroom observations: A total of 20 EFL classes were observed to assess the integration of pragmatic instruction in current teaching practices.

### **Procedure**

The study was conducted over a period of 4 weeks. Participants completed the PAT and CSA at the beginning and end of the study period. During this time, half of the participants (experimental group) received explicit pragmatic instruction as part of their regular EFL courses, while the other half (control group) continued with their standard curriculum. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at the midpoint and end of the study period. Classroom observations were carried out throughout the 4 weeks.

### **Data Analysis**

Quantitative data from the PAT and CSA were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, including paired t-tests and correlation analyses. Qualitative data from interviews and classroom observations were subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes related to pragmatic awareness and communication skills development.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The results of this study provide compelling evidence for the significant role of pragmatic awareness in enhancing EFL university students' communication skills. Analysis of the quantitative data revealed a strong positive correlation ( $r = 0.78$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) between scores on the Pragmatic Awareness Test (PAT) and the Communication Skills Assessment (CSA),



suggesting that students with higher levels of pragmatic competence demonstrated superior overall communication abilities.

Participants in the experimental group, who received explicit pragmatic instruction, showed statistically significant improvements in both their PAT scores ( $t(74) = 6.32, p < 0.001$ ) and CSA performance ( $t(74) = 5.89, p < 0.001$ ) over the course of the study. In contrast, the control group exhibited only marginal gains in these areas. This finding aligns with previous research by Zhang and Papi (2021), who emphasized the importance of integrating pragmatic awareness training into EFL curricula.

Qualitative analysis of the semi-structured interviews revealed several key themes related to the impact of pragmatic awareness on communication skills:

1. Enhanced cultural sensitivity: Many participants reported feeling more confident in navigating cross-cultural interactions after developing a greater understanding of pragmatic norms in English-speaking contexts.
2. Improved interpretation of implicit meanings: Students with higher pragmatic awareness demonstrated a better ability to grasp nuanced and indirect communication styles, reducing instances of misunderstanding.
3. Increased adaptability: Participants who showed gains in pragmatic competence reported feeling more capable of adjusting their language use to suit different social situations and interlocutors.

These findings support the work of Chen et al. (2019), who highlighted the crucial role of pragmatic awareness in facilitating successful intercultural communication among EFL learners.

The findings from classroom observations provide valuable insights into effective strategies for enhancing pragmatic awareness in EFL instruction. These observations align with and expand upon current research in the field of second language pragmatics. The following discussion elaborates on these findings and incorporates additional perspectives from recent studies.

1. Use of authentic materials: The incorporation of real-world language samples, such as videos of native speaker interactions and social media content, has proven highly effective in raising students' pragmatic awareness. This approach is supported by García-Gómez (2018), who found that digital storytelling tools can significantly enhance second language learning and cultural awareness. The use of authentic materials provides learners with exposure to contextualized language use, helping them understand the nuances of pragmatic competence in real-life situations. Furthermore, Wang et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of authentic materials in developing pragmatic competence and intercultural communication skills among Chinese EFL learners. Their study suggests that exposure to genuine language samples helps students better understand the cultural context in which language is used, leading to improved pragmatic awareness.
2. Role-play and simulation activities: Engaging students in contextualized language practice through role-play and simulation activities has been shown to effectively bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application of pragmatic skills. This finding is consistent with the research of Liu and Huang (2017), who advocate for task-based language teaching to develop EFL learners' communication skills. Their study



demonstrates that such activities provide learners with opportunities to practice and internalize pragmatic norms in a controlled environment.

Additionally, Kim and Brown (2016) highlight the importance of focused practice in developing pragmatic awareness, particularly in the area of refusals. Their research suggests that role-play activities can help learners understand and appropriately use complex speech acts in various social contexts.

3. Explicit metapragmatic discussions: Encouraging students to reflect on and analyze the pragmatic aspects of language use has been found to foster a deeper understanding of the connection between linguistic forms and their social functions. This approach aligns with the findings of Rafieyan (2018), who identified knowledge of pragmatic aspects of interlanguage as a significant predictor of pragmatic competence. By engaging in explicit discussions about language use, learners develop a more nuanced understanding of pragmatic norms and their application in different contexts.

Moreover, Zhang and Papi (2021) explore the relationship between motivation and second language pragmatics from a regulatory focus perspective. Their research suggests that explicit metapragmatic discussions can help learners develop a more promotion-focused orientation towards pragmatic learning, leading to improved pragmatic competence.

The technology-enhanced pragmatic instruction approach proposed by Lee and Cho (2020) complements these findings, suggesting that a combination of traditional and digital resources can significantly boost students' pragmatic competence and overall communication skills. This multifaceted approach allows for the integration of authentic materials, interactive activities, and reflective discussions, creating a comprehensive learning environment for developing pragmatic awareness.

Li and Gao (2017) further support this approach, demonstrating that online L2 interaction can be an effective tool for developing pragmatic competence among Chinese EFL learners. Their study highlights the potential of technology-enhanced instruction in providing learners with opportunities for authentic language use and pragmatic practice.

Taguchi (2018) emphasizes the importance of context in pragmatics learning, particularly in study abroad research. While classroom observations provide valuable insights, it is crucial to consider how these findings might translate to real-world settings. Taguchi's work suggests that pragmatic awareness developed through classroom instruction should be complemented by opportunities for authentic language use in diverse contexts.

Chen et al. (2019) investigate the impact of pragmatic awareness on intercultural communication among Chinese EFL learners. Their findings underscore the importance of developing pragmatic competence as a key component of successful intercultural communication. The strategies identified in classroom observations, such as using authentic materials and engaging in role-play activities, can contribute significantly to this goal.

In conclusion, the classroom observations provide valuable insights into effective strategies for enhancing pragmatic awareness in EFL instruction. These findings are supported by a growing body of research in the field of second language pragmatics. By incorporating authentic materials, engaging learners in interactive activities, and fostering explicit reflection on language use, educators can create a rich learning environment that promotes the



development of pragmatic competence. As the field continues to evolve, further research is needed to explore the long-term effects of these strategies and their application in diverse learning contexts.

**Table 1. Mean Scores for Experimental and Control Groups**

Group	Pre-test PAT	Post-test PAT	Pre-test CSA	Post-test CSA
Experimental	62.3	78.9	65.7	81.2
Control	61.8	64.2	66.1	68.5

The significant improvements observed in the experimental group underscore the potential for targeted pragmatic instruction to enhance EFL learners' communication skills. However, it is important to note that the development of pragmatic awareness is a complex process influenced by various factors, including individual learner differences, exposure to the target language, and cultural background (Rafieyan, 2018).

## CONCLUSIONS

This study has demonstrated the crucial role of pragmatic awareness in enhancing EFL university students' communication skills. The strong correlation between pragmatic competence and overall communicative ability highlights the need for a more balanced approach to EFL instruction that goes beyond traditional focus on grammatical accuracy and vocabulary acquisition. By integrating explicit pragmatic instruction into EFL curricula, educators can better prepare students for the nuanced challenges of real-world communication in diverse cultural contexts.

The findings of this research have several important implications for EFL pedagogy and curriculum design. First, there is a clear need for the development of comprehensive teaching materials and assessment tools that address pragmatic aspects of language use. Second, EFL instructors should be provided with training and resources to effectively incorporate pragmatic awareness activities into their lessons. Finally, universities should consider creating more opportunities for authentic language exposure and intercultural exchanges to reinforce pragmatic skills learned in the classroom.

While this study has provided valuable insights into the relationship between pragmatic awareness and communication skills, further research is needed to explore the long-term effects of pragmatic instruction and to investigate how these skills transfer to real-world communication scenarios. Additionally, future studies could examine the potential of emerging technologies, such as virtual reality and artificial intelligence, in creating immersive environments for pragmatic skills development.

In conclusion, by recognizing and actively cultivating pragmatic awareness in EFL education, we can empower students with the tools they need to become truly effective communicators in an increasingly interconnected global society. As we continue to refine our understanding of the complex interplay between language, culture, and communication, the integration of pragmatic competence into EFL instruction stands as a critical step toward preparing learners for the diverse linguistic landscapes they will encounter beyond the classroom.



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