



# Assessing the Pragmatic Competence of English Language Learners: A case study approach

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**Abstract:** While good pragmatic competence is essential for all language users, it is often significantly neglected in the context of English language learners (ELLs). To be able to utilise language successfully in a variety of social and cultural contexts, it is necessary to have an understanding of speech acts, ways of politeness, and hidden meanings. In this research, a case study approach is used to assess the pragmatic ability of English Language Learners (ELLs) by analysing their spoken and written interactions in real-world situations. According to the findings of the study, some of the most significant challenges are the transfer of pragmatics from native languages, sociocultural misunderstandings, and the challenge of conforming to the norms of English-speaking societies. Discourse analysis, interviews, and observations were some of the qualitative methods that were used in the process of identification of these difficulties. According to the findings, a significant number of pupils may have trouble being indirect, adhering to principles of civility, and understanding when it is appropriate to engage in appropriate behaviour. It's possible that this may lead to misunderstandings and accidental rudeness. The findings of this study give more evidence that traditional language programs put a greater emphasis on grammatical accuracy than they do on the students' capacity to communicate successfully.

**Keywords:** Pragmatic competence, English language learners, speech acts, politeness strategies

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the most important components of being proficient in a language is being able to use it effectively in social situations, in addition to possessing a solid grasp of grammar and vocabulary. Understanding cultural norms, interpreting implied meanings, and using acceptable speech actions like requests, apologies, and refusals are only a few of the many abilities that make up pragmatic competence. Despite being crucial for English Language Learners' (ELLs') successful communication, pragmatic competence is sometimes overlooked in favour of linguistic competence in language training. Lack of sufficient pragmatic skills might cause learners to struggle with direct self-expression, leading to communication breakdowns or inaccurate interpretations.

According to the findings of study, pragmatic proficiency is influenced by a number of factors, including the native language of the learner, their cultural background, and their exposure to language use in real-world situations. Many students who are studying English as a second language experience a phenomenon known as pragmatic transfer. This phenomenon occurs when people import social norms and speech patterns from their home language into English. This phenomenon has the potential to result in misunderstandings or accidental rudeness. In conventional classrooms, where the focus is placed more on grammatical precision than on social appropriateness, it is possible that pupils may not have sufficient opportunities to exercise pragmatics. The existence of this difference underscores the need of including

pragmatic awareness into instructional programs for languages.

By using a case study approach, it may be possible to get a deeper understanding of the specific challenges that English Language Learners (ELLs) have while attempting to be pragmatically competent. It is possible that academics will have a better understanding of issues such as uncomfortable tone, mistaken politeness strategies, and difficulty interpreting indirect speech if they investigate discourse samples, real-life interviews, and interactions. It is crucial to note that these findings have significant repercussions for the manner in which we instruct students to become more realistic, so that they are better prepared to manage both personal and professional relationships. With the use of a case study analysis, the purpose of this research is to assess the pragmatic competence of English Language Learners (ELLs) by examining the manner in which they deploy speech actions, politeness standards, and context-appropriateness in their communication. By bringing to light significant challenges and putting up potential training strategies, this study contributes to the growing recognition of pragmatics as an essential component of language learning. It is possible that language programs may be better tailored to equip students with the linguistic and pragmatic abilities they need to speak with confidence in a range of settings if these challenges are addressed.

### **Pragmatic competences**

The capability to use language in a manner that is both effective and appropriate in a variety of communication contexts is referred to as pragmatic competence. This ability is a fundamental component of human language processing. People are able to communicate and comprehend meanings that extend beyond basic word definitions and incorporate subtleties of context, social customs, and purpose when they are competent in this area. This indicates that they are able to communicate effectively. Understanding the process by which individuals develop and make use of pragmatic competence has both theoretical and practical consequences for the fields of education, communication, and advanced technology. When it comes to the processing of language, pragmatic competence is at the core of this breakthrough. It is a complex technique that puts a priority on the relevance of context, purpose, and real-world application. The ability to demonstrate pragmatic competence requires a more comprehensive understanding of the communication aims and contextual aspects that influence language use. This is in contrast to more traditional techniques, which rely heavily on syntactic and semantic analysis. Interactions are the catalyst for the pragmatic process of meaning building or negotiation, which in turn leads to variations and changes in semantic meaning. In order for students to succeed in learning conscious language analysis, they must first demonstrate that they are able to use English in a pragmatic manner. You are able to comprehend how to communicate successfully in a variety of settings if you possess the ability to demonstrate pragmatic competence. This is something that can only be accomplished by practical experience, not via classroom teaching. Given that a more realistic level of expertise could lead to improved understanding, it is worthwhile to consider. When communicating meaning in English, it is more efficient to choose the appropriate term rather than a particular linguistic style. This is because the English language may seem to be well-articulated at first look. The study of this is called pragmatics. Students of a language who are able to demonstrate a pragmatic awareness are better equipped to communicate in a lot of different situations. Understanding the cultural and social norms of a society is one of the most important factors in achieving fluency in language use and understanding. Pragmatic competence refers to the amount of communicative

capacity that is required for learners of a second language to be able to effectively talk in the language that they are learning. When it comes to learning a language, the significance of having a pragmatic skill cannot be overstated. Those who are learning a language must first become adept in pragmatics if they want to be able to communicate successfully in a range of social settings. Teaching and assessing pragmatic skills, on the other hand, provides significant challenges due to the dynamic nature of these abilities, which are depending on the environment in which they are used.

## **OBJECTIVE**

1. To Assessing the Pragmatic Competence of English Language Learners
2. To examine the influence of pragmatic transfer from learners' native languages.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Individuals that participated in the research for the study included fifteen males and twenty-five females. In terms of age, they ranged from 21 to 23 years old. The students were divided into two groups based on their level of English proficiency, which was measured by the average grades they received in eleven required classes ranging from the first year to the third year of their studies. It was determined that sixteen of them have a high level of competency, whereas fourteen were deemed to have a low level of proficiency. In terms of the number of years spent learning English, the average number of years spent by each participant is fifteen. Twenty-one students said that they sometimes had opportunity to use English outside of the classroom. This was the number of classmates they reported having. The activity in which they make the greatest use of English is looking for information on the internet.

### **Instrument Multiple-Rejoinder Discourse Completion Task (Multiple-Rejoinder DCT)**

A written DCT was the source of the data that was used for this inquiry. A significant proportion of speech act assessments are conducted using this specific kind of examination. Cohen and Shively (2002/2003) modified the textual DCT by include various rejoinders, which stand for the remarks made by the interlocutors in each scenario. This was done despite the fact that the textual DCT has been used in a number of pragmatic research studies. This novel instrument, which was given the name "multiple-rejoinder discourse completion task," was deemed to have the potential to assist in imitating the natural turn-taking that takes place during discussions.

During the course of this investigation, a multiple-rejoinder discrete cosine transform (DCT) was used to analyse two speech acts: apologies and gratitude. In order to accomplish this goal, a total of twenty-four different scenarios were used. These numerous scenarios are depictions of events that occur often in real life and are frequently seen. Each question on the test consisted of three different variables: familiarity, social status, and the severity of the mistake (apologies) or the imposition (thanks), which changed depending on the situation. In order to eliminate any potential misunderstandings that may arise as a result of language problems, we translated each scenario into Thai. In spite of this, all of the replies are written in English so that they may be consistent with the flow of the real discussion. In order to guarantee that this research instrument is interchangeable, its structure, content, and grammar were examined by a professional translator as well as by three individuals who are native English speakers. In addition, pilot

testers were comprised of students who were chosen from the same demographic as the participants of the research.

### Data collection

In the month of September in 2010, the persons who were selected were provided with a multiple-rejoinder DCT. It was necessary of the participants that they read the instructions that were written in Thai once they had obtained the explanation of the examination procedure. Before students took the actual test, they were given a practice item for multiple-rejoinder DCT so that they could get used to the sort of work that they would be doing.

Throughout the whole of the activity, participants were told to keep the mental picture of themselves interacting with people who spoke American English. Following that, the participants were given one minute to read the brief descriptions of each scenario as well as all of the responses that were shown on the screen. Within the next two minutes, students were required to fill out the response sheet for each English discussion that took place. In order to determine the time limitations that were imposed on each scenario, the real-world situations served as the foundation.

### DATA ANALYSIS

The responses of the participants from the multiple-rejoinder DCT were scored by three native English speakers using criteria taken from the Cohen and Olshtain Communicative Ability Scales as well as Pinyo, Aksornjarung, and Laohawiriyanon (2010) (Refer to Appendix A). The purpose of this study was to determine whether or not learners with different levels of English proficiency exhibit different levels of pragmatic ability.

In order to determine the means and standard deviations of the scores that were obtained from the native raters, we used statistical analysis. These scores were acquired from the participants. A battery of t-tests was also used by the researchers in order to examine the pragmatic abilities of persons with high and low English proficiency in terms of their ability to communicate acts of gratitude and apologies.

### Findings Pragmatic Competence of Learners with Different English Proficiency

In order to do data analysis, we made use of SPSS 11.5 and generated and analysed the required scores based on the multiple-rejoinder discrete cosine transform that was provided. In Table 1, the findings for both groups are shown, together with the percentages, mean scores, and t-values relevant to each group.

**Table 1: Pragmatic Competence of High and Low English Proficiency Learners (N=30)**

Group	N	Full Score	Min		Max		Mean		S.D.	t	Sig.
			Score	%	Score	%	Score	%			
High	16	48	32	66.67	42	87.50	36.94	76.95	3.40	5.846**	0.01
Low	14	48	21	43.75	33	69.44	28.74	59.87	3.71		
Total	30	48	21	43.75	42	87.50	33.11	68.98	5.43		

Table 1 indicates that out of a total of 48 points that could be earned, the lowest score was 21, which is equivalent to 43.75 percent, and the maximum score was 42, which is equivalent to 87.50 percent. It was discovered via a comparison of the averages of the two groups of learners that high-level learner had a higher score (36.94, which is equivalent to 76.55% of the total) than low-level learners (28.74, which is equivalent to 59.57% of the total).

An independent t-test was used in order to assess the pragmatic ability of the two groups and determine whether or not there was a statistically significant difference between them. The t-test revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between the groups of students who had a high level of English proficiency and those who had a low level of English proficiency ( $t = 5.846$ ).

In the next table, Table 2, you will see the outcomes of the calculations that were performed for each speech act. These outcomes include the mean scores, percentages, and t-values. Because of this, we were able to look further into the differences in the apologies and expressions of thanks that were provided by the participants who had high and poor levels of communication skills in English.

**Table 2: Speech Act of Apologies and Thanks (N=30)**

Speech Acts	Group	N	Full Score	Min		Max		Mean		S.D.	t	Sig.
				Score	%	Score	%	Score	%			
Apologies	High	16	24	15	62.50	22	90.29	18.38	76.56	2.086	5.002**	0.01
	Low	14	24	11	45.83	18	73.63	14.48	60.32	2.179		
	Total	30	24	11	45.83	22	90.29	16.56	68.98	2.880		
Thanks	High	16	24	15	61.13	22	90.29	18.58	77.43	2.092		
	Low	14	24	10	41.67	18	76.38	14.24	59.33	2.399		
	Total	30	24	10	41.67	22	90.29	16.56	68.98	3.115		

Note \*\* Significant at the 0.01 level

Two speech acts are shown in Table 2, which compares the performance of persons with high and low levels of proficiency. When we used a t-test to assess the performance of the two groups, we discovered that the creation of apologies and thankfulness by high-level learners and low-level learners was substantially different at the 0.01 level. The people in the high group received an average score of 18.38 (76.56%) for their apologies, while those in the low group received a score of 14.48 (60.32%). On a similar note, when it came to expressing thankfulness, the high-level learners obtained mean scores of 18.58 (77.43%), whereas the low-level group got mean scores of 14.24 (59.33%).

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this research indicate that a significant number of English Language Learners (ELLs) struggle with pragmatic competence for a variety of reasons. These causes include a lack of exposure to genuine language usage, sociocultural inequities, and pragmatic transfer from their native languages. Students who are learning a new language sometimes rely on the speech act strategies and etiquette conventions that are associated with their original language, even if these may not be the most successful



strategies. When it comes to particular situations, for instance, some students can have difficulty discerning the appropriate amount of formality and tone, while others might inadvertently be disrespectful by speaking plainly when indirectness is required. Given these challenges, it is clear that students need to be taught pragmatics in a more explicit manner in order to improve their ability to deal with challenges in social settings.

It has also been observed that in traditional language schools, pragmatic skills are typically overlooked in favour of grammatical accuracy and vocabulary increase. This is something that has been observed. There are some students who may have no issue generating sentences that are logical or selecting the appropriate words, but they may have difficulty expressing themselves appropriately while participating in class discussions for example. As a result of the lack of emphasis placed on pragmatic ability in the curriculum, students have less opportunities to exercise communication in real-world situations. Students get the opportunity to improve their pragmatic awareness in a structured environment by participating in classroom activities such as role-playing, discourse analysis, and exposure to actual conversational situations. This may help to close the distance between us.

In addition, societal variables have a significant impact on the pragmatic ability of pupils. It is possible that students of English will have a difficult time adjusting to the norms of politeness, formality, and indirectness that are widespread in the world where English is spoken. For example, expressions such as "thank you," "denial," and "request" may take on a variety of forms in the learners' native languages, which would have an effect on their ability to communicate in English. It is important for teachers to take into consideration these cultural elements and present students with examples that compare and contrast in order to assist students in comprehending the challenges that are associated with English pragmatics. In order to better prepare their students for effective and courteous interactions in a range of social circumstances, teachers of foreign languages may find it beneficial to encourage their pupils to acquire cross-cultural awareness.

To summarise, the findings of this study shed light on the need of including pragmatics into language education programmes. The teaching of pragmatic competence, which combines contextualised learning, real-world experience, and explicit instruction, has the potential to significantly enhance the communication abilities of students. Learners are able to interact with more self-assurance and competence in linguistically diverse environments when they handle pragmatic challenges, which increase language proficiency and cross-cultural understanding. This is because learners are able to deal with more situational contexts.

## **CONCLUSION**

The development of pragmatic competence is an important component of language learning for English as a second language (ESL) students who want to be effective communicators in a broad variety of social and cultural contexts. Inadequate exposure to genuine language use, sociocultural misunderstandings, and pragmatic transfer are some of the issues that are brought to light as a result of this study. The findings underscore the need of teaching pragmatics in an explicit manner, with a focus on interactions that occur in the actual world, discourse analysis, and knowledge of cultural norm requirements. Through the incorporation of pragmatic competence into language education, teachers have the opportunity to assist students in the development of both grammatical accuracy and the ability to use language successfully in a

variety of settings. The ultimate outcome of refining pragmatic talents is increased self-assurance and effectiveness in communication, which in turn encourages more cross-cultural understanding and participation.

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