Pakistani University Students' Perception Regarding Pragmatics

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Abstract

Pragmatics competence plays a vital role in enhancing communicative competence. The present study is an endeavor to evaluate the current competence, knowledge, perceptions, attitudes and strategies used in the teaching and learning of pragmatics in Pakistan at university level. A questionnaire used by Yuan (2012) was used to collect data from 30 first year university students majoring in English. For the statistical analysis of the data, statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS) program (version 20) was used. The participants believed that vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar learning are important for English language learning but it was noted that Pakistani first year university learners have limited pragmatic knowledge. The findings proved that the learners have different opinions about the pragmatic competence and its development in learners at university level. The knowledge about these perceptions can help teachers, administrators, supervisors and language planners in developing syllabus and teaching/learning activities for English language learners at university level in Pakistan.

Keywords: Pragmatic Competence; Pakistani University Students; English Language Learning.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, the goal of effective English language teaching is the production of language users' competence in communication of a particular language. Communicative competence includes various aspects of language proficiencies like grammar, discourse, sociolinguistic and strategic competence (Canale and Swain, 1980). According to Bachman (1990) knowledge of the language basically includes organizational knowledge and pragmatic knowledge – the use of suitable language in a particular situation and performance of the function of language and speech acts according to the context. Thus, to achieve

communicative competence in a language, pragmatic competence needs to be acquired. Meaning is conveyed through communication using pragmatics. Language meaning varies according to the context and situation, this gave rise to a common language usage i.e. English in the present global world. The need of pragmatic knowledge in English thus initiated and it also gave a line to cover the intercultural communication gap between the speakers of various cultural backgrounds.

Pragmatics is an important aspect to be taught for language proficiency and competence. When ESL/EFL learners learn a language they need to be equipped with the pragmatics of the target language because complications may arise due to the lack of conversational norms and knowledge used in the speech acts. This may lead towards inter-ethnic communication breakdown (Gumperz, 1990) and other reprehensible consequences. In the recent years there had been several researches related to this area and they are manifold. Pragmatics is taken as an explicit sub-field of language to be taught to the learners (Zohreh, Liu, 2013; Ionel, 2011; Donna and Noel, 2010), as an approach for teaching language (Prados, 1998; Moron, Cruz, Amaya and Lopez, 2009; Demirezen 1991; Adedimeji, e.d.), teaching to increase pragmatic knowledge (Soler, Pitarch, Jaume, 2010) teaching and developing pragmatic competence (Lenchuk and Ahmed, 2013; Arsie, 2012; Rasekh, 2005; Susikaran. R.S.A, 2013) teacher's or student's awareness of Pragmatics (Ekin and Damar, 2013; Kondo, n.d.) and many other in ESL and EFL contexts.

Today, we have a large number of studies targeting pragmatic knowledge and competence in EFL/ESL context but there is little work done to evaluate the current level of pragmatic competence especially in Pakistan.

Keeping in view the importance of pragmatics, the present study is an endeavor to evaluate the current competence, knowledge, perceptions, attitudes and strategies used in the teaching and learning of pragmatics in Pakistan at graduate level. Pragmatics is not taught as an individual course in most of the universities of Pakistan at graduate level. It is important to equip English language learners with its pragmatics so that they could deal better with the language in use. As an initial attempt, the present study attempts to explore the existing knowledge of pragmatics, its competence and strategies applied at graduate level for the students of (BS) English in Pakistan.

2. Research Methodology

A mixed method study was conducted to collect data. A questionnaire adapted from Yuan (2012) was used to collect quantitative data. Open-ended questions were used to collect qualitative data. 30 university students majoring in English from a top ranking university were selected to participate in the study. Quantitative data analysis was carried out using SPSS (version 20) and qualitative data was analyzed by making various themes and seeking percentages of the opinions and beliefs of the participants on different statements and questions included in the questionnaire.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. Part A of the Questionnaire

Table 1 given below provides the details of findings about the questions asked in the 1st

part of the questionnaire.

Table 1. Responses to Part 1 of the Questionnaire

Sr. No	Statements	Strongly Disagreed	Disagreed	Neutral	Agreed	Strongly Agreed	No. of Respondents
1	Learning vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation is learning English.	NIL 0%	1 3.33%	NIL 0%	19 63.33%	10 33.33%	30
2	Linguistic knowledge as well as Knowledge of how to use language is important.	NIL 0%	1 3.33%	2 6.66%	16 53.33%	11 36.66%	30
3	English is learnt because it helps in passing examination	14 46.66%	13 43.33%	NIL 0%	3 10%	NIL 0%	30
4	Text books provide sufficient knowledge about culture, conversational rules and their use in language.	1 3.33%	8 26.66%	5 16.66%	9 30%	7 23.33%	30
5	Activities to develop communicative competence in the class are of no use.	17 56.66%	8 26.66%	3 10%	2 6.66%	NIL 0%	30
6	People who can communicate in English flawlessly are worth admiring.	NIL 0%	2 6.66%	2 6.66%	12 40%	14 46.66%	30
7	Communicative skills should be taught in the classroom by the teachers	NIL 0%	NIL 0%	NIL 0%	6 20%	24 80%	30
8	I have an idea of how can one learn about culture and language use.	NIL 0%	6 20%	7 23.33%	16 53.33%	1 3.33%	30
9	Tasks given by the teacher in classroom are helpful in developing communicative skills in learners.	1 3.33%	NIL 0%	1 3.33%	13 43.33%	15 50%	30
10	Class focused on communicative language teaching along with the explanation of grammar and vocabulary.	NIL 0%	NIL 0%	4 13.33%	11 36.66%	15 50%	30
11	Preference for vocabulary, grammar and sentence drills	1 3.33%	NIL 0%	4 13.33%	16 53.33%	9 30%	30
12	Native like English speaking ability is desired.	NIL 0%	1 3.33%	4 13.33%	15 50%	11 36.66%	30

Part A of the questionnaire consists of the statements regarding learners' perception about the pragmatic competence at university level. First two statements of section A focused on the learners' perception about vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar learning and their importance in learning English language. 30 learners responded this part of the questionnaire and 29 of the respondents believed that vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar learning are indeed important for English language learning. They were found believing that learning all these things means learning English. Yuan (2012) came up with almost the same research results in China. More than 60% of the students were of the opinion that vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation are important for language learning and they claimed that both linguistic and pragmatic knowledge are essential for a language learner.

Statement No. 3 measured whether or not the learners' objective of learning English was just to pass the examination and majority of the students were of the opinion that they were learning English merely to pass their examination. An approach that merely focuses on passing the examination leaves learners to just cram the material instead of learning it. Consequently they memorize material provided to them for language learning and pass the examination somehow, but the utmost target i.e. developing communicative competence, remains unachieved.

Statement No. 4 talked about learners' perception regarding the utility of the text book in learning English and most of the learners believed that the text book was helpful in seeking information about English culture, conversational rules and their correct usage in conversation. If so, the usefulness of the text book must not be denied rather it should be used appropriately and strategically to gain the fundamental objective of language teaching.

Then Statements from 5 to 7 were related to the learners' perception about communicative activities in the classroom and whether or not the learners admire the people who can communicate in English accurately. This part of the questionnaire further includes the information about the learners' opinion regarding the teaching of communicative skills in the classroom. Majority of the learners believed that the communicative activities practiced in the classroom were not wastage of time rather they helped them in developing communicative competence. Further, they were of the opinion that they idealized the people who could speak English accurately and fluently. All of the respondents were of the opinion that teachers should teach communicative skills in the classroom on priority basis. This highlights Pakistani university students' admiration for communication skills and their keen desire to learn them.

The next statement dealt with learners' knowledge of the culture and appropriate use of language in a cultural context. While responding this part of the questionnaire, most of the learners claimed that they knew how to seek knowledge of a culture and how to use language in a culturally befitting way.

The last part of section A in the questionnaire includes questions regarding learners' belief about the tasks used in the classroom, their link with the development of communicative ability in learners, the focus of class and explanation of vocabulary and grammar rules. This part further includes the information about learners' preference to follow native English

speaking in terms of accent, pronunciation and intonation. While responding to the questions in this part, majority of the learners were found believing that the tasks used in the classroom in their academic institute were helpful in developing communicative competence in the learners. They expressed their keen interest in introducing more communicative language tasks in the classroom along with the explanation and drill of grammar and vocabulary when necessary. Majority of the learners expressed their willingness to imitate and follow real British accent, pronunciation and stress/intonation patterns in their language use.

3.2. Part B of the questionnaire

Table 2. Responses to Part B of the Questionnaire

Sr. No	Statements	A	B	C	D	Number of Respondents
13	English that learners prefer to learn	Chinese English	USA English	British English	Other English	30
		1	4	23	2	
		3.33%	13.3%	76.6%	6.66%	
14	Tasks most often used in the classroom	Group discussion	Pair work	Roll play	Debate	29
		13	3	9	4	
		44.8%	10.3%	31%	13.79%	
15	Way of getting information about the use of English	Teacher's explanation	Classroom discussions	Listening to radio/dialogues and watching T.V/videos	Self study	30
		18	5	4	3	
		60%	16.6%	13.3%	10%	
16	Abilities you want to develop the most in English learning	communicate with people	do well in English examination	read materials related to my major	translate	30
		19	5	5	1	
		63.3%	16.6%	16.6%	3.33%	
17	Knowledge you want to learn the most in English classroom	Linguistic knowledge	Cultural knowledge	Communicative skills	Knowledge of how to use English	30
		14	0	8	8	
		46.6%	0%	26.6%	26.6%	
18	Preference for the solution of a problem in learning English	Ask the English teacher or native speaker	Discuss or work with classmates	Try to solve the problem yourself	Look up a dictionary or search on internet	30
		4	3	3	20	
		13.3%	10%	10%	66.6%	
19	Most effective way of learning English	Memorizing vocabulary and reciting texts	Doing sentence drills and translation exercises	Copying a model os a language model and using it in a new context	Self- study and self-evaluation	30
		11	2	6	11	
		36.6%	6.66%	20%	36.6%	

Statement no. 13 measured the ratio of learners' preferences for the type of English they wanted to learn and use the most. Majority of the learners expressed their preferences for the type of English that is spoken in England.

In question 14 the learners were asked about the tasks their teacher gave them most often. While responding to the question most of the learners indicated that the teacher most often gave them group-discussions as classroom tasks.

Statement no. 15 focused on learners' preference about the way of getting information about the use of language. A noticeable majority of the students expressed their preference for teacher's explanation. It can be asserted that learners feel easy when teacher is the active participant in language teaching/learning process but less participation of learners in the process may leave them passive and the learning outcomes may prove discouraging as language learning requires maximum learner's participation.

While responding to statement no.16 that seeks information about learners' preference for communicative ability or the ability to do well in examination, most of the learners indicated that they preferred the ability to communicate instead of ability to do well in examination or the ability to read and translate. Statement no. 17 focused on the kind of knowledge the learners preferred to gain. Majority of the learners preferred to seek linguistic knowledge (grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation) from the classroom teaching. While responding to statement no. 18 that asked what the learners would prefer to do if they have problems in English language learning, most of the learners preferred to look up a dictionary or try to find the answer on the internet instead of asking the teachers or the native speakers. They also claimed that they would prefer to try to solve the problem themselves by discussing it with their class-mates. This indicates that the learners were quite confident in dealing with learning related issues. They showed interest in exploring the world of English while consulting multiple options instead of mere relying on the language teacher.

While responding to statement regarding the most suitable way of learning English, most of the respondents believed that memorizing vocabulary and reciting texts are more helpful in English learning effectively. The equal number of respondents had the other opinion that self-study and self-evaluation would be the most effective way of learning English as compare to memorizing vocabulary, reciting text, doing sentence drills, doing translation exercises, imitating the native speakers and applying language model in a new context. The situation demands for a teachers' full support to help them learn the language effectively.

3.3. Students' responses to different situations

This part of the questionnaire (questions 20 to 24) was set to find whether or not the learners would be able to choose appropriate answers responding to different situations. In 5 different situations learners were successful in judging 3 appropriate answers but they could not judge answers for 2 situations which informs that the rate of success was 60% and 40% was the rate of failure. This sheds light on the need of learning and teaching of pragmatics so as to equip the students with full knowledge of the language in every situation.

3.4. Part C of the Questionnaire

This part of the questionnaire consists of the question that asks the learners about what they usually do in the class. While responding to the question in this section a noticeable strength of the learners informed that they usually listened to their teacher all the time which indicates that teacher played an active role in their classroom whereas the learners are passive listeners.

The second question in part C of the questionnaire focuses on learners' activities for learning English after their class. While responding to this question majority of the learners indicated that they did preview and review work after their classes to learn and improve communicative ability.

3.5. Part D of the Questionnaire: Open ended questions

This part of questionnaire consists of three questions. Question No. 28 focuses on the learners opinions about the suitable task in language teaching and learning. 23 respondents answered the questions and commonly counted tasks by the learners were:

a. Group discussion

b. Watching English movies and talk shows

c. Presentations

d. Listening English news

e. Reading English magazine/books/news papers

f. Debating

g. Role play

h. speaking in given situation

i. Translation and paragraph writing

j. Finding words in dictionary and

k. Interviewing

The following table explains the responses given by the participants.

Table 3. Responses to Part D of the Questionnaire

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
8	8	8	5	8	2	1	1	3	1	1
34.78%	34.78%	34.78	21.73%	34.78%	8.69%	4.34%	4.34%	13.04%	4.34%	4.34%

The situation indicates that majority of the learners were of the opinion that group discussion, watching English movies and talk shows, presentations, reading English magazines/books and newspaper are necessary for language teaching and learning.

While responding to the next question that focuses on the learners' perception about the language learning strategies, only 22 learners responded to the question and they counted the following strategies to be necessary for language learning.

a. Group discussion

b. Self study and evaluation

c. Reading English magazines/novels/books and news papers

d. Watching English movies and talk shows

e. Drills and exercises

f. Memorizing/learning vocabulary

g. Attending seminars

h. Listening programs

i. Conversation with native and non-native speakers/ dialogues

j. Writing practice

k. Presentations

Table 4. Responses to Part D of the Questionnaire

A	B	C	D	E	F	g	H	I	j	k
3	1	14	5	3	6	1	1	8	2	1
13.6%	4.51%	63.6%	22.7%	13.6%	27.2%	4.51%	4.51%	36.36%	9.09%	4.51%

The analysis indicated that majority of the learners were of the opinion that reading English magazines/novels/books and newspaper is the best strategy that helps learner in language learning.

Last question in this section helped us in analysing the usefulness/helpfulness of current language teaching in improving the ability of learners to communicate and use English appropriately. 23 respondents answered the question. Following results were obtained from the data.

Table 5. Responses to Part D of the Questionnaire

Useful	Useless	Neutral
20	2	1
86.9%	8.6%	4.3%

The situation indicated that majority of the learners were found satisfied with language teaching and they claimed that they were learning language skills quite appropriately. Moreover they were of the opinion that the current language teaching was sufficient for them in improving their communicative ability. While giving reasons as to why current language teaching was helpful in their learning, they gave the following reasons.

a. Teachers are competent

b. Teaching methods are useful and suitable

c. Classroom activities are helpful

4. Conclusion

To conclude, pragmatic awareness, teaching, learning and research are a crucial need of present time. It is a growing, vast, interesting and challenging task and experience for the linguists and language users. The findings of the study highlighted Pakistani students' desire to be competent in the language. Although majority of the students believed that learning grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation is learning English but they also considered both linguistic and pragmatic knowledge important for a language learner. Students in majority opposed the idea that English is learnt just to pass the examination and proposed that communicative skills should be taught in the classroom by the

teacher. The findings proved that the learners have different opinions about the pragmatic competence and its development in learners at university level. The knowledge about these perceptions can help teachers, administrators, supervisors and language planners in developing syllabus and teaching/learning activities for English language learners at university level in Pakistan.

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