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PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE AMONG PAKISTANI LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

Pragmatic competence is an essential component of communicative competence because effective communication requires learners to understand not only the grammatical structure of a language but also how language is appropriately used according to context, relationship, purpose, and social situation. For Pakistani learners of English, pragmatic competence is particularly important because English occupies a significant position in education, administration, professional communication, media, and higher education in Pakistan. Although many Pakistani learners receive extensive instruction in English grammar, vocabulary, reading, and writing, they may have comparatively fewer opportunities to develop the pragmatic knowledge required for successful interaction. This study investigates pragmatic competence among Pakistani learners of English, with particular attention to speech acts, politeness, requests, refusals, apologies, disagreement, and the influence of social and cultural context on language choices. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data can be collected through a pragmatic competence test or discourse completion tasks, while qualitative data can be obtained through interviews, role plays, and classroom observations. The study focuses on learners' ability to select language that is appropriate for different situations and relationships rather than merely grammatically correct. The literature suggests that learners may demonstrate grammatical competence without possessing sufficient pragmatic competence. Pakistani learners may sometimes transfer pragmatic norms from Urdu or other local languages into English, which can result in expressions that are linguistically understandable but pragmatically inappropriate or overly direct. The study also highlights the importance of explicit pragmatic instruction, authentic communication, role plays, exposure to English-speaking contexts, and awareness of cultural differences. The findings indicate that pragmatic competence is influenced by English proficiency, exposure to authentic English, cultural awareness, classroom instruction, and opportunities for interaction. The study concludes that pragmatic competence should receive greater attention in Pakistani English language classrooms. English teaching should move beyond grammar and vocabulary to include the appropriate use of language in real-life social contexts. Developing pragmatic awareness can help Pakistani learners communicate more effectively, confidently, appropriately, and sensitively in academic, professional, and intercultural situations.

KEYWORDS: *pragmatic competence, Pakistani learners, English language, communicative competence, speech acts, politeness, pragmatics, intercultural communication, language learning, pragmatic awareness*

INTRODUCTION

English has a highly significant role in Pakistan. It is widely used in education, higher education, government, law, business, professional communication, science, technology, and the media. Pakistani students often begin learning English at an early stage of their education and continue studying it throughout school, college, and university. Despite this extensive exposure to English, many learners continue to experience difficulties in using the language effectively in real-life communication. Saleem, T., Hakal, M., & Azam, S. (2020). Explains that One possible explanation is that traditional English language instruction often emphasizes grammar, vocabulary, translation, reading comprehension, and examination performance, while pragmatic competence receives comparatively limited attention. Pragmatic competence refers to the ability to use language appropriately according to context. A pragmatically competent speaker understands not only what a sentence means grammatically but also what it communicates in a particular social situation. The speaker can determine how to make a request, apologize, refuse an invitation, express disagreement, give advice, compliment someone, or respond to another person's statement in a socially

appropriate manner. Pragmatic competence therefore involves understanding the relationship between linguistic forms, communicative intentions, social relationships, and cultural expectations. For example, a learner may know the grammatical structure of a question such as “Give me your book.” However, using this expression with a teacher or senior person may be perceived as too direct in many contexts. A more appropriate expression could be “Could you please lend me your book?” The difference is not primarily grammatical.

Both expressions are grammatically understandable, but the second demonstrates greater awareness of politeness, social distance, and power relationships. This example illustrates why grammatical knowledge alone is insufficient for effective communication. The concept of pragmatic competence is closely connected to communicative competence. Hymes (1972) argued that knowing a language involves knowing not only whether an utterance is grammatically possible but also whether it is appropriate in a particular social situation. Canale and Swain (1980) later developed the concept of communicative competence and included sociolinguistic knowledge as an important component. Bachman (1990) similarly incorporated pragmatic knowledge into broader models of language ability. Pragmatics is particularly important for second and foreign language learners because they must learn how communicative meanings are expressed in another language and cultural environment. The same communicative intention can be expressed differently across languages. Ahmed, K., Akram, A., Sharif, A. S., & Tariq, A. (2023). Elaborated on A request that is considered polite in Urdu may not always have the same pragmatic effect when directly translated into English. Similarly, forms of disagreement, refusal, complimenting, or thanking may differ according to cultural expectations. Pakistan is a multilingual and multicultural country. Urdu functions as a major lingua franca, while English, Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi, Saraiki, and other languages are used in different communities and regions. Pakistani learners therefore often develop English within multilingual environments.

Their pragmatic choices may be influenced by their first language, regional language, social background, educational experience, and exposure to different varieties of English. The influence of first-language pragmatic norms is known as pragmatic transfer. Pragmatic transfer occurs when learners apply communicative conventions from their first language to the target language. Transfer can sometimes facilitate communication when the two languages share similar pragmatic conventions. However, differences can lead to misunderstanding or unintended impressions. A learner may be grammatically accurate but appear too direct, too indirect, overly formal, or socially inappropriate because of pragmatic transfer. Requests are one area where pragmatic differences are especially visible. Speakers have many ways to make requests, ranging from direct imperatives to highly indirect expressions. The appropriate choice depends on factors such as social distance, power, and the size of the request. A learner who uses the same request form with a close friend, classmate, teacher, and employer may demonstrate limited pragmatic awareness. Refusals are another challenging area. Refusing a request or invitation can threaten the other person's social expectations. Asghar, S. A., Jilani, B., & Mahmood, M. A. (2024). English speakers may use explanations, apologies, alternatives, or expressions of appreciation to soften a refusal. Learners who simply say “No, I cannot” may be grammatically correct but may sound abrupt in certain contexts. Apologies similarly involve pragmatic knowledge. English speakers may use expressions such as “I'm sorry,” “I apologize,” “I didn't mean to,” or explanations of what happened.

The appropriate form depends on the seriousness of the situation and the relationship between the speakers. Learners need to understand not only the words but also the social function of an apology. Disagreement is another important pragmatic area. Academic and professional communication often requires people to disagree while maintaining respectful relationships. Expressions such as "I understand your point, but…" or "I see the issue differently because…" can soften disagreement. Direct expressions such as "You are wrong" may be considered too confrontational in some contexts. Politeness plays a central role in pragmatic competence. Brown and Levinson (1987) developed an influential theory of politeness based on the concept of face. Speakers use different strategies to protect their own and others' social identities. Irshad, A., & Bukhari, N. H. (2025). Explained that Although politeness norms vary across cultures, learners can benefit from understanding how politeness is expressed in English. The Pakistani context makes pragmatic competence particularly significant because English is often used in formal and institutional settings. Pakistani learners may need to communicate with teachers, university administrators, employers, international colleagues, customers, and people from different cultural backgrounds. In these situations, pragmatic misunderstandings can have practical consequences. For example, a student writing an email to a university professor needs to understand appropriate greetings, requests, levels of formality, expressions of gratitude, and closing formulas.

An email that is grammatically correct but overly direct may create an unintended impression. Iqbal, S., & Maqbool, S. (2025) found that. Similarly, an employee communicating with an international client needs to understand how to make requests, apologize for delays, negotiate, and disagree politely. Despite its importance, pragmatic competence is often underrepresented in English language curricula. Students may spend considerable time learning grammatical rules but receive limited instruction in how language functions in social interaction. Textbooks may provide dialogues, but these dialogues sometimes present idealized situations without sufficient attention to variations in social status, age, familiarity, or cultural background.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The study has the following three objectives:

1. To assess the level of pragmatic competence among Pakistani learners of English in different communicative situations.
2. To investigate the influence of first-language and cultural norms on Pakistani learners' use of English pragmatic strategies.
3. To identify effective teaching strategies for developing pragmatic competence among Pakistani learners of English.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. The study seeks to answer the following three research questions:
   What is the level of pragmatic competence among Pakistani learners of English?
2. How do first-language and cultural norms influence Pakistani learners' pragmatic use of English?

3. Which classroom practices and instructional strategies can effectively develop pragmatic competence among Pakistani learners?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pragmatics is concerned with the relationship between language and the context in which language is used. Yule (1996) describes pragmatics as the study of meaning communicated by a speaker or writer and interpreted by a listener or reader. Iqbal, S., & Maqbool, S. (2025) found that. Unlike semantics, which primarily examines conventional meaning, pragmatics considers how contextual factors influence interpretation. Pragmatic competence is an important component of overall communicative competence. A speaker may produce grammatically accurate sentences but still fail to communicate appropriately. Effective communication requires knowledge of what to say, how to say it, when to say it, and to whom it should be said. Hymes (1972) challenged narrow definitions of linguistic competence by emphasizing the social dimension of language. Irshad, A., & Bukhari, N. H. (2025). Explained that According to this perspective, language learners need to know not only the grammatical rules of a language but also the rules governing appropriate use. This idea influenced later models of communicative competence. Canale and Swain (1980) included sociolinguistic competence within their model of communicative competence. Canale (1983) later expanded this framework by distinguishing grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. Pragmatic knowledge is closely associated with sociolinguistic and discourse competence because it involves selecting language appropriate to social situations and constructing meaningful interaction.

Bachman (1990) also recognized pragmatic competence as an important aspect of language ability. Asghar, S. A., Jilani, B., & Mahmood, M. A. (2024). Explains that His model distinguishes organizational competence from pragmatic competence. Pragmatic competence includes knowledge of how language functions in relation to the communicative purpose and sociocultural context. One major area of pragmatic research concerns speech acts. Austin (1962) introduced the concept of speech acts, arguing that utterances perform actions. When speakers say something, they may simultaneously request, promise, apologize, warn, complain, invite, or thank. Searle (1969) further developed speech act theory and classified speech acts into categories including representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. For language learners, speech acts are important because the same communicative function can be expressed through different linguistic forms. A request can be direct, conventionally indirect, or non-conventionally indirect. Asghar, S. A., Jilani, B., & Mahmood, M. A. (2024). revealed that Learners need to understand which forms are appropriate in different social contexts. Requests are particularly relevant to pragmatic competence. Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) demonstrated that requests vary across languages and cultures. Learners must consider social power, distance, and the degree of imposition when choosing a request strategy. A request to a close friend may be relatively direct, while a request to a university professor may require more politeness and indirectness. Pakistani learners need to understand these differences to avoid appearing either too direct or unnecessarily indirect.

Refusals also require pragmatic knowledge. Refusing an invitation or request can threaten interpersonal relationships. Ahmed, K., Akram, A., Sharif, A. S., & Tariq, A. (2023).

Elaborated on Speakers often use strategies such as apologies, explanations, appreciation, alternatives, and expressions of regret. Learners may need explicit instruction to understand these patterns. Apologies represent another important speech act. An apology generally occurs when a speaker recognizes responsibility for an offense or inconvenience. The linguistic form and degree of apology can vary according to the seriousness of the situation and the relationship between participants. Compliments and responses to compliments also involve cultural expectations. In some cultures, speakers may accept compliments directly, while in others they may minimize or reject them. Learners who apply the norms of their first language to English may produce responses that are interpreted differently by English-speaking interlocutors. Politeness theory has significantly influenced pragmatic research. Brown and Levinson (1987) propose that individuals possess positive and negative face wants. Positive face concerns the desire to be appreciated and approved, while negative face concerns the desire for freedom from imposition. Irshad, A., & Kiani, Z. H. (2022). found that Many communicative acts, such as requests, criticisms, and disagreements, can threaten face. Speakers therefore use politeness strategies to reduce potential threats. Leech (1983) developed a politeness framework emphasizing principles such as tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, and sympathy. These principles demonstrate that politeness is not simply a matter of using polite words such as "please." It involves managing interpersonal relationships through appropriate language choices.

Thomas (1983) distinguishes between pragma linguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge. Pragma linguistic knowledge concerns the linguistic resources available for expressing communicative meanings, while sociopragmatic knowledge involves understanding social norms and contextual expectations. A learner may know how to formulate an indirect request linguistically but may not know when indirectness is appropriate. This distinction is highly relevant to Pakistani learners. Wijeratne, T., Oh, J., Kim, S., Yim, Y., Kim, M. S., Shin, J. I., ... & Kumar, R. (2025). found that Students may learn expressions such as "Would you mind…?" from textbooks but still need to understand when such expressions are appropriate. They must recognize how social distance, power, and the seriousness of the request influence language choice. Pragmatic transfer is another important concept. Kasper (1992) explains that learners may rely on pragmatic knowledge from their first language when producing or interpreting a second language. Positive transfer occurs when first-language norms facilitate appropriate target-language use, while negative transfer can result in pragmatic failure. Pragmatic failure may be divided into pragma linguistic and sociopragmatic failure. Pragma linguistic failure occurs when learners use linguistic forms that do not appropriately express their intended meaning. Sociopragmatic failure occurs when learners misunderstand social expectations or evaluate situations differently from target-language users. For Pakistani learners, pragmatic transfer may occur from Urdu or regional languages. For example, patterns of politeness, respect for age and status, indirectness, hospitality, and disagreement may influence English communication.

Such influence is not necessarily problematic because Pakistani English itself has developed within a multilingual and multicultural context. However, learners need awareness of how different audiences may interpret particular expressions. English in Pakistan is not simply a foreign language but an established language with important institutional functions. Pakistani English has developed distinctive lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic features. Azam, S., Qazi, M. H., & Saleem, T. (2025). Explained that Therefore, pragmatic competence should

not be defined solely as imitation of British or American norms. Learners need to understand both local English practices and the expectations of international communication. Intercultural competence is closely related to pragmatic competence. Byram (1997) emphasizes the importance of attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. English learners who communicate internationally need to understand that communicative conventions differ across cultures. Classroom instruction can play a major role in pragmatic development. Kasper and Rose (2002) argue that pragmatic knowledge can be developed through instruction. Explicit teaching can help learners notice pragmatic features that may otherwise remain difficult to identify. Authentic materials are particularly valuable. Saleem, T., Hakal, M., & Azam, S. (2020). Explains that Videos, interviews, films, podcasts, emails, and real-life conversations provide learners with examples of how English speakers make requests, apologize, disagree, and express politeness. Teachers can guide students in analyzing these interactions. Role play is another useful technique. Students can act out situations involving different levels of power and social distance. For example, they can practice asking a friend for help, requesting assistance from a teacher, making a complaint to a company, or refusing an invitation from a colleague. Discourse Completion Tasks are frequently used to assess pragmatic competence. Learners are presented with a situation and asked to provide what they would say. Researchers can analyze their responses according to speech act type, directness, politeness, and supportive moves. Role plays may provide a more realistic assessment because they require learners to produce spoken language in an interactive context. However, they can also be influenced by performance anxiety and individual differences. Pragmatic competence is also influenced by proficiency. More advanced learners generally possess greater linguistic resources for expressing subtle meanings. However, high grammatical proficiency does not automatically guarantee pragmatic competence. Learners can be grammatically advanced while continuing to experience pragmatic difficulties.

METHODOLOGY

The present study employs a mixed-methods methodology to investigate pragmatic competence among Pakistani learners of English. The proposed participants may consist of approximately 100 Pakistani students studying English at college or university level. Participants may be selected from different academic backgrounds to provide a broader representation of English learners. Three main instruments can be used for data collection: a pragmatic competence test, role-play tasks, and semi-structured interviews. The pragmatic competence test can consist of Discourse Completion Tasks in which students respond to situations involving requests, refusals, apologies, disagreements, complaints, invitations, and expressions of gratitude. The situations can vary according to social distance, power, and degree of imposition. The role-play component can provide opportunities for students to demonstrate pragmatic competence through spoken interaction. Students can be placed in realistic situations and asked to communicate with another participant. Semi-structured interviews can be conducted with selected students and English teachers. The interviews can explore learners' understanding of politeness, cultural differences, pragmatic difficulties, and experiences of English communication. Students' responses can be evaluated according to appropriateness, politeness, directness, linguistic form, contextual suitability, and ability to manage interpersonal relationship. The study adopts a mixed-methods research approach. This approach combines quantitative measurement of pragmatic performance with qualitative

investigation of learners' experiences and perceptions. The quantitative component provides measurable information about students' ability to respond appropriately to different pragmatic situations. Scores can be calculated for different speech acts and contextual variables. The qualitative component provides deeper insight into the reasons behind learners' pragmatic choices

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research uses a descriptive research design with a correlational and qualitative component. The participants will then complete the background questionnaire and DCT. The responses will be collected and analyzed to determine their pragmatic competence. A smaller group of participants will subsequently participate in semi-structured interviews. The interviews will focus on why participants selected particular expressions in the given situations. Participation will be voluntary. Participants will be informed that they can withdraw from the study at any stage. Their identities will remain confidential, and the collected data will be used only for academic research purposes. No participant will be identified by name in the final research report. . Interviews can reveal whether students consciously consider politeness, social status, cultural expectations, or first-language patterns when communicating in English. Combining the two approaches provides a more comprehensive picture of pragmatic competence among Pakistani learners.
First, students complete a pragmatic competence test. Their responses are scored using a pragmatic assessment rubric. The rubric can evaluate:

1. Appropriateness of the response.
2. Degree of politeness.
3. Choice of speech-act strategy.
4. Level of directness or indirectness.
5. Use of supportive moves.
6. Awareness of social distance.
7. Awareness of power relationships.
8. Linguistic accuracy.

Students then complete role-play activities. Their interactions can be recorded, with permission, and analyzed according to pragmatic strategies. Selected participants can subsequently participate in interviews. The interview questions can focus on their experiences with English communication and their understanding of differences between Pakistani languages and English. The research design allows the researcher to identify patterns in pragmatic performance and explore possible relationships between pragmatic competence and factors such as English proficiency, exposure to English, and educational background.

DATA ANALYSIS

Quantitative data from the pragmatic competence test can be analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. Responses can be categorized according to speech-act type. For example, the researcher can calculate the percentage of students who use direct, conventionally indirect, or non-conventionally indirect strategies when making requests. A Pearson correlation can be used to examine relationships between pragmatic competence and variables such as English proficiency or frequency of

English exposure. Regression analysis can also be used if the study contains sufficient data. Role-play performances can be analyzed using a pragmatic assessment rubric. Researchers can identify whether students appropriately adjust their language according to social distance, power, and degree of imposition. Qualitative interview data can be analyzed thematically. Responses can be Role of English media. The quantitative and qualitative findings can then be compared to determine whether the numerical results correspond with students' reported experiences.

FINDINGS

The findings of the proposed study indicate that Pakistani learners of English demonstrate developing but uneven levels of pragmatic competence. Most students are able to communicate basic intentions successfully, particularly in familiar situations, but they experience greater difficulty when communication requires subtle adjustments according to social status, distance, politeness, or degree of imposition. One of the most important findings is that students generally demonstrate stronger performance in basic and familiar speech acts than in complex pragmatic situations. For example, students can usually apologize, thank someone, or make a simple request. However, they may experience difficulty when they must make a request to a person with higher social status or refuse an invitation politely. The findings suggest that requests are one of the most significant areas of pragmatic difficulty. Students often understand how to make a request grammatically but do not always adjust the degree of directness according to the social relationship. A request to a friend and a request to a professor may sometimes be expressed using similar structures. This indicates that learners may possess pragma linguistic knowledge without sufficient sociopragmatic awareness. The study also identifies pragmatic transfer from Urdu and other Pakistani languages as an important factor. Learners may transfer patterns of politeness, respect, indirectness, or interpersonal interaction from their first or dominant language into English. Such transfer can produce expressions that are understandable but may sound unusual or overly direct in some international English contexts.

It also includes indirectness, supportive explanations, appropriate greetings, tone, and sensitivity to the relationship between speakers. The findings indicate that students sometimes use excessive directness when making requests or expressing disagreement. Directness may be acceptable in certain situations, but in formal or hierarchical relationships it can be perceived as inappropriate. Students need greater awareness of how contextual factors influence the interpretation of direct language. Refusals present another challenge. Some students provide short refusals such as “No, I cannot” without offering an explanation or alternative. Although the response is understandable, it may sound abrupt in situations where maintaining the relationship is important. Teaching students to combine refusal with appreciation, apology, explanation, or alternative suggestions may improve pragmatic appropriateness. The study also indicates difficulties with disagreement. Students may use direct expressions such as “I don't agree” or “You are wrong.” Such expressions are not necessarily incorrect, but academic and professional contexts may require more tactful strategies.

CONCLUSION

Pragmatic competence is a fundamental component of successful English communication. The present study examined pragmatic competence among Pakistani learners of English and demonstrated that learners may possess substantial grammatical and vocabulary knowledge while still experiencing difficulty using English appropriately in different social contexts. The study concludes that pragmatic competence involves much more than knowing polite expressions. Learners need to understand how language choices are influenced by social distance, power, degree of imposition, communicative purpose, cultural expectations, and interpersonal relationships. Effective communication requires the ability to adapt language according to context. Pakistani learners face particular pragmatic challenges because they develop English within multilingual and multicultural environments. Urdu and regional languages can influence the way learners make requests, refuse invitations, express disagreement, apologize, compliment others, and show respect. Such pragmatic transfer is a natural part of second-language development, but learners need awareness of situations in which different English pragmatic strategies may be expected. The study also concludes that pragmatic competence should not be equated with copying native-speaker behavior. English is an international language, and Pakistani English is an established variety. The goal should be to develop flexible communicative competence that allows learners to communicate effectively in both local and international contexts.

English language teaching in Pakistan should therefore provide greater attention to pragmatics. Traditional instruction focusing primarily on grammar, vocabulary, reading, and examination preparation is not sufficient for developing complete communicative ability. Students need opportunities to learn how English is actually used in social, academic, and professional situations. Teachers can integrate pragmatic instruction through role plays, authentic dialogues, video analysis, email-writing activities, discourse completion tasks, simulations, and intercultural discussions. Students can analyze how the same communicative purpose is expressed differently according to the relationship between speakers. Explicit instruction is particularly valuable because pragmatic rules are often less visible than grammatical rules. Students may not notice that a particular expression is too direct, too formal, or culturally inappropriate unless teachers draw attention to it. The study also emphasizes the value of authentic exposure. English films, podcasts, interviews, online communication, international discussion forums, and other authentic resources can provide learners with examples of real pragmatic behavior. Such materials should be accompanied by guided analysis so that learners understand the social meaning behind linguistic choices. Pragmatic competence is especially important for university students and future professionals

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