

Assessing Pragmatic Competence in English Language Learners: A Case Study of Implicit Learning in Contextualized Classroom Interactions

Skyler Clark

PhD

University of California, Los Angeles
405 Hilgard Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90095

Isla Nelson

Dr. Sc

University of Cambridge
The Old Schools, Trinity Lane, Cambridge, CB2 1TN

Casey Hill

Associate Professor

University of Toronto
27 King's College Circle, Toronto, ON M5S 1A1

Casey Thomas

Professor

University of Melbourne
Parkville, Victoria 3010, Australia

Abstract. This study investigates the implicit acquisition of pragmatic competence among English language learners (ELLs) in contextualized classroom settings. Drawing on a mixed-method approach, we collected data from 120 ELLs through recorded classroom interactions and follow-up interviews. The analysis revealed that learners demonstrated significant improvements in pragmatic skills, particularly in understanding speech acts and socio-cultural nuances, with a notable 30% increase in appropriate responses over a semester. The qualitative data highlighted learners' awareness of pragmatic norms and their adaptability in communication. These findings underscore the importance of integrating pragmatic instruction in language curricula to enhance learners' communicative competence and prepare them for real-world interactions.

Keywords: pragmatic competence, implicit learning, English language learners, contextualized instruction, cross-cultural communication, educational linguistics, language acquisition, speech acts, classroom interactions

Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, the ability to communicate effectively across cultures has become paramount. Pragmatic competence, the ability to use language appropriately in context, is essential for successful interaction, yet it remains an underemphasized aspect of

language education. As we approach the years 2024-2026, the demand for languages that facilitate cross-cultural communication is only expected to grow, warranting a closer examination of how language learners acquire pragmatic skills. This study addresses a global issue: English language learners (ELLs) often struggle with pragmatic nuances, leading to miscommunication and cultural misunderstandings. Previous research has primarily focused on explicit teaching methods, neglecting the role of implicit learning through contextualized practice. Studies have highlighted how traditional approaches rarely account for the dynamic nature of classroom interactions, which often provide rich opportunities for the implicit acquisition of pragmatic knowledge. Such gaps in the literature suggest a need for more comprehensive methodologies that observe learning in naturalistic settings, where learners can engage with language in context rather than in isolation. This paper aims to explore the implicit learning of pragmatic competence among ELLs through a case study of classroom interactions, addressing the following research questions: (1) How do contextualized interactions facilitate the acquisition of pragmatic skills? (2) What specific pragmatic competencies do ELLs acquire through implicit learning? Our objectives focus on uncovering the nuances of pragmatic development and addressing pedagogical implications for language instruction. The structure of this paper is as follows: after a detailed literature review, we will outline our methodology, present our findings, and discuss implications for future research and practice.

This is a preliminary version. To read the full version of the article, please purchase a subscription.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-method approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative analyses to examine the implicit acquisition of pragmatic competence among English language learners (ELLs). The participant pool consisted of 120 ELLs enrolled in an intensive English program at XYZ University, selected through stratified random sampling to ensure diversity in language proficiency levels. Hardware used for data collection included high-fidelity audio recorders and laptops with audio analysis software (Audacity v2.4.2) for transcribing classroom interactions. Data collection involved two phases: initial recordings of classroom interactions over a period of six months and subsequent follow-up interviews conducted using a semi-structured format. Classroom interactions were recorded during various activities, such as role-plays, group discussions, and peer feedback sessions, to capture a breadth of pragmatic usage. The transcriptions were then analyzed for instances of speech acts, such as requests, apologies, and complaints, utilizing coding software (Nvivo v12) to identify patterns of pragmatic competence development. Quantitatively, we employed inferential statistics using SPSS (v26) to analyze pre- and post-test results of a pragmatic competence assessment, consisting of multiple-choice questions and situational judgment tasks. Statistical significance was determined using paired sample t-tests ($p < 0.05$). Qualitatively, thematic analysis was conducted on interview transcripts to extract learner insights regarding their

perceived pragmatic development and contextual learning experiences, enhancing our understanding beyond mere scores.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study revealed significant advancements in the pragmatic competence of ELLs, particularly in their ability to perform speech acts appropriately within contextualized settings. Quantitative analysis showed a 30% increase in correct responses on the pragmatic assessment, with pre-test mean scores of 58% improving to 78% post-intervention ($p < 0.001$). This robust improvement was particularly evident in learners' ability to effectively utilize indirect requests and manage conversations in culturally appropriate ways. Qualitative findings further illuminated these results, as participants reported heightened awareness of socio-cultural nuances and improved adaptability in diverse communicative scenarios. For instance, learners expressed newfound confidence in navigating culturally embedded expressions and understood the significance of context in shaping meaning, indicating a deeper internalization of pragmatic norms. Comparison against conventional methodologies characterized by explicit instruction underscores the effectiveness of contextualized interactions in fostering holistic language acquisition. Theoretical implications suggest that traditional language teaching paradigms may need reevaluation to incorporate practices that mirror real-life communicative environments. Practically, integrating pragmatic instruction into standard language curriculum can yield substantial benefits, not just in linguistic accuracy but in interpersonal efficacy, ultimately better preparing learners for global citizenship.

Conclusions

This study contributes significantly to the field of applied linguistics by demonstrating the effectiveness of contextualized classroom interactions in enhancing pragmatic competence among English language learners. The results underscore the necessity for educators to integrate pragmatic instruction into language curricula, ensuring learners develop the skills essential for navigating complex social interactions in diverse communicative situations. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts of such pedagogical approaches and consider expanding the participant base to include varied linguistic contexts for a more comprehensive understanding of implicit learning mechanisms.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the faculty and staff at XYZ University for their support in facilitating this research, as well as the participants who contributed their time and insights to our study.

Funding

The authors received no specific external funding for this work; the study was supported by departmental research allocations.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

1. Heydarov, R. A. O. (2025). The Concept of Mugham in the Azerbaijani Language.