# The Impact of the Pragmatic Approach on Teaching Conversation at University Level

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## I. INTRODUCTION

**Teaching English to foreign students should implicate not only familiarizing them with the sounds, vocabulary items, and grammar of English, but also helping them to use the language effectively through making them acquainted with the pragmatic rules that manage the appropriate combination of utterances and communicative functions.**
**Although many linguists and specialists in the field of language teaching realize the importance of pragmatic competence, little has been written on the nature of what must be taught or how teachers may go about helping students acquire it. This study introduces a plan for teaching pragmatic competence to foreign students, mainly through teaching three speech acts of request, apology and complement response.**

## 2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

1- Some teachers are using traditional methods in teaching and do not keep pace with modern methods.

2- Learners of foreign languages must be aware of the fact that request, apology and compliment response have specific cultural values and learners' ignorance of this fact may lead to pragmatic transfer or failure to communicate correctly.

3- Ignorance of polite forms may lead many learners to be pragmatically unsuccessful when involved in a conversation with foreigners because one of the characteristics of request, apology and compliment response is the so-called "face-threatening acts" which leads learners to be pragmatically unsuccessful.

## 3. VALUE OF THE STUDY

1 - The pragmatic approach is playing an extremely significant role in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL).

2 - Teaching by using pragmatic approach can enhance pragmatic awareness which will lead to certain benefits, and help to avoid pragmatic mistakes, thus reducing the number of embarrassing situations; make students feel more certain; help them better understand connotative messages in each situation, and make correct presuppositions.

3 - Shedding light on the possibility of teaching conversation through the use of pragmatic approach.

## 4. AIMS OF THE STUDY

The present study aims at:

1- Investigating the impact of the pragmatic approach on teaching conversation at university level. The use of the pragmatic approach in explaining the rules of conversation will participate in facilitating the process of understanding the conversation rules, and this will lead to better improvement in the achievements of the learners in the conversation. This improvement will consequently raise the rate of success in the conversation lesson and motivate learners to enroll into departments of English.

2- Stimulating the learners' pragmatic awareness and to give them choices about their interactions in the target language. It also helps them in explaining certain selected speech acts (specifically request, apology and compliment response)

and how Iraqi learners of English as a foreign language can use language successfully to perform and interpret these speech acts successfully, i.e., developing the pragmatic competence of L2 learners and making them aware of the problem that speech acts have specific cultural values (i.e. they differ from one culture to another) consequently avoiding pragmatic transfer.

## 5. LIMITS OF THE STUDY

1- The present study is limited to the second level students at the department of English, College of Basic Education at the University of Mosul, for the academic year 2013-2014.

2-The present study is also limited to speech acts of apology, request and compliment responses in written language. Other speech acts are going to be neglected due to limitation of space and time. Also, variables of age, gender and level of education are going to be taken into consideration.

3- The test used in this study is a written Discourse Completion Task (DCT) as it is considered more objective than oral tests.

## 6. HYPOTHESES

To achieve the aims of the research, the researcher attempts to test the following hypotheses:

1- There will not be a statistically significant difference in the mean scores of the achievement of the research groups in the pre-test in speech acts of request, apology and compliment response.

2- There will not be a statistically significant difference in the mean scores of the achievement of the research groups in the post-test in request, speech acts of request, and compliment response.

3- There will not be a statistically significant difference in the mean scores of the achievement of the experimental group in the pre and post-test in speech acts of request, and compliment response.

## 7. BACKGROUND

This study investigates English as a foreign language (EFL) Iraqi University students' awareness of pragmatics, their pragmatic competence in selected speech acts namely request, apology and compliment response, strategies they employed in acquiring pragmatic knowledge, as well as their general approach to learning (EFL). Many students lack pragmatic knowledge on how to interpret discourse by relating utterances to their meanings, understanding the intention of language users, and how language is used in specific settings (Bachman Palmer, 1996, 2010).

There is an increasing body of literature on awareness-raising of pragmatic knowledge and strategies for classroom instruction. However, to date, researchers have tended to focus largely on the teaching of pragmatics, rather than on how students acquire pragmatic competence (Bradovi. Harlig & Dornyei, 1998; Hou, 2007; Ruan, 2007; Schaur, 2009). It is this gap in the research that this study fills, with a focus on different types of pragmatic knowledge, learner's awareness of such knowledge, and learning strategies that College English language employ in the process of learning English in general, and pragmatics in particular.

Major findings derived from different sources highlighted that, although university EFL students were grammatically advanced language learners, they displayed limited pragmatic knowledge and a highly restricted repertoire of language learning strategies. The majority of the respondents, however, believed that pragmatic knowledge was as important as linguistic.

## 8.   PREVIOUS STUDIES

**Pragmatic Awareness Approach to Teaching**

A language awareness approach to teaching foreign languages pays special attention to developing learners' language awareness of how the target language is typically used in communication (Tomlinson 1994). Making explicit what students know implicitly about the system of language and the principles of language use is particularly important in the education of language teachers, since an understanding of how language resources can be used to achieve different

communicative goals in both spoken and written communication is indispensable for (future) language teachers: on the one hand it improves their communicative language competences, and on the other it helps them realize what and how they should teach to help their (future) students acquire the target language more effectively and successfully.

The acquisition of pragmatic strategies people use in order to achieve their communicative goals in daily communication is particularly difficult since it requires the contextualization of language use. It is assumed that while the linguistic competences, i.e. knowledge of the language system in its lexical, grammatical, semantic and phonological dimensions and skill in its use (Perkins,2007), are at the core of language use and language learning, other communicative language competences, i.e. the sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences, can be promoted by adopting a pragmatic awareness approach to teaching. It should be noted here that in agreement with Trim (2005) the sociolinguistic competences are viewed as the speakers' knowledge of the appropriate ways how to use language in different social situations, including markers of social relations, politeness conventions, certain stereotyped formulae and register differences, while the pragmatic competences are connected above all with the speakers' ability to form meaningful and coherent discourse in different communicative situations. (ibid).

## 9. METHOD OF RESEARCH

This chapter attempts at surveying the procedures adopted in carrying out the experimental part of the present study. More specifically, it sheds light on the following points:

1. Experimental design,
2. Population and the sample selection,
3. Equalization between the experimental and control groups,
4. Research instrument, and
5. Statistical means used for analyzing the data and computing the results.

### 9.1 The Experimental Design of the Study
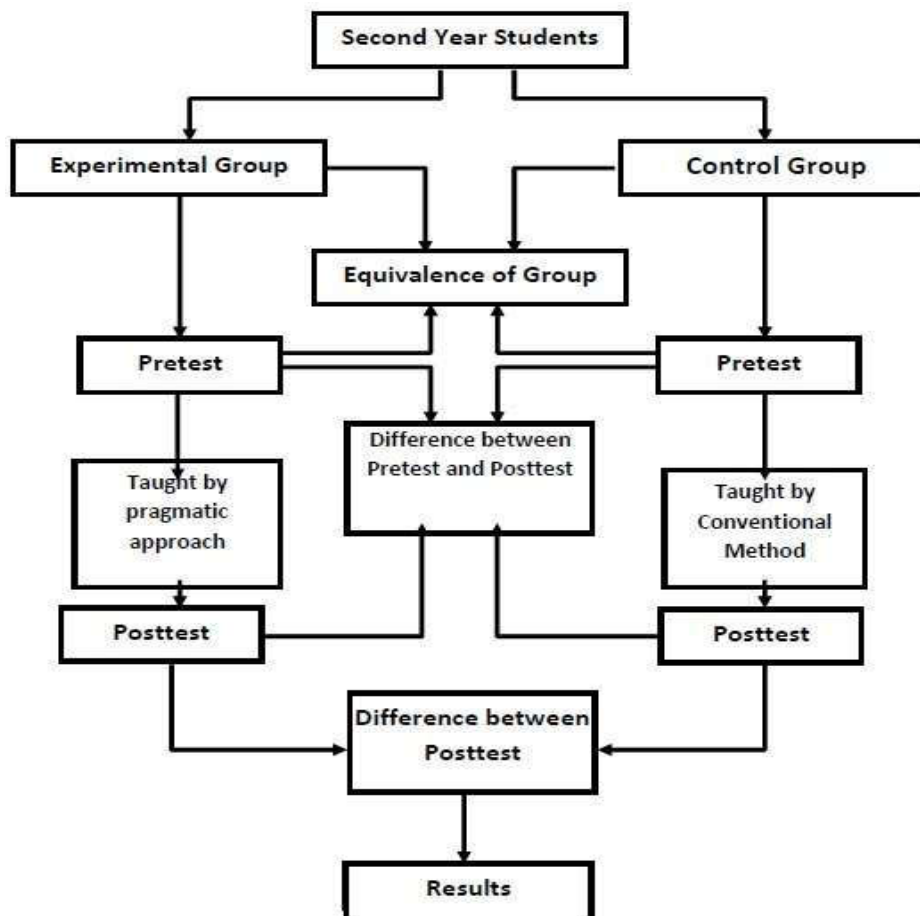
**9.2 The Population**

A population may refer to all of any specified group of human beings or of non-human entities such as objects, and geographical areas (VanDalen, 1979: 318).The population of the present study has been limited to second year university students from English Department, College of Basic Education, and University of Mosul in the second semester for the academic year 2013-2014. The total numbers of the students were 102 (58 males and 44 females).

**9.3 The Sample of the Study**

The sample of the present study is (60) Iraqi students majoring in English as a foreign language. They were chosen randomly from the population mentioned above for the academic year (2013-2014) . There are two justifications for selecting the above college: one of which is that the researcher himself is a student in this college specifically in the aforementioned department. Secondly, the college provides facilities for the researcher to achieve his study .The first group was labeled as the experimental group, i.e. taught by the pragmatic approach and the second group was labeled as the control group, i.e. taught by the conventional method. The ages of the treatment group ranged between 18 and 22 years; thus, the mean age was 20; whereas, the ages of the control group was between 18 and 21 years except one female participant who was 28 years old.

There were (30) students in the first group i.e. experimental group and (30) students in the second group i.e. control group, as shown in Table (1):

**Table (1): Numbers of students in the Experimental and Control Groups**

| Groups | Numbers of Pupils | Methods |
|---|---|---|
| Experimental | 30 | Pragmatic Approach |
| Control | 30 | Conventional Method |

**9.4  Equivalence of the Groups**

Due to the fact that some variables may have some effects on the experimental design, information required for the purpose of the groups equivalence i.e. experimental and control groups, has been collected from the available archives in the schools. It included:

1- The age of each student (measured in months).
2- Parents' educational attainment.
3- Student's achievement in English language for the preceding year.
4- Student's general achievement for the preceding year.

Some other important variables have also been taken into consideration for this purpose, namely intelligence, pretest for the speaking skill and the time available for each group.

**9.5  Students' Ages**

Students' ages have been measured in months. The arithmetic means of their ages, standard deviation and T-value have been computed as shown in Table (2):

| Group | N. | Mean | Std. Deviation | t_ cal. | t _ tab. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Case. | 30 | 258.7667 | 20.04251 | 0.412 | 2.0021 |
| Cont. | 30 | 261.3667 | 28.13941 | | (0.05) (58) |

Table (2) shows that there is no statistically significant difference between the two groups according to age variable since the absolute value for T-calculated, namely (0.301) is less than T-tabulated value (2.011) at the significance level of (0.05) and (49) degrees of freedom (Ferguson, 1981: 487). This means that the two groups are equivalent in terms of this variable.

### 9.6 The Materials

There are two kinds of materials, viz. teaching material and testing material. The former was in a shape of situational dialogues which were taken from Ockenden,(1986) (See Appendix 2) . As for the latter it was prepared by the researcher himself from which consists of fifteen situations from real life situations (See Appendix 3). The subject "conversation" was chosen to be the core subject during which the instructional sessions for both groups were decided to be given. Accordingly, each instruction phase lasted 50 minutes as a lecture actual time for both the treatment and the control groups. The whole instructional sessions for each group lasted six weeks respectively during which two interventional instructions a week were given.

### 9.7 Experimental Procedures

The elimination process has been applied to all the experimental procedures involved in this experiment; these procedures are presented below:

(a) Instructional Material:
To avoid the effect of this factor, the instructional materials have been unified for both groups (TG, CG).

(b) Duration of the Experiment:
The time allowed for the two groups (TG, CG) was the same. The experiment started on Sunday the 2nd of March, 2014 and ended on Sunday the 4th of May, 2014.

(c) Distribution of Lessons:
After getting the permission from the administration of the Department of English, the timetable was arranged according to the requirements of the experiment, where one lesson per week was allotted to each group for teaching the speech act of request while two lessons per week were allotted to each group for the speech acts of apology and compliment response.

### 9.8    Instrument of the Study

To achieve the aim set in the present study and to verify the hypothesis adopted, the researcher has utilized the following instrument:

### 9.8.1    The Pre-Test

The pre- test was utilized as an instrument of the present study. The researcher uses the pre- post- test to see the differences occur between experimental and control group. The researcher by himself prepared some situational dialogues from real life situations as a testing material.

### 9.8.2    The Post- Test

The post- test is a ready-made one used by the researcher with some changes and omission. As mentioned above, the researcher used the same situational dialogues which were used in the pre- test in the post- test. The situations used during the experiment period of instruction are worth reading because of the ideas they contain, the background knowledge the students of both the Exp. and Con. Groups have about them, and because they are interesting. Each situation is followed by three options. The distribution of scores is as follows: each correct choice receives (1) mark, while the incorrect choice receives zero mark. Thus, the total mark of the situations is (45).

## 10. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The results of the current research indicate that there has been a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of students on the pre-test in speech act of request, apology, and compliment response for experimental group which was taught by using the pragmatic approach and control group was taught by using conventional method. The difference is in favour of the experimental group. This means that students have developed their performance in conversation when they have been taught using pragmatic approach.

The results of the current research also indicate that there has been a statistically significant difference between the

mean scores of students on the post-test in speech act of request, apology, and compliment response for experimental group which was taught by using the pragmatic approach and control group which was taught by using conventional method. The difference is in favour of the experimental group. This means that students have developed their performance in conversation when they have been taught using pragmatic approach.

The results showed that there was statistically significant difference between pre and posttest scores for the experimental group which taught by using the pragmatic approach in favour of the posttest. Such results may be attributed to the following:

1. The effectiveness of using pragmatic approach in teaching English, which leads to the development of conversation for students.
2. The effectiveness of the pragmatic approach in providing students with opportunities to express themselves and to use the language productively to reinforce their vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar.

## 11. CONCLUSIONS

In the light of the research results, the researcher concludes the following:

1) It is favorable to apply the pragmatic approach in teaching conversation through the three selected speech acts to the second- year students, College of Basic Education, Department of English.

2) Raising pragmatic awareness proves to be effective for teaching the selected speech acts (, request apology and compliment response) to the second- year students in comparison to the conventional method.

3) Female subjects prove to be more successful to learn the speech act of compliment response.

4) Male subjects prove to be more successful to learn the speech act of request.

5) Analysis of the data asserts that there is evidence of pragmatic transfer from the native language regarding the strategies used to perform the speech acts.

6) Typical expressions are the least used criterion of the six pragmatic criteria in performing the three selected speech acts.

## 12.    RECOMMENDATIONS

1) It is recommended to train teachers of English to adopt the pragmatic approach as a teaching method.

2) Depend on educational techniques for teaching apology, request and compliment response.

3) Teach other types of speech acts depending on the same methods adopted in the present study.

4) Prepare language laboratory in suitable way to be a suitable place to show students certain films (i.e. audio-visual method) helping them to realize how language is used in a variety of social situations.

## 13. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The following are suggestions drawn from the findings and conclusions of the present study:

1) Discovering the effectiveness of the pragmatic approach on teaching the pragmatic concepts to the second year students and developing their attitudes toward learning English language properly.

2) Discovering the effectiveness of certain educational programs for teaching second year students, Department of English to use apology, request and compliment response.

3) The effect of using the pragmatic approach on students' achievement scores in other fields like grammar, semantics and drama.

4) The effect of using other methods (role play, guest classroom).

5) The effect of other variables such as social status, social distance and age.

## 14. APPENDICIES

**Appendix (1)** Some of the situational dialogues that are used a teaching material

I **Asking the Way**

Although all houses should have a street number, many are known only by a name. If you have difficulty in finding such a house, try asking the local shopkeepers or, better still, the postman, if you are lucky enough to see him. If you know that someone lives in a certain road but you do not know which number, ask at the public library or police station and they will check on the electoral roll. This is a road-by-road list of all the people entitled to vote.

| | (i) | (ii) | (iii) | (iv) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| A | Excuse me. Can you tell me where South Street is, please? | Excuse me, please. Could you tell me the way to the station? | Excuse me, but I'm trying to find the Town Hall. | Excuse me, please. Could you tell me how to get to the town centre? |
| B | Take the second on the left and then ask again. | Turn round and turn left at the traffic-lights. | Take the third on the right and go straight on. | First right, second left. You can't miss it. |
| | Is it far? | Will it take me long to get there? | Should I take a bus? | Is it too far to walk? |
| B | No, it's only about five minutes' walk. | No, it's no distance at all. | No, you can walk it in under five minutes. | No, it's only a couple of hundred yards. |
| A | Many thanks. | Thank you. | Thank you very much indeed. | Thanks very much. |
| B | Not at all. | That's OK. | That's quite all right. | It's a pleasure. |

**Appendix (2)**

**Speech act of Request**

**Instruction:**

Please read the following situations. After each situation you will be asked to choose a request as you would do in actual conversation.

1. You are traveling with a friend by bus. When you get on the bus, there are not two seats together, side-by-side. You see a young guy sitting by himself. What would you say to him so that you can change seats?

(a).Excuse me. Would you mind changing places because my friend and I are going together and we want to talk?

(b). Hey, please. Could you change to the other place? We are together.
(c). If, please, you don't mind changing seats with us because we are two friends and we want to continue talking during the very long trip.

2. You are in an examination and you have forgotten your pen , so you need the help of your female classmate.

You say:

(a). Would you be willing to give me your pen .
(b). Will you do me a favor, can I use your pen?
(c). Give me your pen.

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