

A Quantitative Study on Faculty Members' Perceptions of and Attitudes towards Teaching and Assessing Pragmatic Competence in EFL Context *

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to emphasize the perceptions and attitudes of faculty members in terms of teaching and assessing pragmatic competence in foreign language education. Based on a quantitative research design, this study showed that there were not statistically significant differences among the faculty members in terms of their age, gender, academic degree and teaching experiences concerning their attitudes towards teaching and assessing pragmatic competence in foreign language education. However, as to age, academic degree and teaching experience variables, though there were not statistically significant differences among the participants, the results revealed that there was a general increasing tendency towards the awareness regarding teaching and assessment of pragmatic competence as the participants gained experience in the field as well as in the profession. The study revealed that field and professional experience helped the participants expand their views in terms of the importance of pragmatic competence in general and its teaching and assessment in particular.

Keywords: pragmatic competence, faculty members, teaching pragmatics, pragmatic assessment

Akademisyenlerin Edimsel Yeteneğinin Öğretilmesi ve Değerlendirilmesi Konusundaki Algıları ve Konuya Yaklaşımları ile İlgili Nicel bir Çalışma

Öz: Bu çalışmanın amacı, akademisyenlerin, yabancı dil eğitiminde edimsel yeteneğinin öğretilmesi ve değerlendirilmesine yönelik algı ve tutumlarını ortaya koymaktır. Nicel araştırma desenine dayanan çalışmanın sonuçları akademisyenler arasında yaş, cinsiyet, akademik derece ve öğretmenlik deneyimi değişkenleri bakımından istatistiksel olarak önemli farklılıklar olmadığını göstermiştir. Ancak, katılımcılar alanda ve meslekte deneyim kazandıkça, akademik derece ve öğretmenlik deneyimi değişkenlerinde artış görülmüştür. Bu çalışma meslekî deneyimin ve alan deneyiminin, katılımcıların, edimsel yeteneğinin öğretilmesi ve değerlendirilmesi konusundaki bakış açılarını geliştirdiğini göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: edimsel yetenek, akademisyenler, edimsel öğretme, edimsel değerlendirme

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I. Introduction

Communication is an indispensable part of human life and as a number of languages are spoken on earth, it has been a necessity for nations to teach their citizens the languages of other nations in order to maintain interaction with their citizens. This process has attributed language teaching a universal prominence starting from the time peoples of the world felt the need for interaction with each other.

A review of the history of language teaching shows that there had been a great focus on the linguistic side of language education until the realization of the significance of its communicative facet. In the beginning, the emphasis in language education was on teaching learners the linguistic aspects of the target language because the idea was that a good command of grammatical features promoted effective learning. Therefore, such methods as Grammar-Translation Method were adopted in language teaching for many years. However, especially starting with Hymes's (1972) proposal for *communicative competence*, the attention was raised towards the communicative aspect of language education, which was followed by a shift from a grammatical to a communicative focus. The foremost realization, indeed, was the distinction between *competence* and *performance* initiated by Chomsky (1965), who defined competence as the broad knowledge of a person considering a language and performance as the genuine usage of that language. Explaining that performance depends mostly on competence, Chomsky points at the superiority of competence over performance.

Chomsky's reliance on competence over performance was later criticised by Hymes (1972). Not totally undermining Chomsky's distinction but criticising his devaluing approach towards language production, Hymes (1972) conducted an investigation of communication called *ethnography of communication*. His main claim was that grammar rules become meaningful with the help of appropriate rules of language usage. At this point, one can assume that Hymes's proposal promoted the radical shift from grammar-focused to communication-focused language education. Following Hymes's notion, there have been other proposals emphasizing the interactional side of language education. In 1980, Canale and Swain developed a model of communicative competence which consisted of four main parts: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. A few years later, Leach (1983) and Thomas (1983) suggested the terms *pragmalinguistics* and *sociopragmatics*, making a distinction between linguistic and communicative knowledge. Bachman (1990) was the first to coin the term pragmatics in the discussion of defining what is necessary to know a language. Bachman's model includes two main parts: *language knowledge* and *strategic competence*. Language knowledge is divided into *organizational knowledge* which refers to the knowledge of linguistic aspects and *pragmatic knowledge* which is about knowing how to use the language depending on purpose and context. The second main component, *strategic competence*, is related to the ways that can be used in order to maintain effective communication. What seems to

be common in these proposals is their consideration of communication as the unity of linguistic knowledge as well as the knowledge of social context.

Due to the increase in the awareness of the essential nature of the communicative side of languages, different studies on pragmatic competence have been conducted especially in the last few decades. Most of these studies have focused on the relationship between pragmatic competence and such various factors as instruction (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2010; Halenko & Jones, 2011; Liddicoat & Crozet, 2001; Martines-Flor & Fukuya, 2005; Nguyen, Pham & Pham, 2012; Takahashi, 2005; Takimoto, 2009), language proficiency (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998; Beebe & Waring, 2004; Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; Safont Jorda, 2005; Taguchi, 2011b; Takahashi, 2005; Takashi & Beebe, 1987; Wannaruk, 2008) and learning environment (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; Schauer, 2006).

Studies taking the *instruction* variable into consideration have generally centred on the effectiveness of either explicit or implicit instruction, or sometimes both, on the development of pragmatic competence. For example, Liddicoat and Crozet (2001) carried out a study to assess the influence of instruction with a pre-test/post-test design accompanied by instructional treatment. The results revealed that the instructional treatment helped the participants produce native-like usages in terms of both structure and content. In 2005, Martines-Flor and Fukuya investigated the effects of explicit and implicit instruction on the usages of head acts and downgraders in suggestions. The participants of the study consisted of one group receiving explicit instruction with metapragmatic information, another group with implicit instruction accompanied by activities for pragmalinguistics and recasts and a control group without any particular type of instruction. The comparison of the control group with the two other groups revealed that the productions of the treatment groups outperformed the ones of the control group. In a similar vein, Alco'n Soler (2005) also conducted an experimental study in order to evaluate the efficiency of explicit and implicit instruction on requesting strategies. The results showed that the performances of the explicit group (receiving direct awareness-raising tasks as well as written metapragmatic feedback) and the implicit group (receiving indirect awareness-raising tasks) were better than those of the control group. A recent study specifically focusing on pragmatic competence was conducted by Halenko and Jones (2011). In an experimental design, the researchers tried to measure the value of explicit instruction on the development of pragmatic awareness and production. After a 12-week program, the results of pre/intermediate and delayed post-tests pointed at the superiority of the treatment group over the control group. Therefore, it can be concluded that instruction is an influential factor in language education and that pragmatic abilities can be promoted by instruction.

Another set of studies on pragmatic competence are related to the relationship between learner's language proficiency and their pragmatic abilities. While there are some studies providing counter-arguments, most of these the studies addressing this relation have shown that there is a positive correlation between learner's general L2

proficiency and his/her pragmatic competence. Two of the earliest studies focusing on this relation pointed at a positive correlation between these two variables. In 1981, Cohen and Olshtain focused on the apology strategies of a group of L2 learners and concluded that they did not possess fundamental lexical and linguistic knowledge; therefore, they could not produce the appropriate apology forms. Investigating requests, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1986) worked with three groups of students having different proficiency levels. The results showed that the performances of the participants were in accordance with their proficiency levels; in other words, those with higher proficiency levels performed better than the others. In a comparatively recent study, Wannaruk (2008) analyzed the pragmatic transfers of EFL Thai learners in terms of refusals. The results revealed that the learners who had lower L2 proficiency adopted direct translations from their native language to the target language as they did not attain the necessary level of pragmatic abilities in L2. Taguchi (2001b) conducted a study to assess the effectiveness of L2 proficiency and the experience of studying abroad on pragmatic comprehension of 25 native speakers of English and 64 Japanese college students. The Japanese participants were grouped according to their proficiency levels and study-abroad experiences. The pragmatic listening tests showed that the group with higher L2 proficiency was better at understanding the L2 compared to the other groups. The results of these studies revealed the positive contributions of general language proficiency on the improvement of L2 pragmatic competence. It is probably because pragmatic competence depends on an essential level of general language proficiency as a pre-requisite.

The next factor to be discussed in the review of literature is the effects of learning environment on pragmatic competence. Here, the issue is about whether the target language is learned appropriately in an ELS or an EFL context. The basic discussion is that ESL contexts offer learners a variety of chances to be exposed to the target language in its natural setting. However, in EFL environments, learners do not have many opportunities to examine the appropriate language usages paying attention to contextual variables. Therefore, though there are some studies providing counter-argument, most of the studies focusing on the relationship between learning environment and pragmatic competence favour ESL settings over EFL ones. One of the earliest studies on the discussion of ESL and EFL contexts was conducted by Takahashi and Beebe (1987). Investigating the effects of pragmatic competence in L1 on L2 in terms of refusals, the researchers found out that those participants in the EFL setting adopted more negative transfers from L1 to L2 compared to their peers in the ESL context. Another study, which is worth mentioning, in the discussion of ESL vs. EFL environments is that of Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998). The motive behind this study was whether the learning environment had any impact on linguistic and pragmatic awareness of EFL and ESL learners. The participants were 173 learners in the ESL group (the USA) and 370 learners in the EFL group (Hungary) with different proficiency levels for each. Both groups were required to assess the linguistic and pragmatic suitability of twenty videotapes. The results revealed major differences between these two groups. While the EFL learners counted more grammatical errors

than the other group did, the ESL group regarded pragmatic infelicities as more critical than the linguistic ones. The results of these studies point at the difference in terms of the chances provided in these two learning contexts. However, this does not mean that those learners in the EFL settings cannot develop their pragmatic abilities because learning environment is not the only factor influencing language development.

The above-presentation of the issue under consideration shows that there are different studies in the relevant literature investigating pragmatic competence, especially the effects of various factors on learners' pragmatic abilities. Most of these studies have focused on the learner-side of the issue as they have been conducted with learners in different contexts. However, there is a scarcity in the literature in terms of research on the perceptions of the other side, i.e. teachers. In order to contribute to the literature by offering an outlook from the other major party, this study, on a quantitative basis, is designed to understand teachers' perspectives in terms of teaching and assessing pragmatic competence in EFL context.

II. Methodology

A quantitative research design was adopted for the purposes of this study. A comprehensive perusal of literature was done covering relevant research focusing on different issues related with pragmatic competence in order to find appropriate tools to conduct this study grounded on the pre-set purposes. With an aim to understand the perceptions and attitudes of faculty members at tertiary level, considering teaching as well as assessing pragmatic competence, a questionnaire was adopted from a study by Huang, Sheeran, Zhao and Xiong (2014). There were two sections in the questionnaire. The first section was about the demographic information and the other part consisted of 20 items designed to evaluate the faculty members' perceptions of pragmatic competence in general, its significance and their ideas in connection with teaching and assessing pragmatic competence in particular. (As this was a quantitative instrument, the reliability analysis was conducted. The Cronbach's Alpha value was .75 and the Split half coefficient value was .72. Therefore, it can be noted that The Faculty Perceptions of Pragmatic Competence and Assessment Questionnaire was a moderately reliable one.)

The participants of the study were 50 faculty members employed at six state universities in Turkey. There were differences among the participants in terms of age, gender, academic degree and working experience variables. All the ethical and legal applications were followed for the data collection procedure before the study. A pilot study was carried out in order to identify any potential problems during the main study (The faculty members contributing to the pilot study did not participate in the main study). The questionnaires were copied and posted to the related units. In a process of approximately three months, the main study was conducted with 50 faculty members.

In terms of data analysis, the essential conditions for parametric analyses were revised. Extreme value analysis, normality and homogeneity analyses were carried out and the data were found to ensure parametric features. (Extreme value analyses were

conducted with Skevness and Kurtosis values; normality analyses with Kolmogorov-smirnov tests; and homogeneity analyses with Levene homogeneity test). Based on the parametric and non-parametric characteristics, Kruscal Wallis-H test and Independent-Samples T-test were adopted for the analysis of the variables. In the data analysis procedure, $p < .05$ was adopted as the significance value.

III. Results

The statistical analyses of the results obtained through the questionnaire can be presented in accordance with the four variables that showed differences among the participants; age, gender, academic degree and teaching experience. Some discussions will follow the presentation of the results in tables. The first variable to display is the ages of the faculty members. Table 1 shows a comparison of the participants' perceptions of teaching and assessing pragmatic competence in foreign language education for the age variable.

Table 1: Kruskal Wallis H results for pragmatic competence of the faculty with different age groups

Age	N	Mean Score for Pragmatic Competence	χ^2	p
< 30	24	25.48	1.035	.793
31-39	4	22.13		
40-49	7	30.14		
>50 years	15	24.27		
Total	50			

Table 1 shows that there were not statistically significant differences among the faculty members in terms of their perceptions of the value of teaching and assessing pragmatic competence when their ages were compared ($X^2 = 1.035$, $p > .05$). However, a detailed examination revealed that though there was a decrease in the mean scores for the ages between 31 and 39, there was an observable increase for the age group between 40 and 49. This increase can be attributed to the experiences and developmental patterns of the participants in their professional knowledge and lives. As they gain experience in the field, faculty members can develop both their field knowledge and teaching skills. Therefore, it is possible that they can realize the significance of teaching and assessing pragmatic competence in language education in time. There might be some dynamics to be discussed underlying the apparent decrease in the mean scores of the above-the-age-of-fifty-group.

Another variable to consider is the genders of the faculty members. Since there were both quantitative and qualitative variables and the independent variable had two categories (male and female), Independent Samples T-Test was adopted. Table 2 presents the results in terms of the gender variable.

Table 2: Independent-Samples T-Test results for perception of pragmatic competence and its assessment by gender

Gender	N	Mean	d	t	p
Male	28	79.71	8.07	.123	.903
Female	22	79.45	6.46		

The above table reveals that there was not a statistically significant difference between male and female faculty members in terms of how they perceive teaching and assessing pragmatic competence ($t_{48} = .123, p > .05$). A detailed examination of this variable showed that the mean values were close to each other. In other words, female and male instructors shared similar perspectives touching on the importance of pragmatic competence in general and its teaching and assessment in language education in particular.

The academic degree of the faculty members is the next variable to focus on in order to portray the perspectives and attitudes of the participants taking into consideration their academic experiences. As this variable showed non-parametric characteristics, Kruskal-Wallis H test was employed. Table 3 shows the mean scores based on the available data set in terms of academic degrees.

Table 3: Kruskal Wallis H results for perception of pragmatic competence and its assessment by academic degree

Academic Degree	N	Mean Rank	χ^2	p
Bachelor's	11	23.18		
Master's	13	25.58	.389	.82
PhD.	26	26.44		
Total	50			

The analysis of the academic degree variable revealed that there were not statistically significant differences among the participants in terms of their academic experiences ($\chi^2 = .389, p > .05$). In other words, though there were three groups of participants classified according to their academic backgrounds, they shared similar perspectives considering the value of teaching and assessing pragmatic competence. However, it can also clearly be seen in Table 3 that as they progress in their academic studies, the perspectives of the participants also expand. The more they continue their academic studies, the higher number of positive attitudes they develop towards integrating pragmatic competence into foreign language teaching and assessment. It

can be commented from this assumption that the academic education the faculty receive contributes to the development of their ideas.

The last variable is related to the teaching experiences of the faculty members. Table 4 shows the participants' views of the value of teaching and evaluating pragmatics giving thought to the years they have spent in the profession. As the variable showed non-parametric features, Kruskal-Wallis H test was applied for the analysis.

Table 4: Kruskal Wallis H results for perception of pragmatic competence and its assessment by teaching experience

Experience	N	Mean Score for Pragmatic Competence	χ^2	p
< 5 years	23	24.13	.763	.85
6-9 years	12	25.71		
10-19 years	5	30.30		
>20 years	10	26.00		
Total	50			

As in the analysis of the other variables, there were not statistically significant differences among the faculty members in terms of their teaching experiences ($X^2 = .763$, $p > .05$). A closer evaluation showed that as participants gained experience in the profession, their awareness of the importance of pragmatic competence in language education increased. In other words, the years spent in the profession helped the faculty direct their attitudes towards a more positive level in which they gradually appreciated the value of pragmatic knowledge and competence in foreign language education. However, a detailed examination of the analysis also showed that there was a slight decrease in the mean scores when the faculty members had a teaching experience of more than twenty years, which could be affected by some other variables to be discussed in the next section.

IV. Discussion

The analyses of the data set revealed that there were not statistically significant differences among the faculty members when age, gender, academic degree and teaching experience variables in terms of their viewpoints about the value of pragmatic knowledge and competence in foreign language education are taken into account. In other words, they almost shared similar perspectives as regards the value of pragmatics teaching and its evaluation in foreign language education especially taking the gender variable into account. Yet, for age, teaching experience and academic degree variables, though there were not statistically significant differences among the participants, there were observable changes in the mean scores obtained from the analyses to attract attention for further discussion.

Considering the age variable, the analysis revealed that there was a decrease in the mean scores between the group of participants under the age of thirty and those who were between 31 and 39. The reason for this decrease may be attributed to the amount of work and responsibilities of the faculty. In order to elaborate on the issue, it can be stated that the faculty members between the ages of 31 and 39 belong to the group who are generally expected to progress in their academic studies. Focusing on academic responsibilities may be the reason why those instructors need to spend extra time for conducting research while allocating comparatively limited time for pragmatic instruction and assessment in their language classes as it may take more time to be prepared for pragmatic instruction compared to other content. Additional comparison between the other two age groups (31-39 and 40-49) shows an increase in the mean scores. This increase may stem from the expansion of knowledge and experiences of the faculty members. The more they continue to teach, the better strategies they can develop and the more different areas they can focus on in foreign language teaching.

Another variable was the academic degrees of the participants. Though there were not statistically significant differences among the groups (bachelor, master and PhD degrees), the examination of the results pointed at the increase in the mean scores in terms of the perceptions of the participants of teaching and assessing pragmatic competence in foreign language education. In other words, the more the participants pursued their academic studies, the more increased levels of awareness they reached. Upon this result, one can comment that the amount and scope of academic studies can lead to positive changes in teaching and assessment of pragmatic competence and, therefore, can increase the awareness of this dimension in foreign language education. It can also be discussed that experiences gained both in the profession and in the field can help faculty members expand their horizons pertaining to the importance of different aspects of language education. As academic studies enable the faculty to keep up with the developments in theory and practice in language education, academicians can expand their knowledge repertoire and can adopt or adapt new teaching strategies to get utmost benefit out of practice.

The other variable, the results of which did not show statistically significant differences but need additional discussion, was the years of experience the participants spent in the profession. There were four groups of participants according to their teaching experiences. There were gradual increases except for the last group including the faculty with more than twenty-year-experience in the level of awareness towards teaching and assessment of pragmatic competence as they gained more experience. It can be argued that when they begin their careers, a great percentage of instructors try to apply the system they, directly or indirectly, observe through the years they have received education. It is possible that they feel comfortable when they adopt the way they are familiar with as they are not equipped with new strategies that can be obtained through experience. Approaching the profession in a familiar way helps them feel safe in the period when they are expected to manage a whole class full of different students with diverse personality traits and learning styles as well as the course content on which teachers do not generally have extensive chances to decide. Therefore, until they

gain some basic professional experience, faculty members in our case may prefer to focus on instructing the aspects of the language that are easier to teach, mostly the linguistic content instead of the pragmatics of L2. With this perspective in mind, one can infer that teachers need some time to gain experience in the profession, including the way they approach their students and the way they teach them in order to conduct their classes in a manner from which their students can get the benefit in terms of necessary foreign language knowledge and skills to develop. For the decrease in the mean scores of the group with more than twenty year experience, one might comment that as those instructors had been generally educated in the traditional system in which the grammatical aspects of the target language were considered to be the core of language education, they may have applied a similar system in their own classes leaving pragmatic knowledge and practice in a somewhat dark area. What is important, at this point in the discussion, is that language educators should go steps beyond their previous experiences and current states of knowledge in order to provide learners a fruitful environment for learning the foreign language. Therefore, language teachers should do their best to design practice-based classes in which the communicative aspects of the target language are taught and practiced (Solak & Bayar, 2015).

Given the general increase in the levels of awareness based on the variables of age, teaching experience and academic degree, one can comment that experiences help the faculty members feel more comfortable as actors in the teaching and learning process. The more comfortable they feel, the more willing they can be to deal with pragmatic aspects of the language that seem scary to teach. In addition, gaining experience in their academic studies also enables the academics to expand their views of the significant features of the target language to teach and assess. When they gain more knowledge on language and how it should be taught and evaluated, faculty members can realize that language education should be more than the provision of grammatical knowledge (Chen, 2011), instead, it should also involve pragmatic instruction (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Jeon & Kaya, 2006; Takimoto, 2008; van Compernelle, 2011) and assessment as crucial components of foreign language education. If the aim is to train learners who can communicate in the target language, then every effort should be spent in order to develop pragmatic knowledge and competence of learners with essential teaching and evaluating strategies.

V. Conclusion

This study was designed in order to understand the perceptions and attitudes of faculty members regarding teaching and assessing pragmatic competence in foreign language education. The results of the quantitative data revealed that there are not statistically significant differences among the participants with respect to age, gender, academic degree and teaching experience variables on their perceptions of teaching and assessing pragmatic competence in foreign language education. However, for the age, academic degree and teaching experience variables, though the differences were not statistically significant, there were general observable increases among the participants. This shows that expanded knowledge and experience in the field as well as in the

profession can promote pragmatic development of teachers and can expand their horizons. This improvement is essential as teachers are the building-blocks of education.

Considering the results of this study, some suggestions for further research can be presented. As pragmatic competence is a topic that has received attention in the last few decades, additional studies evaluating the existing state of pragmatic education, including its teaching and assessment can be conducted especially in EFL contexts. Besides, since most of the present studies on pragmatic competence are on the matters related to students, new research dealing with the teacher-side of the issue can contribute to the literature to enlighten a still somewhat dark area.

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