



**THE IMPACT OF PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE ON LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY
IN SECONDARY EFL CLASSROOMS**

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APPROVAL SHEET

This research paper attached hereto, entitled The Impact of Pragmatic Competence on Language Proficiency in Secondary EFL Classrooms prepared and submitted by CHEN, JIAYI in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts (Hons) English Education is hereby accepted.

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ABSTRACT

Pragmatic competence is vital to effective communication in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and consequently crucial in terms of English language assessment. Although learner's grammatical competence may be flawless, lack of pragmatic competence may impede the appropriateness and effectiveness of their communication in real life, thus impacting on their overall proficiency. The current study attempts to investigate the effect of pragmatic competence on EFL learners, and learners' perceptions of instructional practices that support the pragmatic portion of their communicative competence. A qualitative research design was used, in which semi-structured interviews were held with five Chinese international undergraduate students, trained in their secondary level English in China, now attending a private university also in Perak, Malaysia. Data were analysed thematically. Results showed that pragmatic competence does not develop as a natural extension of the curriculum in exam-oriented and form-focused EFL classrooms, due to lack of authentic communication and pragmatic awareness opportunities. Learners view pragmatic development as more valuable through teaching practices based on interaction, exposure to language in its use, and explicit pragmatic instruction. Such pragmatic-focused instruction may greatly enhance learners' communicative effectiveness, and overall language proficiency, confirming the necessity of a focus on pragmatic instruction in general, and at secondary level in particular.

Keywords: EFL Learners, Exam-oriented instruction, Language Proficiency, Pragmatic Competence, Qualitative Study

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Chapter 1: Introductions

1.1 Background of the Study

Pragmatic competence is the ability of the learners to use language appropriately in a certain social context, including understanding and producing appropriate discourse. While grammar and vocabulary dominate secondary school EFL classrooms, the significance of pragmatic competence remains greatly undervalued. It has been revealed through studies that even though students possess a high degree of linguistic competency, they can fail in real communication due to their low capacity for comprehending and using the pragmatic aspects of language use appropriately (Tai & Chen, 2021). For example, students are not usually face challenges in implied meaning or to use language socially in discourse like making polite requests or processing indirect refusals (Yang, 2022). This pragmatic capacity-grammatical competence mismatch reinforces the necessity of direct pragmatic teaching, especially in EFL situations where learners have no time to acclimatize to natural use (Arghashi & Gorjian, 2018).

Due to globalisation, the EFL learners need to be able to use the language in various socio-cultural contexts outside the formal organisation in which it is institutionalised for communicative purposes. The justification for the same is due to the integration of cultural authentic content and process into the English language curriculum because these increase learners' pragmatic competence as well as enable them to function in informal settings (Khouni & Boudjelal, 2019). Yet, high grammar level students are not necessarily pragmatically highly competent (Mokoro, 2024). Thus, it has been a significant concern to explore the effect of pragmatic competence on overall language proficiency (Moghaddam et al., 2020). Target language exposure only is insufficient to enable the pragmatic acquisition of secondary school EFL students in an automatic way. Instead, intentional practice and education are required for the development of pragmatic competence (Yeshanov, 2025).

Considering the above discussion, this study aims to examine how pragmatic competence affects the language proficiency of EFL students. It is also hoped that the current research can shed valuable insight into EFL pedagogy and pragmatic suggestions for teaching, which will aid teachers in improving their effectiveness in developing the pragmatic competence of EFL students. This study may close the available knowledge gap of the relationship between pragmatic competence and language proficiency, as well as inform future curriculum design.

1.2 Problem Statement

Although pragmatic competence is a crucial part of language learning, it does not receive much attention in secondary English language (EFL) teaching. For instance, learners can struggle with the interpretation of indirect language, management of conversational meaning, and the acquisition of speech acts (Tai & Chen, 2021). This phenomenon shows that standard EFL teaching techniques may be ineffective in teaching pragmatic information and skills, resulting in students' incapacity to communicate smoothly in real-life circumstances using the language they have studied.

Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that, even among students at higher levels, a lack of pragmatic competence inhibits them from efficiently communicating with native speakers. Despite possessing useful grammatical skills, students show deficits in understanding and producing information at the discourse level (Tai & Chen, 2021). As a result, there is an urgent need to investigate a pedagogical technique that may systematically improve the language ability of secondary school students in EFL classroom.

On the other hand, learners' attitudes and self-efficacy towards pragmatic learning influence their success in this domain. Students are more likely to actively engage in pertinent

learning activities if they think they can develop their pragmatic abilities (Yang, 2022). However, the contemporary EFL classroom lacks an integrated pedagogical method dedicated to the development of pragmatic abilities, which inhibits students' ability to improve in this area.

Finally, there is evidence that explicit training can effectively improve students' pragmatic ability. However, this teaching technique has not yet achieved broad acceptance in secondary EFL settings. To overcome this gap, a new teaching and learning model must be designed and implemented.

1.3 Research Objectives

1. To explore the effects of pragmatic competence on the EFL language proficiency of secondary school students.
2. To analyse the effects of different teaching strategies on the development of EFL pragmatic competence in secondary school students.

1.4 Research Questions

1. How does pragmatic competence affect secondary school students' language proficiency in the EFL classroom?
2. What teaching strategies are effective in improving secondary school students' pragmatic skills in the EFL classroom?

1.5 Significance of the Study

The findings of this study will be of great benefit to the following:

Firstly, students will benefit from the study in the following ways. The results of the study will demonstrate how pragmatic competence can improve their communicative

competence in real-world. Based on this research, the students will better comprehend how to adjust their use of language according to varying social contexts, identify typical fallacies in intercultural communication and appreciate the significance of pragmatic awareness in attaining effective communication. The research will enable them to go beyond being grammatically accurate to comprehend how proper word selection can result in effective communication.

Next, teachers will be able to use the findings to improve their classroom practices.

The practical usage of the study outcome will serve directly as instruction for teachers to implement in EFL classrooms. The findings will assist the teachers to identify the effective discursive teaching methods, prescribe actual communicative environments that are being employed in the lesson plan, and include efficient ways of quantifying discursive progress amongst the students. The teachers will be able to bridge the gap between discursive learning in the classroom and the actual discursive usage, therefore, improving the communicative competence of the students.

Moreover, curriculum designers and textbook authors will find the study useful in materials development and syllabus planning. The study will also be helpful to curriculum designers and writers of textbooks in materials development and syllabus planning. This study is significant in the development of materials. This research will be the basis of creation of more realistic learning resources, which will be closer to actual trends in the use of language. It is based on this research that curriculum designers can later rely on to formulate clear and realistic learning outcomes, and to design sufficient assessment instruments that are not part of the normal parameters of language proficiency.

Finally, parents will also benefit from the insights provided in this research. They will benefit from an awareness of how pragmatics can be a tool for developing the

communicative competence of their child. The study will provide them with a better understanding of why their child may struggle in some social contexts for language use and alert them to how they can support pragmatic development at home by providing opportunities for authentic use of language.

In comparing several pedagogic methods, among them a fresh blended learning strategy, this piece of research has empirical evidence which will assist all stakeholders in coordinating efforts to enhance secondary school EFL classroom language learning and instruction. The results of the research are especially germane to designing more effective, learner-focused models of language teaching that equip students with the proficiency they require in order to respond to the demands of actual communication.

1.6 Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study examines how pragmatic competence influences the English language proficiency of Chinese international students studying at a private university in Perak. Highlighting the EFL learning experience of the students at the secondary school level, the study will analyse how understanding of discourse and speech acts influences language performance and determine the suitable teaching methodology. The participants involved are Chinese international students who received EFL instruction during their secondary school years in China and are currently enrolled at the university. The study is informed by current pragmatic theories. The target population includes only international Chinese students who are currently studying at this private university in Perak and selected with purposive sampling.

The research is confined to investigating oral communication competence, excluding extensive analysis of writing, listening, or reading skills. It does not include EFL learners from other educational levels or nationalities. Additionally, the limited sample and purposive

sampling method reduce the generalizability of the findings to wider EFL learner populations. The limitations of the research are the non-random sampling method, shorter data collection time, and self-reporting biases in the responses. Despite these limitations, the results should be useful for the construction of pragmatic competence in comparable EFL learning contexts.

1.7 Definition of Key Terms

- **Pragmatic competence:** Pragmatic competence is defined as a learner's ability to communicate effectively and appropriately within specific socio-cultural contexts. It involves the capacity to understand and produce speech acts, interpret conversational implicatures, and adhere to communicative norms, all of which are crucial for successful interactions in a target language (Taguchi & Ishihara, 2018).
- **Language proficiency :** Language proficiency measures an individual's ability to effectively use a language across four core skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. It goes beyond grammatical accuracy to include the capacity to adapt language use to different communicative situations, ensuring appropriateness and effectiveness in real-world contexts (Bachman & Palmer, 2010, pp. 44–48).
- **Speech acts:** Speech acts are utterances that serve specific communicative functions, such as making requests, offering apologies, or expressing gratitude. As a fundamental aspect of pragmatics, and all about the interaction between the speaker and the listener, not just the actual meaning of the words spoken, but also the motive behind the words (Idris et al., 2023).
- **Pragmatic awareness:** Pragmatic awareness is the capacity to perceive and consider the relationship between language form, function and context. A blended learning model

of pragmatic competence acquisition necessitates learners to possess adequate pragmatic awareness to utilize language. (Bouftira et al., 2022).

- Blended learning model: A teaching approach that combines traditional face-to-face classroom instruction with online learning activities and digital resources. In EFL environments, blended learning improves discourse competence by combining explicit instruction with digital tools that simulate authentic communicative scenarios. (Bouftira et al., 2022).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter summarizes empirical studies on the acquisition of pragmatic competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in the context of secondary school settings. Based on its theory of reference from Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis, the review discusses three connected areas that influence pragmatic competence acquisition. Where other theoretical stances are evident in the reviewed literature, they exist only in the background and not as the dominant vision of the current research.

First, it examines pedagogical methods like blended learning and explicit teaching of discourse function (e.g., requests or apologies) to facilitate learners in monitoring form-function relationships within context. Second, it points to learner-internal elements, such as language capacity, comprehension processes, and L1 transfer impact. Third, it considers developing pedagogical trends, such as discourse task work and development of cultural and strategic competence through communicative exercises.

Through categorizing research both past and present under the auspices of the Noticing Hypothesis, this chapter attempts to deliver an understandable description of how pragmatic competence can be achieved and enhanced in well enough secondary EFL classes, especially where natural access to authentic input is restricted.

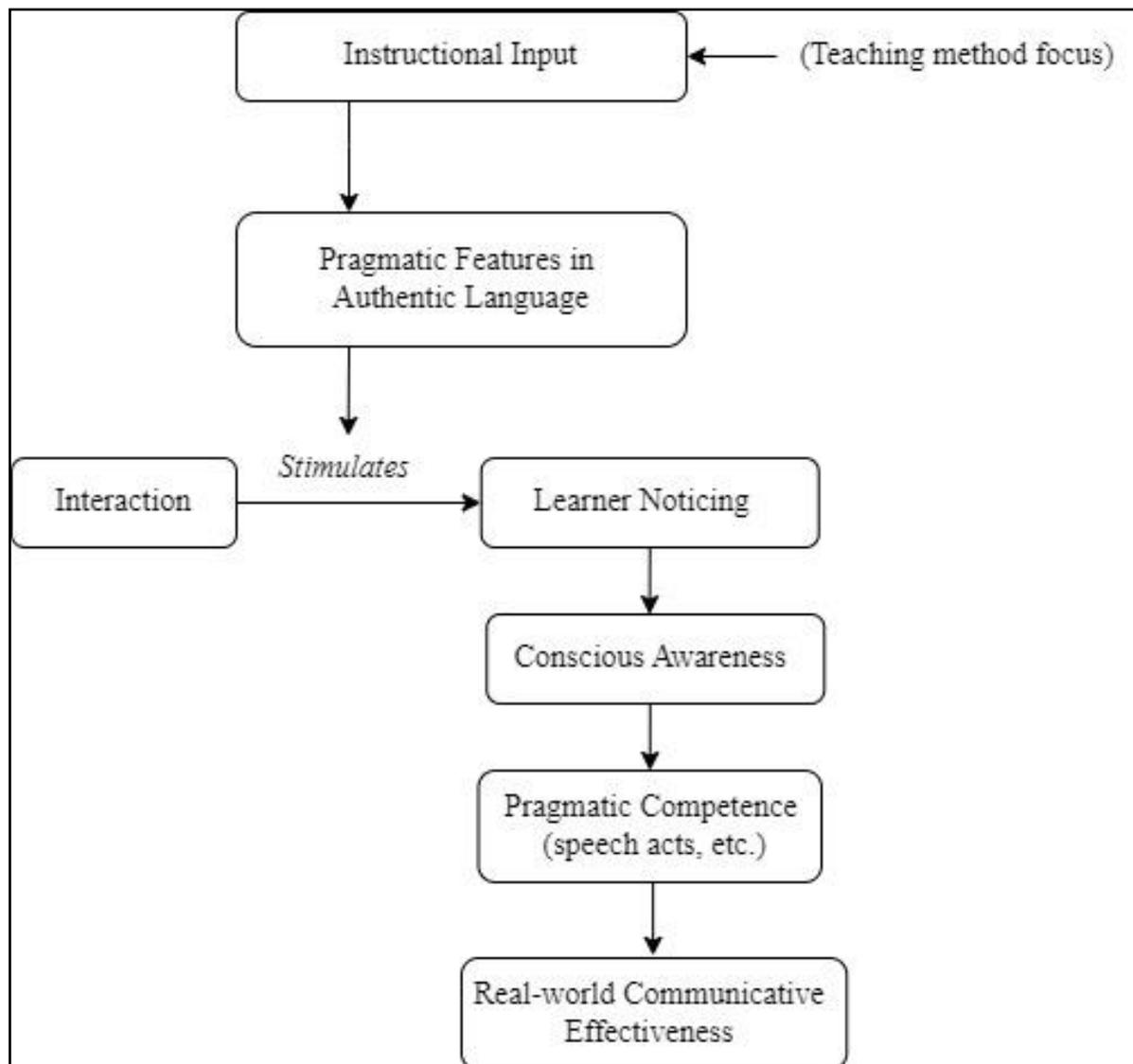
2.2 Theoretical Framework

The study follows Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis, which states that conscious attention to linguistic input is a requirement for second language acquisition. The figure above indicates how this hypothesis forms the foundation for the acquisition of EFL learners'

pragmatic competence. It conceptually represents how instructional input and interaction with the learner leads to noticing pragmatic features, and then to pragmatic awareness, and finally to communicative competence. This visualization model assists in conceptually connecting the theoretical foundations of this research-to-research focus and question.

Figure 1

Application of Noticing Hypothesis to the Development of Pragmatic Competence in EFL Learners.



Note. This diagram illustrates the process by which noticing leads to awareness and pragmatic competence in EFL learners. Adapted from Richard Schmidt, “*The Role of Consciousness in Second Language Learning*,” *Applied Linguistics*, 1990.

This study is based on Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis, which remains the primary theoretical framework underpinning the research. The Noticing hypothesis presumes conscious attention to input in language as necessary for second language acquisition. That is, the learners first have to notice linguistic and pragmatic features in the linguistic input before they can internalise and acquire them.

In pragmatic competence terms, the following prediction is made by this hypothesis: learners will not develop sociocultural appropriate language use—such as speech acts, politeness strategies, or implicatures—unless they first become consciously aware of them. The consequences of this are paramount for learning and teaching, particularly in EFL contexts: without deliberate input, guided reflection, and targeted instruction, pragmatic acquisition will not take place naturally, particularly in contexts where authentic communicative interaction is limited.

In addition, such theoretical framework provides a conceptual framework against which the two research questions of the present study may be addressed. In the first place, it explains how learners develop pragmatic competence as the result of purposeful focus on pragmatic properties accrued by teaching and communication. Second, it highlights that instructional design plays a crucial role in helping to focus the attention of learners to these pragmatic features, which is the centre of the analyses in this study.

2.3 Instructional Approaches in Pragmatic Development

Effective teaching methods are instrumental in developing pragmatic competence. Bouftira et al. (2022) examined a blended learning model that incorporates conventional classroom learning with information and communication technology (ICT) materials, including

interactive website. Through their quasi-experimental research, they established that learners engaged on online discussion tasks improved significantly in discourse awareness. This finding substantiates Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis, which posits that learners are drawn to form-function mappings through technologically provided input.

Similarly, Arghashi and Gorjian (2018) compared the explicit instruction of discourse functions like requesting and apologizing. Through their research, direct instruction with contextualized practice was found to enable learners to better incorporate discourse routines in writing and speech. This supports Swain's (1985) Output Hypothesis because it indicates that learners are compelled to actively produce language and consider its utilization.

The findings of such studies validate the advantages of deliberate, systematic pedagogical practice, particularly if complemented with communicative practices and approaches.

2.4 Learner-Internal Variables in Pragmatic Development

Pragmatic competence development is also influenced by internal learner variables such as language capacity, understanding ability, and cross-linguistic influence. In Tai and Chen (2021) study, they state that learners with higher language capacity create more complicated strategies in pragmatic interpretation compared to learners with lower capacity, who mainly rely on intuition. This shows the considerable interaction between grammatical knowledge and pragmatic knowledge.

According to Wongkittiporn (2024) study, it investigated the impact of a learner's native language (L1) on the acquisition of pragmatic features in a second language (L2), i.e., Thai learners' use of passive constructions. The findings indicated that socio-cultural and

linguistic norms pertaining to L1 played a role in the target-like attainment of discourse organization in L2, particularly regarding A-movement constructions.

Moreover, the research from Yang (2022) utilized the Theory of Planned Behaviour to investigate Chinese EFL learners' beliefs and attitudes towards pragmatic learning. Based on the findings, learners who perceive pragmatic competence as desirable and attainable are more likely to participate in relevant learning activities, thus reflecting the role of psychological preparation in attaining pragmatic competence.

These studies underscore the necessity of dealing with both cognitive and affective aspects in teaching pragmatics.

2.5 Pedagogical Shifts for Enhancing Pragmatic Competence

Recent studies have proposed some instructional changes towards bridging gaps in discourse progression. Among the most prominent suggestions is the integration of discourse-based tasks into instructional practices. Arghashi and Gorjian (2018) concluded that the introduction of discourse functions into a writing task led to the production of better writing by students, which manifested greater discourse awareness.

Considering communicative language teaching, the activities go beyond grammar drill and promote interactional ability. Role plays, simulations and multimedia exercises allow the learners to learn socio-cultural norms and practice real-life situations.

Bouftira et al. (2022) argue that blended learning is both a pedagogy and a personalized learning strategy. The integration of direct feedback with independent online discovery can address the varied needs of different learners while supporting an applied sense of autonomy.

These innovations call for a more holistic approach in language teaching—blending pragmatics and grammar, developing reflective learning culture, and tailoring teaching to the backgrounds and needs of students.

2.6 Synthesis of Past and Present Research

Earlier studies have established the validity of pragmatic competence in the process of learning a second language. However, most studies have concentrated on discrete elements—e.g., speech acts or comprehension—and neglected examining how pragmatic competence might be infused across all sectors of language competence. The previous research from Derakhshan and Arabmofrad (2018) supported a mixed approach model, building on Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis. More recent research such as Yang (2022) and Wongkittiporn (2024) has, in contrast, focused on learners' belief effects and L1 impact, while research bridging those psychological and cultural aspects to lesson design is less comprehensive. Moreover, few have investigated pragmatic development in secondary school contexts, especially in Asia where EFL contexts limit authentic language exposure.

Therefore, the present study aims to fill this gap by investigating the interplay of teaching methods, learner attitudes, and curriculum innovations in developing discourse competence in secondary school EFL contexts. In this manner, the study contributes to a fuller understanding of the parallel development of language ability and pragmatic awareness and of how teachers can better scaffold students' communicative ability.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodology adopted in carrying out this research. It describes what sample and sampling methods were used, the overall research design and layout, instruments of data collection, and approaches to data collection and analysis. As the research adopts a qualitative approach, it predominantly relies on semi-structured interviews to explore Chinese international students' attitudes and experiences of pragmatic competence attained in their secondary EFL education in China.

3.2 Samples and Sampling Methods

The samples of this research were Chinese international students studying in arts- and science-related disciplines at the private university in Perak. Based on the institutional data gathered from the International Office, there were 73 Chinese international students studying in the arts- and science-related faculty. A subsample of these students will be chosen using purposive sampling in such a way that the participants will have experience and insights to share about the EFL classroom of Chinese secondary schools.

The sample population will constitute around 7-11% of the overall population (5-8 students). These students will be invited for semi-structured interviews in which they will be asked to share their learning experience in the EFL classroom and how this experience has helped them enhance their discourse competence. This sampling guarantees the selection of informative cases that can shed light on the phenomenon being explored.

While the sample size can be considered small in proportion terms, it is within qualitative research traditions in which the emphasis is to try depth instead of breadth.

Contextualised, in-depth information was favoured over generalisability. The participants shared academic backgrounds and language learning histories also optimised the chances of data saturation in this setting.

3.3 Research Design

3.3.1 The Central Question

How do Chinese learners of English construct and build up their pragmatic competence, particularly in the understanding and utilization of speech acts, management of implicit meaning, and choice of the correct linguistic forms in situation?

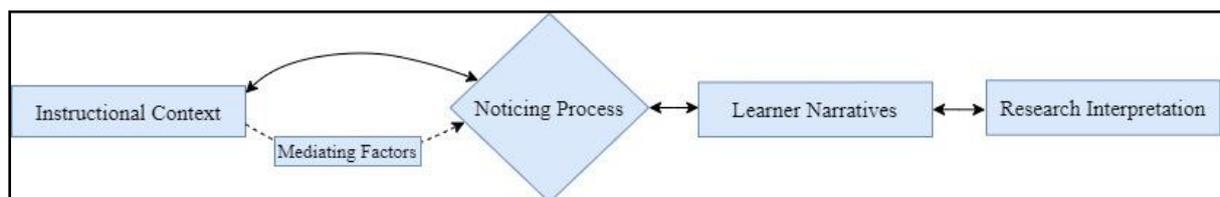
3.3.2 Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research paradigm to explore learners' lived experiences and perceptions.

3.3.3 Conceptual Framework

Figure 2

Phenomenological Model of Noticing Processes in Chinese EFL Contexts



Note. A process model illustrating the development of pragmatic competence from instructional inputs to learner outcomes, with mediating cognitive and interpretive factors. Solid arrows indicate primary

relationships, dashed arrows represent mediating factors. Adapted from Richard Schmidt, "*The Role of Consciousness in Second Language Learning*," *Applied Linguistics*, 1990.

This research takes a conceptual framework based on Schmidt's (1990) "noticing hypothesis" to investigate the process Chinese EFL learners acquire pragmatic competence through classroom instruction. The framework illustrates an interactive process starting from the instructional context comprising teacher explanation, authentic materials, and corrective feedback. These stimuli bidirectionally interact with the "noticing process," during which pragmatic features are explicitly attended to by learners and are governed by mediating variables such as L1 transfer, motivation, and previous language knowledge. The noticed features are subsequently mapped onto learners' narratives, elicited by semi-structured interviews and stimulated recall protocols, wherein the participants describe how they interpreted pragmatic functions. Lastly, the researcher interprets and synthesizes these stories, triangulating them with classroom observations and ensuring reflexivity as a guard against analytical bias.

The shape of the framework - with a diamond "noticing process" - prioritizes conscious awareness in pragmatic acquisition, and bidirectional arrows between the teaching context and the "noticing process" recognize the recursive nature of learning. The framework is consistent with the constructivist qualitative research tradition (Creswell, 2013) while informing methodological choices so that data collection and analysis are theoretically aligned.

3.4 Instrumentation

The primary instrument for data collection in this study is a semi-structured interview protocol designed to investigate Chinese learners' perceptions, experiences, and strategies related to the development of pragmatic competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

context. The protocol was self-developed but grounded in established literature on interlanguage pragmatics and second language acquisition. Specifically, the questions were framed with the results and main themes of the research of Taguchi (2008), Bardovi-Harlig et al. (1998), and Ishihara and Cohen (2010) in mind. These works explored how the English Language Learners (ELLs) perceive and produce appropriate language and challenges they faced while communicating in context-dependent manner.

The theoretical framework informing the development of the interview protocol was Schmidt's (1990) "Noticing Hypothesis", which calls for learners to become consciously aware of aspects of discourse in their acquisition input. In line with this framework, we asked questions which invited participants to consider whether and how they had noticed aspects of discourse like politeness, indirectness or implied meaning in their classroom learning. While the initial draft of the interview protocol also relied upon Swain's (1985) Output Hypothesis and Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour, ultimately only Schmidt's framework was kept featuring the cognitive awareness elements that best applied in this study.

The protocol had eleven open-ended questions with six sections: participant introductions, learning English in Chinese secondary school's experiences, attitudes towards teaching discourse, discourse competence building approaches, comparative Chinese and Malaysian education environment experiences, and teaching practice comments and plans. These categories were selected based on their recurrence in past research and relevance to the development of interlanguage pragmatics. The open-ended format was chosen to encourage rich, reflective responses and to allow for follow-up probing during the interviews. This format facilitates a deeper understanding of how learners experience and construct pragmatic competence, particularly in the areas of speech acts, implicit meanings, and context-sensitive language use.

3.5 Data Collection Method

Data will be collected through a series of one-on-one semi-structured interviews using a pre-developed guide consisting of open-ended questions. The interviews aim to elicit participants' reflections on their past English learning experiences and their current pragmatic competence in authentic communication contexts. This interview will be conducted face-to-face or on a secure videoconferencing platform, such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, depending on the participant's schedule and preferences.

Each interview will last approximately 15-20 minutes and will be audio-recorded using a smartphone or digital device such as a recording application, likes Otter.ai, Voice Memos, and so on. The participants will be made very clear that the interviews will be audio-recorded and will be requested to provide prior informed consent by signing an informed consent form.

Following recording, the interviews will be transcribed word for word to make sure that they are accurate and allow the analysis of data. The transcripts will only be used for research, and all personal identifiers will be stripped to allow the participants to maintain anonymity.

Background information such as age, gender and EFL study experience will be collected prior to the interviews to understand the background of respondents' responses. The process of data collection attempts to provide insight into learners' prior practical learning experience and current communicative action.

In ethical compliance, the research will adhere to the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) ethical guidelines. All participation will be entirely voluntary, and subjects can withdraw at any time without penalty. Respect for the autonomy of the subjects (Principle 2.1) is needed by this study, for minimizing any possible harm (Principle 3.3), and for ensuring clear and open information about the use of the data (Principle 5.2). All the participants are Chinese international undergraduate students, and particular care will be taken

to maintain cultural sensitivity and ease of understanding in the data collection and consent process.

3.6 Data Analysis

Following the above data collection procedures, audio data of interviews will be transcribed verbatim as the basis of thematic analysis. The transcripts will be examined by using thematic analysis. Transcription and analysis accuracy will be maintained through the creation of verbatim transcripts from recorded interviews with the prior consent of the participants. Thematic analysis will be supported by qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo or Taguette, which facilitate the systematic organization, coding, and interpretation of qualitative data.

The six-phase model of Braun and Clarke (2006) will guide the analysis, namely familiarising with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, checking themes, defining and naming themes, and writing a final report. Coding will begin with open coding to delineate substantial meaning, followed by axial coding to classify related codes into conceptual categories, and selective coding to develop superordinate themes in line with the research objectives.

To enhance consistency and reduce bias on behalf of the researcher peer debriefing will be undertaken where a section of coded data sets will be examined by an independent peer experienced in qualitative research who will provide feedback on the development of themes. Analytical validity and thematic consistency will also be promoted through coding triangulation among participants to ascertain the presence of repeating patterns or contradictory insights. Furthermore, the interviews will be scheduled and organized with the help of tools like Google Sheets or Calendly, and semi-structured interview questions that will serve both

as a data collection instrument, as well as thematic map to direct interpretation and consistency with the research goals.

Chapter 4: Findings & Analysis

4.1 Introduction

The chapter outlines the study results and major findings that were achieved after the analysis of interviews. The research was based on the semi-structured interviews as a source of data collection to investigate the experience of participants in learning English and understanding their definition of pragmatic competence. There are two parts to this chapter. In Section A, we will first introduce all the research participants and give some background information about them. This context will help understand the findings that follow. In section B we summarise the key patterns that emerged from the thematic analysis of the interview data. Both sections work together to paint a fuller picture of how participants speak about their English learning experience and how they believe they go about improving their pragmatic knowledge.

4.2 Research Respondents

The participants in this study comprised five Chinese undergraduate international students from the private university in Perak. All the respondents who answered the survey had completed their whole secondary education in China and had many years of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education during their prior studies. This common educational background enabled them to be able to contemplate their past experiences of learning in a pragmatic way. Deliberate sampling of the participants was done to include both Arts- and Science-oriented fields to have a diversity range of backgrounds. The interviews were conducted in the one-on-one semi structured format and face on face or online session was dependent on the practicality. All the interviews were tape recorded after the consent forms had been signed. The respondents were open-minded and shared information about their

experiences of learning English along with their current realistic views of the process of using English in the real situations of communication.

4.3 Interview Questions

The methodology adopted in the study was semi-structured interview, which required eleven open-ended questions that were meant to help obtain information on past experience in learning EFL, awareness of pragmatic aspects, and perceptions of pragmatic competence. The questions were self-constructed but based on the themes frequently used in the previous works on pragmatic competency, including the experience that learners had with speech acts, implicit meaning, and sociocultural appropriateness (Bardovi-Harlig & Dornyei, 1998; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Taguchi, 2008). The structure of the questions was also conditioned by the Noticing Hypothesis which was developed by Schmidt (1990) and made it add items which required students to think about whether they had observed pragmatic elements in class. The last interview procedure consisted of six parts, the background of the learners, previous classroom experiences, the way they perceived pragmatic instruction, the ways to enhance pragmatic competence, cross-context comparison, and recommendations on how to improve pedagogy. The interview questions are presented in their entirety in the Appendix.

4.4 Thematic Analysis Results

In this section, I have tried to explain the research results obtained after thematic analysis of interview transcripts. Braun and Clarke (2006) framework was employed in the analysis of the data where the data were coded, categorised and recurrent patterns identified amongst the responses of participants. The results are structured by the research question of

the study, and every theme is supported by extracts of the respondents to evidence their experience and perspectives on the English pragmatic competence. After thorough analysis of the interview data and, as a result, coding, comparison, and conceptual aggregation, the main results of this study were summarized into two major themes as follows: 1. Exam-Orientated and Form-Focused English Learning in Chinese Secondary Schools; 2. Beliefs About Useful Instructional Strategies for Pedagogically Developing Pragmatic Competence.

4.4.1 Data Analysis for Research Question 1

The findings of the interviews reveal that all the subjects of the study had basically the same opinion. Their experience in an examination-based learning in secondary school influenced their acquisition of pragmatic competence to a considerable degree since the courses in English put too much focus on grammatical correctness, memorising vocabulary, and learning to take tests. These methods of instruction did not offer real communication opportunities, essential in the acquisition of pragmatic competence. The major themes that emerged are the following:

Theme 1: Exam-oriented, form-focused English Learning in Chinese Secondary Schools

Respondents always asserted that their English learning experiences were dominated by preparation of exams and not practicing communicatively. Every respondent remembered classroom lessons which were focused on grammatical practice, and there was very minimal interest on functional or cultural use of English. This is how the respondents gave their opinion.

“In my secondary school, English lessons were mostly grammar and exercises. Teachers focused on correct answers, not how to use English in real communication.”

(Respondent 2)

“We rarely used English to communicate. It was mainly reading, writing, and preparing for exams. I didn’t learn how to speak politely or naturally.”

(Respondent 3)

These illustrations show a learning environment where the forms of language have a dominant role over communicative functions and these facts are in line with the Noticing Hypothesis of Schmidt (1990), which is that learners cannot take in pragmatic elements without taking particular notice of them. There is little opportunity to find out the pragmatic nature because classroom activities do not always require the use of an interactive or contextual language.

Moreover, the respondents emphasized that their activities in the English classroom were centered mainly on the Gaoka, the National Higher Education Entrance Examination of China, and other beneficial school-provided exams. A significant percentage of the class time was devoted to practicing previous papers and mock tests on the part of teachers and students. The respondents explained:

“Everything we learned followed the exam format. We didn’t practise conversation or pragmatics.”

(Respondent 4)

“Even speaking tasks were rare. Reading passages were treated as exam questions instead of real communication.”

(Respondent 1)

Such an exam-based instructional method promotes a limited focus on precision and the written word, limiting the student to develop practical skills.

Another aspect that was reported by participants is that they could seldom encounter actual English beyond the classroom. English is not a common language that Chinese students use in their everyday life, therefore, they have problems with the acquisition of sociocultural norms, politeness techniques, and indirect communication styles. Respondents describe:

“I never used English in daily life. So, I didn’t know how to speak politely or indirectly when I came to Malaysia.”

(Respondent 5)

“We only memorised textbook sentences. There was no real communication.”

(Respondent 3)

Since there were no real-life contributions, they did not have much practical learning in their secondary schools.

In general, the results of Theme 1 indicate that the pragmatic skills of the participants were not developed spontaneously because of the examination-based learning environment that is common in secondary education. Excessive focus on grammatical accuracy and test-taking skills led to minimal communicative practice and the use of real language - both of which are essential in learning pragmatic competence. The restrictions to participation in the

classroom, and the lack of real-life situations involving the use of the English language, limit the possibility of the learners in recognizing and obtaining pragmatic elements. When combined, these factors clarify why participants were faced with practical issues in their subsequent face-to-face interactions, thus responding to Research Question 1 and demonstrating that the environment of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in China influences and limits the pragmatic learning of participants.

4.4.2 Data Analysis for Research Question 2

In terms of expected qualities of teaching strategies that help enhance pragmatic competence, views among interviewees converged broadly. More specifically, to the extent that their secondary English at school was largely designed to serve the ends of examinations and grammatical correctness, our interviewees felt that pragmatic awareness was impossible. What they advocated instead was teaching practices that include contextualized input, interactional authenticity and awareness-raising. From the interviews there seem to be four main themes:

Theme 2: Beliefs About Effective Instructional Strategies for Developing Pragmatic Competence

Analysis of the participants' replies suggests a prevalent attitude towards acquiring pragmatic competence with explicit instructions instead of being 'automatically' exposed to it. Since exam-oriented teachers prevent primary real communication in secondary schools,

participants noted teaching strategies that foster interaction, contextual understanding and clarity of pragmatic aspects.

Participants testified to the importance of communicating and contextualized activities, emphasizing the need for more oral practice, role as well as situational tasks for "this helps us to understand what English is in communication." This is what the respondents said about that.

"If we had more chances to talk in real situations, maybe role play or group tasks, I would know better how to respond politely."

(Respondent 1)

"Our teacher focused on exams, so we didn't learn how to speak naturally. If teachers explained how to say things appropriately in different situations, it would help a lot."

(Respondent 3)

These responses show that communicative tasks should be central to the pragmatic classroom, enabling learners to glean and enact pragmatic features in situ in a timely manner.

Furthermore, explicit instruction of pragmatic rules is to be encouraged. Some of these respondents stated that secondary school had never taught them so directly on pragmatic rules like having to speak kindly or speak in a certain tone or indirect communication. To them, the direct education would have equipped them with the worldly elements of communicative knowledge.

“Nobody taught us how to be polite in English. We only learned grammar. Teachers could explain these things clearly, like when to use indirect expressions.”

(Respondent 4)

“If teachers pointed out the hidden meaning or tone, I would understand English conversations better.”

(Respondent 2)

These thoughts reflect the importance of some kind of explicit instruction in facilitating learners to actively notice pragmatic forms—what’s alluded to in the Noticing Hypothesis.

According to the students, using video, film, or real conversations adds an element of authenticity to their education that is not normally experienced in a typical textbook approach. For instance, in the words of one respondent:

“The textbook dialogues were too fake. Real videos or conversations would help us understand how people actually speak.”

(Respondent 5)

Authentic materials provide EFL learners with the requisite social and linguistic background to recognize pragmatic conventions like intonation, politeness, and conversational implicatures.

Theme 2 suggests that learners consider teaching strategies that involved authentic communication and carefully crafted instructional activities to be the most effective for developing pragmatic competence. The participants substantiated the importance of interactive

activities, clear elucidations of pragmatic rules, and contact with authentic human linguistic interaction as three components too often missing from their own prior instruction.

In summary, the data fulfil Research Question 2 in showing when authentic interaction, awareness-building, and meaningful language input, are included in education, pragmatic competence improves dramatically.

Chapter 5: Discussion & Conclusion

5.1 Discussion of the Findings

In this section, I will discuss the two main findings given in Chapter 4 by situating these findings in the literature to comment on how far participants' language learning experiences lead to the development of their English pragmatic competence. In general, the interview results imply that respondent's pragmatic competence development was largely constrained by their examination-oriented learning environment in Chinese secondary school. Their knowledge of effective pragmatic teaching tactics is strongly related to basic principles in second language acquisition theory, including "awareness raising," "input quality," and "authentic interaction".

5.1.1 Discussion on the Findings of Research Question 1

Research question 1 looks at how participants report on their English experiences in Chinese secondary schools and the role played therein by those experiences in developing their pragmatic competence. According to research, all participants were exposed to an exam-oriented environment where English teaching "often involves an overwhelming number of grammatical rules, vocabulary, and test performance". Such teaching environments cause a scarcity of authentic communication chances, hindering the development of practical skills.

Such findings corroborate Schmidt's (1990) "Noticing Hypothesis", suggesting that learners only acquire knowledge that they have consciously focused upon. But since contemporary classroom tasks in China rarely involve conversation, role-plays, or contact outside the classroom context, students have little opportunity to notice sociolinguistic

phenomena such as politeness markers, indirect speech acts, and sociocultural conventions. As a result, pragmatic knowledge did not develop naturally during secondary education in China.

Data from the interviews also show that activities in China's EFL classrooms are mostly focused on past papers and mock examinations, with a strong emphasis on correctness and a narrow concentration on writing skills, this pattern has also been identified in prior study on exam-oriented English teaching in China (Cheng & Hamid, 2025). Participants described how even oral activities were severely restricted and closely managed, making it difficult for them to develop awareness to actual English usage settings. These descriptions are consistent with recent study findings, which show that spoken tasks in Chinese English schools are frequently tightly controlled, leaving few opportunities for spontaneous engagement or meaning negotiation (Peng, 2024). The issue of lack of meaningful contact is broader than the classroom—namely, real life in a typical Chinese town is one where students rarely hear English outside of school and even more rarely have opportunities to use it. In the absence of ‘real input contexts’ students have no way to see how native speakers use good manners, prosody, and operate with ‘background information’ during communicative encounters (and students need to know about these in developing pragmatic competence).

Overall, research findings indicate that examination-oriented, formality-focused teaching environments restrict students’ opportunities to develop their pragmatic competence. The lack of communication opportunities and “genuine” exposure to language prevents them learning to recognize, understand, and acquire pragmatic aspects, per Research Question 1, shows how teaching EFL in the Chinese secondary school context affects students’ development of pragmatic competence.

5.1.2 Discussion on the Findings of Research Question 2

Research Question 2 looks at participants' perspectives on teaching techniques that can adequately promote pragmatic competence. In the interviews, most participants felt that teaching of pragmatic competence was a necessity as opposed to discovering pragmatic competence lessons in grammar-centred lessons.

Participants appreciated the value of having the opportunity to communicate, for example through role-play, group discussions, or talking through a scenario. This lends support to Swain's (1985) 'Output Hypothesis'—that output gives learners an opportunity to 'test out' hypothesised grammars, negotiate meaning and notice gaps in their grammar. For these participants, interactive activities provide scope for rehearsing the "right" way to respond, and the tone and conventions of communication.

Results further attested to learners' acknowledgement of the importance of explicit instruction: learners said that norms of polite forms, euphemistic language, and culturally—including linguistically—appropriate responses are never explicitly taught at their secondaries. This supports Ishihara and Cohen's (2010) argument that explicit instruction might speed up learners' cognitive processing of pragmatic rules, as well as their use of these rules in 'real-life interactions'. Recent study also suggests that without explicit instruction, learners frequently struggle to identify pragmatic clues or understand the communicative aim underlying language forms (Munir & Yavuz, 2024). Participants contended that further explicit explanations of pragmatic rules would greatly enhance their confidence and abilities in practice.

Moreover, participants underscored the value of authentic input items such as films, videos, and spontaneous occurrences. These expose students to features of real communication, such as word stress, intervals of silence, discourse markers and implied meanings, things

usually poorly realised in textbooks. Their view mirrors Taguchi's (2008) belief that rich input is key to preparing students for the pragmatics.

In summary, learners indicate that enabling pragmatic competence requires communicative practice through interacting in L2, explicit teaching and real input. In this respect, the findings corroborate pragmatic theory and reveal the mismatch between learners' needs and their experience of teaching linked to examination.

5.2 Implication of the Study

Research have found that in an exam-getting orientated EFL context, pragmatic competence cannot be acquired—grammar and exam grades come before meaningful communication. This underscores the importance of English textbooks and curricular materials providing explicit pragmatic teaching guidance and meaningful venues for sincere interaction—so that learners find and internalise the sociocultural conventions that language use is situated within.

5.2.1 Practical Implication of the Study

The findings of this study also have various implications for the stakeholders in EFL, and particularly the students, teachers and curriculum developers.

First, students need to realize that pragmatic competence is an important part of effective communication that cannot be had through grammatical well-formedness alone. Awareness of situations of use and sociocultural origins may prompt students to seek for themselves opportunities for engagement beyond the classroom.

Second, the findings underscore the necessity of teachers embedding explicit pragmatics education, authentic language input, and interactive tasks into their classroom practices, as they mediate the test-communication divide and not toward exam-oriented instruction. Teachers could also ask students for reflections on pragmatic qualities, consistent with the theory in this study.

Lastly, many researchers' conclusion was that curriculum designers included pragmatic competence must be included in syllabuses, instructional materials, and assessment methods. The existent examination-based curriculum system provides too few opportunities for the building of pragmatic ability, indicating an urgent need for a curricular model, and an evaluative scheme rich in communicative tasks and authentic contextual models.

5.3 Recommendation for Future Research of the Study

The findings and methodology of this study point to some interesting areas for future work. One interesting tactic is to expand the participant pool beyond one university. With more learners being recruited across more regions, different types of schools, and levels of proficiency in China, a study of whether these findings apply to describe a characteristic of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) education in China or institutional characteristics can be achieved.

The further improvement of the study methodology will be beneficial for future research. This study relies mainly on retrospective interview data; the addition of further sources of data, such as classroom observations, discourse completion tasks, role-playing, or spontaneous interactions would allow for a more verifiably reliable triangulation. This more rounded methodology gives a fuller picture of learners' pragmatic behaviour, while lessening the need to rely on self-report.

Another branch of research focuses on the time aspect of pragmatic development: longitudinally following learners, or their progress from secondary school to higher education, helps to address how long it takes for pragmatic competence to manifest or stabilize, and how it transfers from context to context, as well as under which conditions teaching effects endure.

As classroom practice will play a central role in students' pragmatic awareness development, future study could investigate the role of teachers. Researching into teacher awareness and training background and teacher pragmatic knowledge and teaching decision will point to structural factors that propitious or hinder the introduction of pragmatic into EFL classroom. This research is vital in that it can inform curriculum design and teacher professional development.

5.4 Conclusion

This study is likewise concerned with the development of pragmatic competence in international Chinese students abroad and of communicative competence. The results indicate that in a test-driven environment, grammatical accuracy and exam-fitness are paramount, but pragmatic competence doesn't develop so conveniently. Lack of exposure to authentic language, and lack of pragmatic direction, limit their abilities to notice and acquire social communicative rules.

Participants alluded to "classroom experiences" they felt really helped them become more practically competence. Many students thought that their learning improved greatly when the classroom experience allowed more "real interaction, had EN input more related to what they do in life, and clearer pragmatic issues (like politeness, loudness, indirectness). Such reflections do not just directly speak to the study issues but illustrate how Schmidt's (1990) "Noticing Hypothesis" can be used in the real world.

In conclusion, the current research is relevant to the gap knowledge concerning gaps between grammar based EFL teaching and communicative needs of learners outside of the classroom. The research prefigures the challenges of the teaching and learning process and provides useful information to the teachers, curriculum planners, and scholars who are concerned with pragmatics instruction in EFL classrooms. It allows EFL students to be aware of what kind of learning activities might assist them to become more proficient in their pragmatic competence, and it also equips them to identify, comprehend, and operate with the pragmatic facet of language use in real-life communicative context.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Interview question

Introduction

Q1. Please make a brief introduction about yourself.

Section 1: Experiences in English Study

Q1. Could you describe what kinds of English study you have experienced in Chinese secondary school?

Q2. What difficulties or challenges did you face when studying in EFL classes?

Section 2: Perceptions of Pragmatic Learning

Q1. Do you think it is important to bring pragmatics into the EFL education system? Why or why not?

Q2. What impression did the emphasis (or lack thereof) on pragmatic competence leave on you?

Section 3: Strategies for Improvement

Q1. What strategies have you used to improve your pragmatic competence?

Q2. Are there areas of pragmatic competence that still challenge you? If so, which ones and why?

Section 4: Comparison Between Learning Environments

Q1. How does learning English in Malaysia differ from your experience in China in terms of pragmatic competence?

Q2. Have the differences between the two educational environments impacted your language learning in any significant way?

Section 5: Feedback on Teaching Methods

Q1. What can EFL teachers do differently to help students develop pragmatic skills?

Q2. Is there anything you wish you had learned earlier about English pragmatics?

Section 6: Future Learning Goals

Q1. What are your future goals regarding improving your pragmatic competence in English?

Appendix 2: Participant consent form

Participant Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study entitled:

"Exploring Chinese International Students' Pragmatic Competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Contexts."

This study is being conducted by CHEN, JIAYI, an undergraduate student at Tunku Abdul Rahman University, under the supervision of Dr. Siti Ummaizah binti Meor Musa. The purpose of this study is to understand learners' perceptions and experiences related to pragmatic competence in English.

Participation

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw at any time without any consequences. The interview will last approximately 15–20 minutes and will be audio recorded with your consent.

Confidentiality

All information collected in this study will remain strictly confidential. Your identity will not be revealed in any publication or report. Audio recordings will be securely stored and only used for transcription and analysis purposes.

Consent Statement

By signing below, you acknowledge that you:

1. Have read and understood the purpose of this study.
2. Agree to participate in a recorded interview.
3. Understand that your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time.
4. Understand that your responses will be kept confidential and used solely for research purposes.

Participant's Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____