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ENHANCING STUDENTS' PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE THROUGH THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ROLE-PLAY ACTIVITIES

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Abstract: *This study explores the impact of role-play activities on pragmatic competence among ESL learners. Fifty-two first-year students majoring in English at the University of Languages and International Studies (ULIS) participated in the research. After screening, 52 high-intermediate students were selected as the study sample and divided into two mixed groups. Group A engaged in role-play activities, while Group B participated in conversation followed by free discussion techniques. Following the treatment, both groups underwent a similar posttest assessment. The results indicate a significant positive effect of role-play on increasing pragmatic competence among the participants. This study contributes to the understanding of the benefits of role-play in enhancing pragmatic language skills among ESL learners.*

Keywords: *role-play, pragmatic competence, ESL learners, language acquisition, mixed-group experimental study*

INTRODUCTION

Language teaching has traditionally emphasized grammar accuracy over communicative proficiency, leading to a neglect of the functional aspects of language. However, a paradigm shift occurred in the 1970s with the introduction of a new approach that highlighted the importance of communication in language learning. This shift stemmed from educators recognizing learners' deficiencies in conducting natural exchanges in second or foreign languages. Over time, research in second language acquisition has strived to uncover how learners grasp both linguistic and extralinguistic elements, ultimately leading to the acquisition of competence in a second language.

Studies examining learners' performance in speech acts within second or foreign language contexts have illuminated disparities between learners and native speakers. Bardovi-Harlig (2001), as cited by Rueda (2006), identified various factors contributing to these disparities, including input availability, length of exposure, and transfer. To address these discrepancies, recommendations have been made to incorporate the teaching of interlanguage pragmatics in the classroom (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996; Bardovi-Harlig, 1997).

In spoken English classrooms, effective communication skills are highly valued. This demand places a significant responsibility on teachers to provide appropriate pragmatic instruction, encompassing the comprehension of oral language, interpretation of speaker's feelings and

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intentions, and the ability to select appropriate responses (Bachman, 1990). Pragmatic skills are pivotal in social communication, facilitating effective interaction and relationship building.

However, there remains a dearth of research on the post-instructional effects of activities on the pragmatic development of foreign language learners. These activities serve as communicative practices, enabling students to immerse themselves in more natural communicative settings. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the potential of role-play activities in enhancing the pragmatic competence of first-year English majors at ULIS, VNU, Hanoi.

This research endeavors to examine the efficacy of utilizing role plays as a pedagogical tool to enhance students' pragmatic competence. Accordingly, the following research question is posed:

What is the effect of the use of role-play activities in enhancing students' pragmatic competence?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pragmatic competence

Pragmatics, as a subfield of linguistics, is concerned with the study of language usage within social interaction, encompassing the choices made by users, the constraints encountered, and the resultant effects on communication participants (Crystal, 1997; Chomsky, 1980). According to Crystal (1997), pragmatics delves into the examination of language from the perspective of its users, highlighting their decision-making processes and the impact of language usage on others involved in the communicative act (p. 301). Chomsky (1980) early on conceptualized pragmatic competence as the knowledge of appropriate language use in accordance with various communicative purposes (p. 224).

This competence extends beyond mere linguistic proficiency to include the speaker's ability to employ language for diverse functions, the listener's capacity to discern the speaker's underlying intentions, and mastery of the rules governing discourse formation (Bialystock, 1993).

The concept of pragmatics extends beyond individual language components, integrating phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics to generate communication that is both functional and socially appropriate (ASHA, 2015). Goldstein, Kaczmarek, and English (2002) emphasize the role of pragmatics in social interaction, where speakers and listeners employ language to navigate various communicative contexts and convey intended meanings effectively. In essence, pragmatics serves as the framework through which language users negotiate meaning, interpret intentions, and engage in meaningful interaction within diverse social settings.

The role of pragmatic competence

The role of pragmatic competence in language learning and communication is integral to achieving communicative proficiency beyond mere memorization of vocabulary and grammar rules (Canale, 1983). While often overshadowed, pragmatic competence is a fundamental component within models of communicative competence. Edwards and Csizer (2001) define pragmatic competence as encompassing knowledge of social, cultural, and discourse conventions necessary for effective communication across various contexts. Speakers who lack pragmatically appropriate language use may be perceived as uncooperative or, in more severe cases, as rude or insulting. This

risk is particularly pronounced in individuals with high levels of pragmatic competence, where deviations from expected norms may be more conspicuous (Edwards & Csizer, 2001, p. 234). Thus, pragmatic competence plays a crucial role in facilitating successful communication, enabling individuals to navigate social interactions with sensitivity to contextual norms and expectations.

Pragmatic competence and the second or foreign language classroom

In second or foreign language classrooms pragmatic competence is often underdeveloped due to the limitations of traditional instructional environments. Compared to authentic interactions outside the classroom, classroom discourse is typically constrained both functionally and formally, hindering the development of pragmatic abilities in the target language (TL). This limitation is not solely attributed to the instructed nature of these learning contexts but also to the organizational structure of second language (SL) and foreign language (FL) classrooms, which may either facilitate or impede the acquisition of TL pragmatics.

Explicit instruction in pragmatics becomes particularly crucial in FL classrooms, where opportunities for authentic human interactions are scarce. As a result, learners encounter greater challenges in acquiring appropriate language use patterns (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996). This scarcity of authentic interaction underscores the need for pedagogical intervention aimed at two primary objectives.

Firstly, pedagogical intervention aims to heighten learners' awareness of their existing pragmatic knowledge and equip them with strategies to leverage this knowledge in appropriate sociopragmatic contexts. By tapping into their preexisting pragmatic foundations, learners can more effectively navigate social interactions in the TL.

Secondly, pedagogical intervention seeks to guide learners in attending to both the linguistic forms of utterances and the relevant social and contextual features with which they are associated (Schmidt, 2001). This dual focus enables learners to develop a nuanced understanding of the interplay between linguistic structures and social norms, thereby enhancing their pragmatic competence in the TL.

Role-play activities

Role-play serves as a pivotal pedagogical tool in the realm of language learning, particularly for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, offering a dynamic platform for simulating authentic social exchanges and eliciting naturalistic responses (Tran, 2004; Purvis, 2008). By immersing learners in simulated communication scenarios, role-play facilitates experiential learning within a controlled and supportive environment, mirroring real-life interactions (Theodoros *et al.*, 2010). In educational settings, role-play tasks strategically position learners in participant roles within carefully constructed scenarios, with facilitators guiding the learning process (Killen, 2006; Oliver *et al.*, 2002).

Central to the concept of role-play is the notion of participants adopting specific character roles within contextually relevant settings, thereby embodying social positions and functions that align with the scenario's objectives (Greco, 2009; Ertruk, 2015). This active teaching strategy not only

enhances student engagement and enjoyment but also cultivates oral fluency and fosters creativity (Harmer, 1998). Through role-play, students are afforded opportunities to express themselves confidently and fluently, empowering them to apply language skills in authentic communicative contexts (Pollard, 2008).

The versatility of role-play activities allows for the exploration of a diverse array of topics and grammar points, providing learners with opportunities for meaningful language practice (Pollard, 2008). Whether engaging in structured dialogues or open-ended discussions, learners are able to develop linguistic proficiency while also honing their communicative abilities in a dynamic and interactive manner. Role-play not only enhances language skills but also promotes socio-cultural awareness and empathy by immersing learners in diverse social scenarios (Greco, 2009; Ertruk, 2015). Through role-play, learners gain insight into cultural norms, societal roles, and interpersonal dynamics, thereby fostering intercultural competence and promoting cross-cultural understanding.

Types of role–play activities

In language learning contexts, two primary forms of role-play are utilized: closed role-plays and open role-plays. In both forms, participants are provided with instructions specifying the roles, the primary situation, and at least one participant's communicative aim. However, the execution and outcomes of these role-plays differ significantly.

Closed role-plays entail participants representing a one-turn oral response within a predetermined scenario. In contrast, open role-plays involve multiple turns in discourse, allowing for spontaneous interaction and negotiation of meaning (Kasper & Dahl, 1991). Participants in open role-plays are not explicitly instructed on the conversational outcomes or how to achieve them, thus fostering impromptu planning decisions and negotiation of goals in real time.

The chief strength of open role-plays lies in their ability to replicate natural speech act behaviors within a complete discourse setting, providing insight into the organization of speech act performance and the strategic choices that influence interlocutor responses (Tran, 2004). Through open role-plays, learners can engage in authentic communication experiences, honing their linguistic skills and social interaction abilities in real-time exchanges.

Taking on roles is a natural and spontaneous activity, particularly for children, who engage in imaginative play to explore different characters and situations (Harris, 2000; Mucchielli, 1993). Role-play activities allow children to respond as though they were in the assumed situation, fostering empathy and social understanding (Colucci-Gray, 2007). Moreover, role-taking experiences contribute to the development of mental habits, values, and social norms, shaping individuals' understanding of social contexts and relationships (Claxton, 2002; L'Abate & Bagget, 1997).

Empirical evidence suggests that role-play is fundamental to the process of socialization, facilitating the acquisition of social skills and interpersonal communication abilities from early childhood through adolescence (Karmiloff & Karmiloff-Smith, 2001; Harris, 2000). Through role-play, individuals gain insights into societal norms, cultural values, and interpersonal dynamics, enhancing their ability to navigate social contexts and relationships effectively.

In summary, both closed and open role-plays play integral roles in language learning and social development, providing learners with valuable opportunities to engage in authentic communication, develop linguistic proficiency, and foster social understanding and empathy.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The research design employed in this study was quantitative, utilizing both experimental and control groups to investigate the effect of role-play on pragmatic competence. Following an experimental approach, the study involved the implementation of a treatment, with role-play serving as the independent variable and pragmatic competence as the dependent variable. To assess the impact of role-play on pragmatic competence, a pretest-posttest method was adopted, allowing for the comparison of participants' pragmatic abilities before and after the intervention.

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 52 first-year English majors enrolled at the Faculty of English Language Teacher Education, University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam National University, Hanoi. They were divided into two groups: a control group and an experimental group, each comprising 26 students.

Instrumentation

To fulfill the requirements of the current research, two instruments were employed: a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) and Role-play Tasks (RPTs). These instruments were selected to align with the research question and objectives, facilitating the comprehensive assessment of participants' pragmatic competence before and after the intervention.

Data Collection Procedures

Following the initial pretest, the study unfolded over a span of 10 weeks, during which the effectiveness of role-play tasks (RPTs) in enhancing pragmatic competence was investigated. Here's a detailed breakdown of the procedure:

- *Pretest Phase (Week 1):*

All 52 participants, divided into control and experimental groups, completed the Discourse Completion Test (DCT) as a baseline assessment of their pragmatic competence. This pretest measure took place one week after the course began and lasted for 45 minutes.

- *Intervention Phase (Weeks 2-10):*

Group A, the experimental group, was systematically instructed in performing role-play tasks (RPTs) over the course of eight sessions. These sessions were integrated into their regular coursework and designed to facilitate simulated social interactions and the development of pragmatic skills.

Group B, the control group, received standard instruction without specific emphasis on role-play tasks. Instead, they engaged in ordinary classroom conversations followed by free discussion

techniques. The progress of both groups was indirectly monitored by their teachers to ensure adherence to the treatment protocol. Researchers provided guidance and instructions to the teachers as needed to ensure consistency in implementing the desired methods of role-play.

● *Posttest Phase (Week 10):*

After the completion of the intervention period, all participants underwent a posttest assessment using the same Discourse Completion Test (DCT) administered during the pretest phase. This posttest aimed to evaluate any changes in pragmatic competence resulting from the implementation of role-play tasks.

Each participant completed the posttest within a 45-minute timeframe, mirroring the procedures followed during the pretest phase. This allowed for a direct comparison of participants' pragmatic competence before and after the intervention period.

Data Analysis

To test the research hypothesis, the following steps were implemented:

● *Independent Samples t-test:*

Initially, an independent samples t-test was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference between the two groups (experimental and control) on the pretest measure of pragmatic competence.

This analysis aimed to ensure that any observed differences in posttest scores could be attributed to the intervention (role-play tasks) rather than pre-existing disparities between the groups.

● *Calculation of Effect Size (Eta Squared):*

After confirming the absence of a significant difference between the groups on the pretest, the effect size of the intervention was calculated using Eta squared.

Eta squared (η^2) is calculated by dividing the t-score squared by the sum of the t-score squared and the degrees of freedom (N1 + N2 – 2).

This effect size measure provides an indication of the magnitude of the difference between the groups, allowing for a better understanding of the practical significance of the intervention.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Results from Experimental Teaching

Table 1. The result for the experimental and control groups on the pretest

	N	Mean	Std. deviation
Role-play (experimental	26	5.92	1.02
Conversation (control)	26	5.80	1.25

Table 2. Independent Samples Test for the pretest

t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
.346	38	.732

Eta squared = $.346^2/.346^2 + 38 = 0.003$

According to table 1, for the experimental group, the mean score on the pretest was 5.92, with a standard deviation of 1.02. In comparison, for the control group, the mean score was 5.80, with a standard deviation of 1.25.

In table 2, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare these scores between the two groups. The results revealed that the difference in mean scores was not statistically significant (t(38) = .346, p = .73), with p > .05.

This suggests that, before the intervention, both the experimental and control groups exhibited similar levels of pragmatic competence. Therefore, any subsequent differences observed in posttest scores between the groups are less likely to be attributed to baseline disparities in pragmatic competence.

These findings provide a solid foundation for evaluating the effectiveness of the intervention in enhancing pragmatic competence, as they establish a comparable starting point for both groups.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the experimental group's scores on the pretest and the posttest

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
pretest	5.92	1.02	26
posttest	6.90	0.92	26

The analysis of Table 3 reveals a notable improvement in students' pragmatic competency following their engagement in role-play activities. Prior to the intervention, the mean score on the pretest for the experimental group was 5.92, with a standard deviation of 1.02. Following the completion of role-play activities, the mean score on the posttest increased to 6.90, accompanied by a slightly reduced standard deviation of 0.92. This increase in mean score from the pretest to the posttest suggests that the role-play activities effectively contributed to enhancing students' pragmatic competency. Furthermore, the reduction in standard deviation indicates a greater level of consistency among students' performance after engaging in the intervention.

The observed improvement in pragmatic competency underscores the efficacy of role-play activities as a pedagogical tool for fostering language proficiency in authentic communicative contexts. By actively participating in simulated social interactions, students were able to apply and refine their language skills, leading to demonstrable enhancements in pragmatic competence. These findings highlight the value of incorporating role-play activities into language learning curricula, as they provide students with valuable opportunities to practice and develop their language abilities in meaningful, real-life situations.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of the control group's scores on the pretest and the posttest

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
pretest	5.80	1.25	26
posttest	6.01	1.16	26

Based on the data presented in Table 3 and table 4, the analysis reveals notable differences in the effectiveness of role-play activities in enhancing pragmatic competency compared to standard instruction.

In the control group, where no role-play activities were introduced, the mean score on the pretest was 5.80, with a standard deviation of 1.25. Following the intervention, the mean score

on the posttest increased slightly to 6.01, accompanied by a reduced standard deviation of 1.16. However, this improvement was not statistically significant, indicating that standard instruction alone did not lead to a significant enhancement in pragmatic competency among the students.

Conversely, in the experimental group, which actively participated in role-play activities, the mean score on the pretest was 5.92, with a standard deviation of 1.02. After the intervention, the mean score on the posttest notably increased to 6.90, with a slightly reduced standard deviation of 0.92. This substantial improvement in posttest scores, coupled with a decrease in standard deviation, suggests a significant enhancement in pragmatic competency among students who engaged in role-play activities.

The comparison between the two groups highlights the superior efficacy of role-play interventions in fostering pragmatic competency. The experimental group demonstrated a more substantial increase in mean posttest scores and greater consistency in performance compared to the control group. These findings underscore the importance of incorporating interactive and experiential learning methods, such as role-play, into language teaching curricula to facilitate meaningful language acquisition and proficiency development.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings of this study underscore the significant role of role-play activities in enhancing students' pragmatic competency in ESL settings. The results align with previous research by Fogg (2001), Harris (2000), Kasper and Dahl (1991), McKeachie (2003), Mucchielli (1993), Poorman (2002), Rintell (1981), and Scarcella and Brunak (1981), all of whom have highlighted the advantages of role-play in pragmatic knowledge acquisition and its positive impact on social exchanges.

The experimental group, which engaged in role-play activities, demonstrated a notable improvement in pragmatic competency compared to the control group, which engaged in standard conversation techniques. This suggests that role-play provides learners with valuable opportunities to navigate complex social interactions in authentic contexts without predetermined rehearsal, thereby preparing them for real-life situations.

Role-play serves as a dynamic tool for facilitating genuine interaction and meaningful participation, thereby promoting L2 pragmatic development. By immersing learners in simulated communication scenarios, role-play activities offer enhanced access to authentic interaction, allowing learners to observe and engage in pragmatic language use firsthand. Furthermore, role-play activities can serve as valuable sources of instructional material and facilitate the tracking of changes in learners' pragmatic competence over time.

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations and suggestions can be made for the use of role-play in enhancing students' pragmatic competency:

1. Incorporate role-play activities into ESL curricula: Educators should integrate role-play activities into language teaching curricula as a regular component of instruction. These activities can provide students with valuable opportunities to practice and develop pragmatic language skills in authentic contexts.

2. Provide clear instructions and guidance: When implementing role-play activities, teachers should ensure that students are provided with clear instructions and guidance on how to effectively participate. This may include modeling appropriate language use, providing feedback, and scaffolding students' learning as needed.

3. Foster a supportive learning environment: Creating a supportive and nonjudgmental learning environment is essential for successful role-play activities. Teachers should encourage students to take risks, make mistakes, and learn from their experiences in a safe and supportive setting.

4. Incorporate diverse scenarios and roles: To engage students and promote cultural awareness, educators should incorporate a variety of scenarios and roles into role-play activities. This can help students develop a broader understanding of different social contexts and communication styles.

5. Provide opportunities for reflection and feedback: After engaging in role-play activities, students should be given opportunities to reflect on their experiences and receive feedback from both peers and teachers. This can help students identify areas for improvement and refine their pragmatic language skills over time.

6. Encourage creativity and flexibility: Role-play activities should encourage creativity and flexibility, allowing students to adapt their language use to different social situations and contexts. Teachers should provide opportunities for students to experiment with language and explore different communication strategies.

7. Integrate technology and multimedia resources: Technology and multimedia resources can enhance role-play activities by providing students with additional visual and auditory stimuli. Educators can use video clips, audio recordings, and online platforms to create immersive and interactive role-play scenarios.

Overall, role-play activities offer a valuable tool for enhancing students' pragmatic competency in ESL settings. By incorporating role-play into language teaching curricula and providing students with opportunities for practice, reflection, and feedback, educators can help students develop the communication skills they need to succeed in real-life social interactions.

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