

# RELATING EFL LEARNERS' GRAMMAR KNOWLEDGE TO THEIR USE OF PRAGMATIC EXPRESSIONS

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## ABSTRACT

When people use language as a tool to communicate, the meaning that is conveyed or received will be more than what is heard from the explicit utterances. It is believed that the language we use as the code can be interpreted in any meaning, which interpretation becomes part of pragmatics. Grammar ability and pragmatic competence should work together to create good communication and avoid misunderstanding. This paper presents three aspects. The first aspect is the kinds of pragmatic knowledge that the EFL learners may have about their foreign language they are learning. The second aspect is how the EFL learners use their foreign linguistic expressions in a contextually appropriate manner within their daily communication. The last one is to what extent the EFL learners understand the implicit messages of expressions.

**Key Words:** pragmatics, pragmatic expression, EFL Learners, grammar and pragmatic competence

## ABSTRAK

*Ketika orang menggunakan bahasa sebagai alat untuk berkomunikasi, makna yang ingin disampaikan atau diterima akan melebihi dari apa yang terdengar dari kalimat yang secara eksplisit disampaikan. Hal ini disebabkan bahasa yang kita gunakan sebagai kode dapat diinterpretasikan dalam berbagai makna, dimana interpretasi menjadi bagian dari pragmatik. Kemampuan tata bahasa dan pragmatik harus berjalan seiring untuk dapat menciptakan komunikasi yang baik dan menghindari kesalahpahaman. Artikel ini akan menjelaskan 3 aspek. Pertama adalah jenis pengetahuan pragmatik bahasa asing yang dipelajari dan mungkin dipahami oleh siswa. Kedua bagaimana siswa menggunakan ungkapan linguistik bahasa asing mereka secara tepat dalam kehidupan sehari-hari mereka. Terakhir adalah sejauh mana mereka memahami pesan implisit yang terdapat dalam berbagai ungkapan.*

**Kata Kunci:** pragmatik, ungkapan pragmatik, pembelajar bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing (EFL), tata bahasa dan kompetensi pragmatik

## INTRODUCTION

When people use language as a tool to communicate, the meaning that is conveyed or received will be more than what is heard from the explicit utterances. Their body language, intonation, expression, will influence the way the speaker talks to send a message and add other implicit information within the message. Time, location, and background of both interactants also play important roles in making the communication run well.

A person is considered to have good ability in using the language when he or she can use some linguistic competence in the language within communication properly. The ability to pronounce the words well including the use of stress in the sentence, to use varied diction and expressions, and to use excellent grammatical structure are considered as a guarantee that a person can communicate properly within the community. However, it is also important to know what to say in what condition and how to say it because it will influence the hearer's reception and the result of the communication. The study of how language is used in human communication, which is determined by the condition of the society, is called pragmatics (Mey, 2001).

To show that the ability to use proper stress in an utterance is important to understand a particular condition, let us take this simple example (the small capital words show the stress within the sentence):

- 1) a. *Hania HATES basketball*  
b. *Hania hates BASKETBALL*

Both utterances use the same form of grammar with the same words. However, in *1a*, by raising the intonation in the verb of the sentence, the speaker is telling the hearer about Hania's feeling toward basketball. It is emphasizing the feeling that Hania does not like basketball at all. Therefore, the probability to ask her to play basketball does not seem to be the best response. While in *1b*, the speaker intends to tell the hearer that *it is* basketball that Hania does not like, not other games, by raising the intonation on basketball.

It is believed that the language we use as the code to exchange our conversation can be interpreted in any meaning we intend to. To infer or to interpret the utterances becomes the part of pragmatics. Understanding grammar well is not enough to communicate effectively. Therefore both grammar and pragmatics should go together to create effective communication (Ariel, 2008).

Another example shows how grammar can influence the pragmatic intention:

- 2) a. *The result may be different from our expectation*
- b. *The result might be different from our expectation*

Both utterances explicitly give prediction about difference result probability. Grammatically, both sentences are correct. However, those two sentences are different in the degree of probability. The sentence 2a has a higher probability than the sentence 2b.

In the production and perception of a language, pragmatic competences play a significant role, including for the EFL learners. Having enough knowledge in pragmatic will be helpful for them to produce and to perceive the appropriate meaning and to know what the intention within the speech acts based on the situation. However, the difficulties in understanding pragmatic sentences with their intended meaning seems natural within the learning process of non-native speakers. This could happen due to different social and cultural background with those of the target language speakers. Meanwhile, based on the field observations during the teaching practice of several students from the Department of English Education in

several schools around South Jakarta and South Tangerang, from year to year, pragmatic competence is not taught implicitly in the teaching of grammar nor explicitly in the teaching of speaking.

It is important to relate pragmatic competence with other competences explicitly. In this study, the importance of relating the teaching of grammar with pragmatic competence is presented. This is because grammar ability and pragmatic competence should work together to create good communication and avoid misunderstanding. Supporting this idea, Ariel (2008, p.17) wrote that "while grammar is responsible for what we express explicitly, pragmatics explains how we infer additional meanings". Living as part of a community will require us to communicate based on the agreed premises. There are patterns or rules of language use that should be well acknowledged if we want to be accepted as part of the community.

Some kinds of pragmatic knowledge that the EFL learners may have about their foreign language they are learning will be presented in this paper. Related to linguistic competence, I also would like to know how the EFL learners use their foreign linguistic expressions in a contextually appropriate manner within their daily

communication. Furthermore, I would like to know to what extent the EFL learners understand the implicit messages of expressions. In order to make the discussion clearer, here I would like to divide the structure of my paper into several sections. The first one is introduction and the second one is literature review on linguistic pragmatic knowledge, in which speech acts and implicature are discussed. Then, in the third section I discuss the findings of the study on how the EFL learners use their grammar ability to support their pragmatic competence. Finally, conclusion will end this paper.

## LINGUISTIC PRAGMATIC KNOWLEDGE

As a linguistic concept, pragmatics is concerned with communicative activity and anything related to it including the context, the actions, the people involved, the environment when the action takes place, and what is expected from the utterances production (Fetzer, 2011). Pragmatic knowledge of both speaker and hearer plays a very significant role in the production and the perception of a language during communication activity. Furthermore, Fetzer (ibid) explains that linguistic pragmatics, which is defined as the science of language use, focuses more on pragmatic principles, mechanism,

universals and their immediate act of use in language and in language use.

To be able to produce and to perceive the appropriate meaning and know the intention within the speech acts based on the situation, it is important for both interactants to have several kinds of pragmatic knowledge in their language. Here I would like to give a brief explanation about speech act and implicature in pragmatic knowledge that we need to have in order to be able to use them in our communicative activities. In addition, this section will also explain the interaction between pragmatic competence and grammar competence.

### Speech Acts

The definition or explanation about speech acts here is mostly based on Austin's lectures at Harvard University in 1955. Austin (as cited in Cutting, 2002) said that the actions performed when we produce the utterances are called speech acts. In addition, Austin (as cited in Degand, 2009) considered that language is used not only to say or to make statement but also to perform actions. Furthermore, Austin (as cited in Degand, ibid) contrasted two types of utterances, constatives and performatives, both of which are declarative.

According to Degand (2009), even though its proposition can be either true or false, *constative* sentences are statements that are used to describe events, processes, or state of affairs such as:

- 3) a. *I'm sleeping on my bed*
- b. *I have several new books*
- c. *I am waiting for my husband*

From the examples we can see that one of them is not true even though it is grammatically correct. The state of *sleeping* (3a) shows that at that time of utterance production, the speaker is actually not sleeping yet. So it is hard to prove that this sentence is true.

On the other hand, Degand (2009) stated that even though they have no truth conditions, *performative* sentences are sentences used to show some performances or actions, which should be issued in an appropriate situation. In other words, it must meet the condition required for the performance of the utterance. For example:

- 4) a. *I warn you not to meet my daughter again*
- b. *I name my new baby "Thareeq"*
- c. *I promise to come on time later*

The three examples above are grammatically correct. However, inappropriate situation or wrong intonation of the speaker may result in an unexpected condition. Therefore, referring to Degand (2009), it can be

concluded that *constative* and *performative* differ in at least two aspects. While *performative* sentences are "used to do something or create new facts" (Degand, *ibid*, p. 1010), *constative* sentences are used to make statements and assertions. In addition, *performative* sentences cannot be said to be true or false as *constative* sentences can.

Furthermore, if the speaker cannot meet the requirement of the conditions to produce certain utterances, there is a probability that the utterance may cause "unhappy situation" or "infelicitous". Degand (2009) stated that there are two ways that can make unhappy utterances. The first is the inappropriate circumstances or conditions when the utterances are produced, which could result in unsuccessful utterances. The second one is insincere production of utterances, where the act is achieved but the procedure is violated. An example for the first one is sentence 4c, where it is possible that the hearer cannot believe in the speaker because the speaker keeps violating the promise to come on time. Another probability is the speaker has a vital role in the occasion, but he/she comes very late, and the event does not run well as it is expected. Sentence 4a can be an example for the second one, where it is possible that a parent does not like her

daughter's friend to meet her. The probability of the result is either the relationship between a daughter and her friend gets worse or gets better in inappropriate meaning because of the utterance.

### **Implicature**

Implicature is a derivation from the verb "to imply" which means folding something within something else (Mey, 1993). Horn (2006) defined implicature as an aspect within speaker's utterance that conveys the actual meaning. Therefore, when we use implicature within our conversation, it means there is something within our utterances, which meaning is made implicit in the actual language we use. In other words, we do not use our language to directly say our intention.

In addition, implicature is not solely about the production of utterances, because signs and gestures can also manifest and attribute the meaning (Mey, 1993). Body language, face expression, and intonation will influence the way the speaker utter his or her sentence based on his or her intention. In this case, any component of the speakers, including grammar forms, can contribute to the intended meaning of the speakers without explicitly saying it because the

speakers' intention is more than just what is explicitly said (Horn, 2006).

To understand what people say, we must be able to interpret what they say, however understanding what people mean when they use the language is not easy. Leech (as cited in Mey, 1993) considered that interpretation of what others utter involved guessing or forming hypothesis. Consequently, the probability to misinterpret what the speaker said is not zero. However, it does not mean that the conversation will not run smoothly because pauses often take place during conversation, during which we attempt to understand the real meaning of the utterances.

Mey (1993) differentiates implicature into conversational implicature and conventional implicature. The first one is directly related to what our utterances are within the conversation. This is to say that the implication is derived on the basis of conversational principles and assumptions, relying on more than the linguistic meaning of the sentence. Therefore, the response to the sentence is not always as what we may expect.

Example:

- 5) a. *Is there anything I can have for the dinner?*
- b. *There is a 24 hour restaurant near here.*

From the example we can see that the answer for 5a is neither *yes* (*there is*) nor *no* (*there is not*). The speaker (5a) does not ask whether there is any restaurant or not. However, the hearer (5b) informs the speaker about a restaurant, where the speaker can go instead of telling the availability of food for his/her dinner. From this conversation, it can be implied that there is no more food to eat so the hearer suggests going to the restaurant rather than answers *yes* or *no*. Another possibility is that the hearer produced his or her utterance unpleasantly because the speaker came too late.

Therefore, it is crucial to know the context of our conversation in order to be able to interpret the real meaning of utterances. In addition, depending on strict semantic and logical criteria only will not help us in interpreting the utterances. It is also very natural that we expect people to respond to our question or request. However their response will depend on their ability in interpreting our language production.

### **THE INTERACTION BETWEEN PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE AND GRAMMAR COMPETENCE**

Grammar is also a product of pragmatics due to frequent use of several expressions within pragmatic context. When these expressions are

accepted to be part of the ways to communicate within community, they may come into the processes of grammaticization and semanticization, which make those expressions become grammatical conventions (Ariel, 2008). Furthermore, Ariel (*ibid*) explained that those expressions are mostly collected as corpus and then become parts of standardized language we use as descriptive grammar. Therefore, it is not quite right to strictly separate grammar from pragmatics in teaching the language. As it is mentioned before, grammar is one product of pragmatic convention and pragmatics can also be influenced by the use of grammatical components.

When we want to communicate with our interlocutors, we need a string of words that are attached properly to each other so it can convey our message as we intend to. The hearer of our spoken language will also need several abilities to be able to interpret the message, explicitly and implicitly. Both speaker and listener process their procedures, which may be different from each other so that the communication can run well. The speaker will deal with how to encode the message and how to trigger the hearer's response, while the hearer will deal with the ability to decode the message and to draw the right inference from the decoded message (Ariel, 2008).

The message delivered by both the speaker and the hearer needs to be well constructed. In this case, forming the constructions of the message requires acceptable rules, which is exactly the role of grammar. Fried and Ostman (2005) view that grammar could be considered as a set of abstract structure to guide the construction of messages so that they are accepted. From grammar construction, the speaker delivers the message in a certain way that is, hopefully, will be understood by the hearer.

In Indonesia, based on some observations and interview with some English teachers, pragmatic competence is rarely taught. Therefore, for EFL learners in Indonesia, the use of proper sentence structure or grammatically correct sentence become the primary concern for promoting students' ability to communicate. This is because using correct grammar will help the speakers to deliver the real message or to show his or her understanding of the condition.

Example:

- 6) *Would you like some bread and cake or something? Have you eaten anything?*

The example 6 is intended to offer the hearer something to eat, which based on the speaker's observation, the hearer seems to be hungry or even starving. The present perfect tense is

used to show that the speaker seriously concerns the condition of the hearer and wonders; whether the hearer has eaten something yet on the day the conversation takes place, even though grammatically means something like "have you ever eaten anything in your life?" (Ariel, 2008).

## METHOD

This paper used qualitative approach, in which the data were gathered through in-depth interview. Previously, observation was conducted to several classrooms to get preliminary information concerning the English teaching and learning process. In the interview sheet, 5 short conversations and 5 discourse contexts were provided. The conversation part required the participants to give the expression based on the utterances from the speaker and the hearer. The discourse part required the participants to perform actions according to the given situation, which could be raising a question, giving a command or request. There were 10 students (5 male and 5 female) from 5 different schools around Jakarta. They were selected because they have more or less the same level of ability based on their teachers' observation. The data were analyzed descriptively while possible reasons for the responses provided by the participants were presented based

on some relevant reference. In addition, triangulation was also conducted through unstructured interview with the teacher and some of the students.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Concerning the conversation part, in the first question, the speaker asked "how are you?". From 10 EFL learners, 4 of them answered by explaining their condition and asking the speaker back (*I'm fine/good/very well, and you?*). Only two of them answered based on what their teacher taught them (*I'm fine thank you, and you?*). The previous response is not wrong, and is not considered as impolite either. However, saying "thank you" shows our gratitude directly to someone who care about how we are and it is likely that the speaker will feel how good our manner is. The other four students responded "great, thanks; splendid, you?; I am extra ordinary; I'm not fine", which probably because they refer the speaker as their close acquaintance. Again those answers cannot be considered as impolite, because it depends on the context or situation given.

Following the principles of grammar, saying *I'm fine*, which is a complete sentence will show a better condition compared to saying only *fine*. The speaker, as the hearer of such response (*fine*), will probably think one

of two probabilities. First, the speaker may believe that the hearer is really fine. Second, the speaker may feel that something wrong is happening behind the short answer as if the listener does not want to be bothered by other questions. Telling the learners the differences between full sentence and one word will be beneficial for them so they can use any of them accordingly.

In the second question in the conversation part, the instruction was to ask them to ask their friend to turn on the air conditioner because the weather was hot. Two of them directly said, "turn on the AC, please", which is not grammatically wrong. Pragmatically, it is also considered quite polite because even though they use imperative, they still use the polite marker, *please*. Moreover they ask their friends, who are supposed to be close to each other. However, different interaction situation or different interlocutor can have different interpretation because judging polite behavior is a subjective matter (Holmes, 2009). For instance, within our cultural context, it may be awkward if we ask a stranger or older people using imperative sentence.

Furthermore, one of the students said "can you turn on the AC?" which is grammatically correct. Yet, the hearer is likely to feel more appreciated if the speaker add a polite marker. The

absence of a polite marker in that sentence can also have different impressions, because the use of *can* also refers to ability or potentiality (Lock, 1996). In other words, in that sentence, someone can have an impression that the speaker is questioning the interlocutor's ability to turn on the AC. Another student gave a grammatically correct command rather than giving a request, *turn on the AC*. The hearer, even though cannot be generalized, may feel that he or she is less appreciated by that imperative utterance. The need to use polite markers to show politeness is to express our appreciation because we concern to save people's face (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and is important to keep a harmonious relationship. The rest of the students seemed to understand how to make polite requests by adding the polite marker *please* or *would/could* such as "*would/could you turn on the AC, please?*". The use of *would* or *could* will make the expression or the request less direct and more polite (Lock, 1996), and the combination with another politeness marker (*please*) can soften the directive intention from the speakers (Holmes, 2009).

However, one of the participants seemed to misunderstand the instruction. She responded in a way to offer rather than to request by saying "*would you like to turn the AC, please?*". It

is grammatically correct, yet based on context, it is not a request. Therefore, based on the students' responses, teaching pragmatic competence (politeness) embedded in grammar teaching (modal expressions) is crucial to avoid losing face of the hearer.

In the third question, the EFL learners were asked to make a request to borrow a pen from their friends. Two of them used a complete request form based on modal expressions that their teacher has taught them such as "*may/can I borrow your pen, please?*". Of course, there may be some arguments about the degree of politeness in using modal *may*, *can*, and *could* (Lock, 1996). However, due to the context given, the request was considered polite. Seven other students also used *may* and *can* as their request marker (*can/may I borrow your pen?*) but they do not add *please*. The degree of request between *may* and *can* as a request marker is different, where *may* is considered to be more polite rather than *can*. The different degree of politeness of both modal expressions may be due to their different degree of likelihood where the word *may* has a lower degree of likelihood (possibility) rather than the word *can* (potentiality) (Lock, *ibid*). The last student gave a kind of exaggerating request, which could be influenced by friendship context by saying "*would you mind if I borrow your pen for the rest of the*

*semester*". He seemed not to be serious in giving the request although the sentence cannot be considered as grammatically or pragmatically wrong.

Moving to the next part, which is discourse, one of the contexts was the presence of assistance in doing math homework and the question concerned the way to thank. One of the students only said, "thanks," which is actually a correct manner to thank to someone. However, the degree of difficulty of the action, which is more difficult than just passing the sugar from another friend across the table, requires more than just standard gratitude. It is important for us to be able to use appropriate expressions in thanking based on the discourse. Inappropriate utterances to show our appreciation will result in negative social consequences and damage the relationship (Liao, 2013). EFL teachers should teach their students which expressions to show or to deliver in which situations. The ability to show that we are grateful is crucial to maintain the solidarity among interlocutors and to promote social contact within the community (Liao, 2013).

The use of the expressions definitely will depend on who our interlocutors are, and how the expressions are used is based on the community or social convention (Held, 1999). Therefore, the degree of

politeness in expressing thanking between friends will somehow be different from expressing thanking to strangers (Liao, 2013). In this study, two of the students gave a well form gratitude which is only suitable for informal condition between friends, where one of them said "*you're my savior, thanks so so so so much*". This expression can be said exaggerating, yet when it is between close friends, it sounds alright. Other than the overuse of the adverb "so", the other parts are grammatically accepted. Another one said "*thanks a lot, man, I owe you big time*" which is acceptable between friends. Nevertheless, the second part, "*I owe you big time*" is rather awkward to be in this sentence. Instead, he could say, "*I owe you a big favor*", which may be more suitable for this context. Six other students showed a correct manner for this situation by saying "*thank you for your help*". Adding the sentence with "*I really appreciate it*" will likely make their friends who helped them feel more appreciated, which was indeed done by two of the participants. The first one said "*thank you for your help, I'm really suck at math*", which showed how he did not like math or how happy he was to get help on the subject that he considered difficult. The second one said "*thank you very much, I hope you get the highest score*", which possibly would make the helper smile.

From those expressions responded by the students, we can see how the relationship between the speaker and the hearer influence the way we produce our spoken language. Real life acts of speech usually involve interpersonal relations. A speaker does something with respect to an audience by saying certain words to that audience (Sadock, 2006). This gives another reason that pragmatic expressions should be taught implicitly or explicitly within the grammar teaching.

When we relate the pragmatic to grammar knowledge, we can take speech acts as an example to show the relationship (Deppermann, 2011). *Performative* sentences usually require the existence of a first person subject and a *performative* verb (Degand, 2009). It is also stated that *performative* sentences tend to use the simple present tense and are indicative because they are pronounced for the purpose of acting on a real situation (Degand, *ibid*). Therefore, *performative* sentences are usually not intended to say something that refers to the past events. In addition, Degand (*ibid*) also stated that the use of *performative* in a passive form is quite common.

There are five classes of performative verbs even though the distinction among them cannot clearly be stated (Austin, 1975). Those classes

are 1) verdictives (give a finding or verdict by someone who has the authority in doing something such as sentencing, pleading, judging, or pronouncing); 2) exercitives (the utterance given by someone who is exercising his or her power, right, or influence by giving sentence in appointing, advising, voting, ordering, etc.); 3) commissives (the sentence that requires us to do the action as we declared or as we intend such declaring, promising, announcing, etc.); 4) behabitives (the sentence that is related to social behavior like apologizing, challenging, congratulating, etc), and 5) expositives (where the utterances are intended to fit in a certain conversations or arguments).

The verb of action in utterances will need proper grammar forms so it will help the hearer to understand the speaker's intention better. This kind of speech acts is locutionary acts, which is "the act of using words to form sentences, those wording making sense in a language with correct grammar and pronunciation" (Degand, 2009). However, a locutionary acts is not necessarily a part, for it is actually a dimension within speech acts that cannot perform in isolation. A good or proper speech acts will require the use of linguistic ability (locution) in combination with communicative ability (illocution) and understanding

how to make the hearer understand the message (perlocution).

Therefore, for EFL learners, proper grammar sentence still become a reliable and an appropriate way to communicate properly. It is because grammar is still a main source in EFL learning to perform a recognizable social action (Deppermann, 2011) However, it does not mean that pragmatic competence cannot be taught. It can be embedded as the teacher teaches modal expressions or tenses.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The findings show that most of the participants were familiar with some types of pragmatic knowledge related to the expressions in greetings, command and request, and thanking, which are embedded within speaking activity and grammar teaching material. There is no such explicit statement that they learn pragmatics, yet they are asked to practice such utterances in proper way, both grammatically and politely. They learn some polite markers such as the use of *please, can you, could you, etc.*, in their grammar learning.

When it is related to linguistic competence, it seems that when EFL learners are required to produce some pragmatic expression in daily

communication, they are also suggested by their teachers to consider their interlocutors.. When they are given some situations that require them to express some utterances, some of them are able to use English linguistic expressions in appropriate manner, using polite marker or modal expressions.

Most of EFL learners still rely on the use of modal auxiliary to show the degree of politeness within their expressions. The second forms of modal is usually used to show a higher degree of politeness (would, could, might). The ability of EFL learners to use the proper expressions does not come from the teaching of pragmatics, but mostly from their grammar learning or from role play activities in the speaking part. Therefore, it can be concluded that with proper understanding of grammar use, to some extent, EFL learners can produce polite utterances properly in given situation.

This study gives some evidence that grammar teaching in EFL context can help the learners to produce communicative utterances. The teacher can also give the examples about how sentences, even though grammatically correct, can bring negative results if they are used in different conditions. However, to know a further relationship between grammar ability and pragmatic competence in EFL

context, it is necessary to conduct a deeper and more thorough research including a bigger scale participants and more advance research design.

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