



## Pragmatic awareness among Saudi EFL learners

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### Abstract

This study investigated the status of pragmatic awareness among Saudi EFL learners and the differences in pragmatic awareness between Saudi male and female EFL learners. The participants in the study consisted of 28 male and 28 female language learners whose proficiency levels ranged from intermediate to advanced. The instrument used for this study had two parts: the first section consisted of demographic questions and the second four sub-sections on language learners; language teachers; classmates; and learning institutes, course books, and exams. The findings of the study revealed that Saudi language learners had an average level of pragmatic awareness. There were no major gender differences in pragmatic awareness. The outcomes of this research will be of use to linguists, curriculum designers for foreign languages, foreign language instructors, and learners. Strengths and weaknesses are highlighted for different stakeholders to take action and create better English as a Foreign Language classroom environment and increase learners' pragmatic awareness.

*Keywords:* pragmatics; pragmatic awareness; EFL learners; gender; Saudi Arabia

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## 1. Introduction

For many years, learning another language has been limited to learning the grammar and vocabulary and pronunciation of that language (Mohammad-Bagheri, 2015). Over the years, however, language instructors and linguists have realized that learning a language requires more than being competent in its grammar rules or vocabulary and included the aspect of using the language in its social context. Thomas (1983/2006) described pragmatic competence as “the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand a language in context.” Hymes (1972) asserted that communicative ability in how language is used in various situations stands at the same level of importance as the linguistic competence of semantics, syntax, and phonology. Furthermore, Hymes added that children not only acquire linguistic knowledge of a language but also develop its uses in various contexts. Leech (1983) divided linguistics into grammar and pragmatics, thus highlighting the importance of pragmatic competence and its role in language learning. Bachman and Palmer (1996) view pragmatic knowledge as one area of language knowledge. They added that it focuses on “how utterances or sentences and texts are related to the communicative goals of the language user and to the feature of the language use setting” (p. 68). According to Kumaravadivelu,

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“communicative competence consists of grammatical competence as well as sociolinguistic competence, that is, factors governing successful communication” (2006, p. 9).

It may be said that pragmatic awareness refers to the terms of the knowledge received from instructors, textbooks, exams, and classmates. Even though the importance of pragmatics in English as a Foreign Language classes has been acknowledged, there is not enough focus on it in EFL curriculums. The consequences of this can be observed in communicative situations, when learners encounter difficulties in applying what they learned through the years, as noted by Mohammad-Bagheri (2015). This study investigates the pragmatic awareness of Saudi EFL learners and examines the differences in pragmatic awareness between Saudi male and female EFL learners. The findings of the current study will be of use to linguists, foreign language curriculum designers, foreign language instructors, and foreign language learners. It will provide further insight on the status of pragmatic awareness in English as a Foreign Language classes. Strengths and weaknesses will be highlighted for stakeholders to take action. It is essential to examine this area, especially in relation to Saudi EFL learners. Not much research has been conducted to explore the status of pragmatic awareness among Saudi EFL learners although it is as important as the other skills of language. It is also crucial to compare the results of male and female participants as they are segregated in the Saudi educational system. Thus, comparing results will provide a better understanding of whether this separation is leading to different pragmatic awareness levels between the two genders.

### *1.1. Research questions*

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the status of pragmatic awareness and instruction among Saudi EFL learners, in relation to the extent of pragmatic knowledge they possess and the extent of pragmatic knowledge they receive from their instructors, classmates, course books, and exams?
2. Are there any prominent differences in the pragmatic awareness possessed by male Saudi EFL learners and female Saudi EFL learners?

### *1.2. Literature Review*

As a subfield of linguistics, the term pragmatics refers to the use of language and factors that may affect how language is used, such as social or interpersonal dynamics (Takkaç Tulgar, 2016). This field was created at the end of the 1970s. Pragmatics is concerned with going beyond the meanings of words given in dictionaries. It connects the meanings of these words to “...the norms and conventions of a particular society, or context, in which conversation takes place” (Takkaç Tulgar, 2016, p. 10).

Similar earlier definitions have been presented by diverse scholars. Yule (1996), for example, described pragmatics as a study of contextual meaning. He also saw this as a study of what the speaker means. Richards and Schmidt (2002) regarded pragmatics as “the study of how speakers use and understand speech acts.”

The way a language produced and perceived is strongly linked to pragmatics. Kasper (1993) stated that pragmatics is “the study of people’s comprehension and production of linguistic action in context” (p. 3). There are different aspects to pragmatics. Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor (2003) discussed speech acts, conversations, aspects related to sociolinguistics, and discourse organization. Austin (1962) explained speech acts as expressions that represent psychological states and added that they represent involvement in social interactions.

### 1.3. *Teaching pragmatics*

The importance of teaching pragmatics derived from pragmatic failure among foreign language learners, as Murray (2009) illustrated. Eslami-Rasekh (2005) also emphasized the importance of the teacher's role in teaching pragmatics. Having excellent grammatical competence does not mean that the learner is pragmatically competent, which results in pragmatic errors (Takkaç Tulgar, 2016). One approach to teaching the pragmatics of a foreign language is to raise awareness. This approach may not directly impart pragmatic knowledge per se, but it makes the learner conscious of the differences between their native language and the language being learned (Rose, 1994). Schmidt (1993) highlighted that learner awareness of pragmatic input is considered part of the process of acquiring and developing pragmatic competence. Foreign language teachers tend to focus more on grammatical competence and less on pragmatic competence (Jianda, 2007). Ögeyik, Aslan, Kondal, and Guvendir (2015) contended that this is because foreign language teachers often do not possess adequate knowledge about the target language and its accompanying culture. They also added that explicit and implicit instructions in foreign language pragmatic learning have the positive effect of raising learners' awareness of interactional behavior in an appropriate manner. Further, Olshtain and Blum-Kulka (1985) stated that communicative competence is now measured because there is a focus on it in many modern language programs and that the comprehension of different speech acts is the essence of pragmatic competence.

### 1.4. *Pragmatics and materials for English Language Teaching*

Pragmatic competence is considered an essential aspect of foreign-language teaching. Weak pragmatic competence can result in communication failures (Shi, 2014). Thus, one can conclude that it is important to have an EFL curriculum that covers pragmatics. Eisenchlas (2011) stated that, even though the importance of pragmatic competence is known to many, there is still a need to incorporate pragmatics more actively in language education.

Teachers and teaching materials are components of a teaching context. Essential teaching materials include books, pictures, video, and audio. Textbooks are considered the main source of teaching in the EFL and ESL contexts (Ögeyiket al., 2015). However, Bardovi-Harlig (2001) argued that for language learners in a classroom, textbooks are not a reliable source of pragmatic knowledge. This point is generally agreed upon by researchers, underlining the need for materials that can fill the gaps left by textbooks (Boxer & Pickering, 1995, p. 56).

### 1.5. *Studies on the pragmatic awareness of EFL learners*

Realizing the importance of pragmatic awareness, researchers have conducted numerous studies on it. Martínez-Flor and Alcón Soler (2007) observed the development of a pragmatic awareness of suggestion in EFL classes, focusing on the effects of instructions. The objective was to investigate the effects of teaching using explicit and implicit approaches. The participants in this research were EFL learners, who were divided into three groups. Group A, consisting of 24 participants, and focused on raising awareness and production tasks. They received metapragmatic explanations of explicit suggestions. Group B, consisting of 25 participants, was instructed on how to use suggestions with input enhancement and recast strategies. Group C, consisting of 32 participants, was the control group and did not have any instructions on how to use their suggestions. The researchers administered a pre-test and post-test to examine the awareness levels of the participants vis-à-vis the suggestions they had received. The findings revealed that implicit and explicit instructions had a positive impact on learners' pragmatic awareness concerning suggestions.

Nipaspong and Chinokul (2010) examined the impact of explicit feedback and prompt feedback in increasing the pragmatic awareness of EFL learners. They were examined for the use of refusal expressions. There were 39 participants in this study. It consisted of one control group and two experimental groups. Each group comprised of 13 participants. A pre-test, post-test, and interviews were conducted. The application took 10 weeks to complete. Findings from the qualitative data and multiple-choice tests showed that the pragmatic awareness of the participants improved significantly. This was more the case in the group that had received prompt feedback than in the other two groups. The researcher related this finding to the "...demand for learners to generate repairs and its provision of more opportunities for learners' uptake" (Nipaspong & Chinokul, 2010, p. 101).

Mohammad-Bagheri (2015) investigated Iranian learners' pragmatic awareness. The purpose of his study was to investigate whether EFL learners think they glean their pragmatic knowledge from teachers, classmates, exams, or course-books. The study also examined gender differences in EFL pragmatic awareness. The findings of this study revealed that Iranian EFL learners were conscious of the importance of pragmatic knowledge. They also showed that Iranian EFL learners did not gain sufficient pragmatic knowledge from their teachers. They believed that pragmatic knowledge was not available in their course books, or tests in their exams or interactions with classmates. The results also show that there were differences between genders in pragmatic awareness. His results revealed that female participants performed better in the first two parts (language learners and language teachers). However, there were no significant differences between the results of both groups in the third and fourth parts of the questionnaire (classmates and learning institutes, and course books and exams).

Li et al. (2015) investigated the pragmatic competence of Chinese EFL learners. The study focused on the production and awareness of pragmatic competence. Data were gathered using three instruments: a written discourse completion task, a multiple-choice discourse completion task, and a retrospective interview. Eighty-five students who majored in English participated in the study. The findings revealed that Chinese EFL learners were able to recognize and create utterances that were appropriate from a contextual point of view. It also showed that there was a correlation between pragmatic awareness and production. The data also revealed that Chinese participants attempted to respect power differentials in situations where they were aware of the social status of the interlocutor. The difficulties they faced were in the usage of linguistic features and appropriate strategies to achieve the intended communication. The researchers also pointed out that participants found it difficult to grasp different strategies and forms of linguistics and the meanings intended. They concluded that the pragmatic competence of Chinese EFL learners was influenced by their culture and language and that there was a need for pragmatic instruction for EFL learners.

This study will contribute to the understanding of EFL learners' pragmatic awareness in the context of Saudi Arabia. It also aims to investigate the differences in pragmatic awareness between Saudi male and female EFL learners. It will be beneficial to foreign language learners, language instructors, and curriculum designers.

## **2. Method**

### *2.1. Participants*

The participants in this study were 56 intermediate to advanced university EFL learners, consisting of 28 males and 28 females. Their ages ranged from 20 to 23 years. Language learners were chosen on the basis of their language proficiency levels. Only those possessing intermediate language proficiency at an advanced level were chosen. The Princess Nourahbint Abdulrahman University Institutional Review Board approved this study. Students were assured that participation was voluntary, and this was clearly stated in the information sheet presented to them. This was also emphasized orally by the

researcher before the data collection began. The students were notified that their participation was anonymous.

## 2.2. Instrument and Procedure

The instrument is comprised of two sections. The first section consists of demographic questions and the second part consists of four sections: (1) language learners, (2) language teachers, (3) classmates and learning institutes, and (4) course books and exams. These four sections are further subdivided into 24 items. Items 1–9 belonged to component (1), which focused on examining learners' pragmatic awareness and knowledge. Items 10–15 belonged to component (2), which examined how much focus is given, from the learner's perspective, to pragmatics in teaching or in the form of assessment activities. Items 16–19 belonged to component (3), which aimed to examine the receiving and giving of pragmatic feedback and the extent to which learners' classmates value pragmatics. Items 20–24 belonged to component (4), which aimed to understand how learners felt about the incorporation of pragmatics in course books and exams.

This instrument was adopted from Mohammad-Bagheri (2015) with slight modifications to make it relevant to the context of Saudi students. Participants had to select an option from a five-point Likert scale. The scale ranged from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” The findings were interpreted as low if the mean score was between 1 and 2, average if the mean score was between 2 and 3.5, and high if the mean score was between 3.5 and 5. A calculation was performed for the mean of both genders to answer the second research question if there were any substantial differences between the pragmatic awareness of Saudi male and female learners.

## 2.3. Pilot Study

A pilot study was carried out to ensure the feasibility of the instrument. It was conducted with the participation of 20 members of the same target group. The participants did not face any difficulties in answering the questions. The validity of the questionnaires was also considered in this study. They were administered to colleagues for their comments and feedback. The reliability of the questionnaire was confirmed.

## 3. Results

Table 1, which provides the maximum, minimum, standard deviation, and mean of the questionnaire components, shows that the language learners component had the highest mean, which was 3.85, meaning that their pragmatic awareness was high. The second highest mean was for the language teacher component. It was 3.48, meaning that the level of pragmatic awareness for language teachers was average. The course books and exams component had the third highest mean of 3.29, which is average. The component with the lowest mean was the one concerned with classmates and institutes. The mean was 2.92, which is also average.

**Table 1.** Maximum, minimum, standard deviation and mean of questionnaire components

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Component 1	56	3.85	0.57	2.00	4.89
Component 2	56	3.48	0.90	1.67	4.83
Component 3	56	2.92	1.01	1.00	5.00
Component 4	56	3.29	0.64	1.40	5.00
Total	56	3.38	0.78	1.52	4.93

Table 2 presents the mean of each item in the four components of the questionnaire. For component 1, it can be observed that item 2 had the highest mean of 4.11, which is considered a high pragmatic awareness. This item asked about the importance of pragmatic competence for learners. Conversely, item 9 had the lowest mean of 3.54. This item asked about the extent to which exams should test the pragmatic competence of the language learner.

For items 10–15, which belonged to component 2, item 15 had the lowest mean of 3.04. It was concerned with asking language teachers inquiries about pragmatic concerns; as in how to construct an appropriate request. The highest mean associated with component 2 belonged to item 13, which had a mean score of 3.77. This item was concerned with the correction of the pragmatic errors of language learners by their language teachers.

The lowest mean among the items of component 3 was 2.73, which belonged to item 18. This item was concerned with the conversation of the language learner and his/her classmates to recognize the pragmatic features presented in their course book. Item 19 had the highest mean of 3.14. It asked about pragmatic competence as a factor in successful language learning by classmates.

The highest mean among the items under component 4 was 3.61, which belonged to item 20. This item was concerned with whether the exercises in the course book contributed to pragmatic competence. Item 23 had the lowest score of 2.86. It was concerned with the evaluation of pragmatic competence in the exams of their institute/university.

**Table 2.** Maximum, minimum, standard deviation and mean of items 1-24

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Item 1	56	3.91	0.92	1	5
Item 2	56	4.11	0.89	1	5
Item 3	56	3.61	0.82	1	5
Item 4	56	3.84	0.80	2	5
Item 5	56	4.05	0.88	1	5
Item 6	56	3.98	0.82	2	5
Item 7	56	3.82	0.77	2	5
Item 8	56	3.75	0.88	2	5
Item 9	56	3.54	1.03	1	5
Item 10	56	3.43	1.01	1	5
Item 11	56	3.45	1.25	1	5
Item 12	56	3.77	1.03	2	5
Item 13	56	3.77	1.03	2	5
Item 14	56	3.41	1.23	1	5
Item 15	56	3.04	1.32	1	5
Item 16	56	2.98	1.14	1	5
Item 17	56	2.80	1.33	1	5
Item 18	56	2.73	1.30	1	5

Item 19	56	3.14	1.03	1	5
Item 20	56	3.61	0.87	1	5
Item 21	56	3.59	0.89	1	5
Item 22	56	3.23	1.06	1	5
Item 23	56	2.86	1.17	1	5
Item 24	56	3.14	0.98	1	5

To conclude whether there were any significant differences between the pragmatic awareness possessed by Saudi EFL male learners and female learners, a calculation was performed for the mean of the female and male language learners. The data, presented in Table 3, were initially subject statistics that were descriptive. The questionnaire consisted of four components.

The data revealed the following:

1. The pragmatic awareness of male and female participants in relation to component 1 was high, with male participants displaying a slightly higher level of awareness (3.90) than female participants (3.79).
2. Saudi male EFL learners had higher pragmatic awareness, with a mean of 3.52, in relation to component 2. Here, Saudi female EFL learners had an average pragmatic awareness, with a mean of 3.43.
3. Both male and female Saudi EFL learners had an average level of pragmatic awareness in relation to component 3 (2.96 and 2.87, respectively).
4. Both male and female learners had an average level of pragmatic awareness in relation to component 4. Here, male Saudi learners possessed a slightly lower level of awareness (3.17) than female learners (3.40).
5. As for the overall mean of the four components of the questionnaire, the data revealed that both female and male Saudi EFL learners shared an average level of pragmatic awareness (3.37 and 3.39 respectively).

**Table 3.** Mean and Standard Deviation for Saudi male and female EFL learners

		N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error
Component 1	Female	28	3.79	.68	.13
	Male	28	3.90	.44	.08
	Total	56	3.85	.57	.08
Component 2	Female	28	3.43	.86	.16
	Male	28	3.52	.95	.18
	Total	56	3.48	.90	.12
Component 3	Female	28	2.87	.79	.15
	Male	28	2.96	1.21	.23
	Total	56	2.92	1.01	.14
Component 4	Female	28	3.40	.67	.13
	Male	28	3.17	.61	.11
	Total	56	3.29	.64	.09

	Female	28	3.37	.54	.10
Total	Male	28	3.39	.61	.11
	Total	56	3.38	.57	.11

To determine if there were substantial differences between male and female participants in their pragmatic awareness status, t-tests were used. The results of the t-tests, presented in Table 4, confirmed that there were no significant differences between Saudi male and female EFL learners in any of the components. The value of T was .437, meaning that the level of significance was higher than .05 ( $p > .05$ ). The t-test for component 2, which was concerned with the language teacher, showed that there were no significant differences between the genders, as the t-test value was .695 ( $p > .05$ ). The t-test value for component 3, which focused on classmates and institutes, was .721, showing that there was no significant difference ( $p > .05$ ). The t-test value for the last component of the questionnaire was .186, meaning that there was no significant difference ( $p > .05$ ).

**Table 4.** T-test results for Saudi male and female EFL learners' performance

		Equality of Variances Test by Levene		Equality of Means t-test				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Component 1	EVA	4.58	.037	-.783	54.00	.437	-.119	.152
	EVNA			-.783	46.13	.438	-.119	.152
Component 2	EVA	0.90	.347	-.394	54.00	.695	-.095	.242
	EVNA			-.394	53.40	.695	-.095	.242
Component 3	EVA	6.40	.014	-.359	54.00	.721	-.098	.273
	EVNA			-.359	46.38	.721	-.098	.273
Component 4	EVA	0.08	.783	1.338	54.00	.186	.229	.171
	EVNA			1.338	53.44	.187	.229	.171

#### 4. Discussion

The findings of the current study are presented as answers to the research questions mentioned earlier. The first research question investigated the status of pragmatic awareness and instruction among Saudi EFL learners in relation to the extent of pragmatic knowledge they possessed and the extent to which they received pragmatic knowledge from their instructors, classmates, and course books and exams. The finding of this study shows that the pragmatic status of Saudi EFL learners was average. However, it is close to 3.5. This reveals that Saudis are aware of the significance of pragmatic awareness in their communication. The language learner and the language teacher were the two components of the questionnaire that possessed high pragmatic awareness. On the other hand, course books and exams, as well as classmates and institutes, received average pragmatic status.

Bardovi-Harlig (2001) argues that textbooks used in language classrooms are not considered a dependable source of pragmatic input. Similarly, Vellenga (2004) declares that textbooks do not have adequate “metapragmatic explanations” to increase students’ understanding of pragmatic issues. Others also stress that language textbooks have limited information on second language pragmatics, absence of clear conversational norms, and unauthentic use of language materials (Wong, 2001; Diepenbroek and Derwing, as cited in Abe and Suezawa, 2018). Abe and Suezawa (2018) emphasized that even advanced English language learners lacked pragmatic awareness of speech acts as a result of the deficiency in successful classroom instruction and material.

The second research question explored whether there were any prominent dissimilarities in pragmatic awareness between Saudi EFL male and female language learners. It was revealed that both male and female participants shared a high level of pragmatic awareness in relation to the language learner component, that male participant had a high level of pragmatic awareness in relation to component 2, while the pragmatic awareness of female participants was average, and that both groups possess an average level of awareness for components 3 and 4. The overall pragmatic awareness for all four components for both genders was average, with very slight differences.

The results of the t-test also confirmed that there were no gender differences in the status of pragmatic awareness in relation to the four components. Other studies investigating gender differences in Saudi Arabia in relation to one of the pragmatic aspects was the study conducted by Hariri (2016). She investigated thanking strategies in Saudi academic emails. She explored the role of gender and the status of the email sender on the variation of gratitude expressions. Her results revealed that females used thanking strategies more than males, and each group expressed these differently. As previously mentioned, Mohammad-Bagheri (2015) also explored the differences in pragmatic awareness between Iranian male and female participants. His results revealed that there were no major variances between the results of both groups in the third and fourth parts of the questionnaire, similar to the results of this study. However, female participants performed better in the first two parts.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study explored the status of pragmatic awareness among Saudi EFL learners. It also aimed to investigate the differences in pragmatic awareness between Saudi male and female EFL learners. The findings revealed that Saudi language learners had an average level of pragmatic awareness and that there were no variances in the pragmatic awareness of Saudi male and female language learners. The implications of these findings will prove beneficial to linguists, foreign language curriculum designers, foreign language instructors, and foreign language learners, by making them conscious of the parts of foreign language learning and education that need to be given consideration. Further efforts should be put together to increase EFL learners’ level of pragmatic awareness. Instructors should raise learners’ awareness to the importance of pragmatic knowledge and encourage group and pair work to emphasize this. Exams should also include questions to measure their pragmatic competence. The findings of this study also indicate that learners’ pragmatic awareness through the use of course books and exams was not high. Curriculum designers should design course books with sufficient activities and explanations to increase learners’ pragmatic competence. Further tools should also be provided by universities/institutes to facilitate teaching pragmatic competence.

The limitations of this study are that a larger sample size might provide a better understanding of the status of pragmatics among Saudi English language learners. In addition, measuring pragmatic awareness is difficult, so different indirect tools can be used to generate detailed data concerning pragmatic awareness.

Further research could investigate different age groups and look into the effects of participants' social backgrounds. Finally, further research could be done using different instruments and comparing the results with those found in this study.

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