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**NAVIGATING PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE OF PAKISTANI EFL
LEARNERS' FACE-THREATENING ACTS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY**

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Abstract

Realization of face-threatening acts (FTAs) is a Herculean task for EFL/ESL because it involves understanding the intricacies of politeness and social norms of the target language. The focus of the present study is to assess the pragmatic competence of Pakistani English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners in realizing FTAs such as ordering, suggesting, and advising. The study utilized a qualitative research design. The researchers, by employing purposive sampling technique, involved BS English novices (n=60) studying in three public-sector colleges in Lahore. The data were collected with the help of the Discourse Completion Task (DCT). The data were analyzed qualitatively through a content analysis approach. The analyzed data suggested that Pakistani EFL learners showed an understanding of FTAs. Pakistani L2 learners struggle with pragmatic competence, with directness, politeness, and mitigation devices lacking. The study had academic and pedagogical ramifications.

Key words: Pragmatic competence, face-threatening acts, politeness, discourse completion task, Pakistani EFL learners

Introduction

The English language's global spread is attributed to factors such as the British Empire's expansion, the United States' rise to power, advancements in communication technologies, and globalization. As a worldwide lingua franca, English is considered a prevailing language, making effective communication more challenging in today's rapidly evolving world. Effective communication in the English language is challenging for non-native speakers, who interact with diverse individuals from different backgrounds and cultures. This involves acquiring English as an L2, understanding, and being understood at the interface. Effective communication involves



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form-function-context mapping, making it a complex phenomenon. To overcome this complexity, pragmatic competence is essential, especially in pragmatics.

Pragmatic competence is the ability to use language effectively and decipher meanings in context. It involves functional and sociolinguistic knowledge, as well as cognitive processes. Culpeper et al. (2018) emphasize the importance of understanding learners' meaning negotiation and production in social settings. This research study focuses on pragmatic competence, focusing on production as a central aspect. Thomas (1983) defines pragmatic failure as the inability to comprehend the meaning of words, distinguishing it from grammatical errors. Pragmatic competence involves probable rules, unlike prescriptive rules. Pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failures are two categories of pragmatic failures, as they fail to achieve the speaker's intended purpose. It is not possible to say a speech act is erroneous.

Pakistani college-level English language learners often struggle with recognizing face-threatening speech acts in English, leading to misunderstandings and communication breakdowns. While previous studies (Alcon 2001; Alfghe & Mohammadezadeh 2010; Anwar et al. 2020; Anwar & Kamran 2021; Banerjee & Carrel 1988; Heidari-Shahreza 2013) have examined the pragmatic appropriateness of Iranian and Pakistani L2 learners in realizing order acts, suggestion acts and advice acts in different settings, there is a lack of research specifically investigating the pragmatic competence of Pakistani English Language Learners (ELLs) in realizing FTAs. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the pragmatic competence of Pakistani college-level ELLs in realizing speech acts of order, advice, and suggestion. The objective of the study is to assess the pragmatic competence of Pakistani English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners in realizing FTAs such as ordering, suggesting, and advising. This research helps address the gap in understanding the pragmatic competence of Pakistani ELLs in realizing FTAs and improve their communication skills.

Literature Review

Liu (2004) defines pragmatic competence by stating that it consists of two components i.e. knowledge of a pragmatic system and knowledge of its proper use. The former may be termed as pragmalinguistic knowledge while the latter may be called sociopragmatic knowledge. According to Yule (1996) a face is threatened when someone says something that threatens the expectations of another person about one's self image. In other words, an FTA is an action that gauges the desires of either the speaker or the hearer. According to Brown & Levinson (1987) FTA may endanger the faces of any interlocutors and pose a threat to a person's positive or negative image. The speech acts such as request, order, refuse, advise, and suggest are highly face threatening.



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Torghabeh and Rabieefar's (2015) study examined the pragmatic appropriateness of non-native Iranian learners in realizing order acts. They used a DCT to collect data from 150 participants in Iran and the US, revealing similarities and variances in passing orders, with both speakers employing similar strategies but at different frequencies. Anwar et al. (2020) studied the pragmatic competence of native speakers and Pakistani English learners (PELs) in ordering directives. The study used a quantitative approach and DCT to gather data from 80 participants. Results showed PELs had less appropriateness in directives, were more direct in passing orders, and used less mitigation devices against native speakers.

Rintell (1979) found Spanish ESL learners use deferent languages in request and suggestion speech acts. Banerjee and Carrell (1988) found Americans suggest more frequently, while non-native Chinese are more direct. Alcon (2001) found Spanish suggestions need pedagogical intervention, and Li's (2010) found Cantonese learners use similar strategies but have intricate sentence structures. Research by Heidari-Shahreza (2013) and Pishghadam and Sharafadini (2011) found significant variances in pragmatic semantic formulas in suggestion acts of 30 Americans and 30 Iranian novices in English and Persian. They also found that Persian native speakers used interrogative forms, conditional forms, to-clauses, and imperative strategies, while English native speakers used let's and pseudo-cleft strategies. Anwar and Kamran's (2021) study found Pakistani English language learners (PELs) less pragmatically competent, using direct strategies like performative verbs and imperatives. Native speakers used indirect strategies more frequently. Alfghe and Mohammadzadeh's (2021) study on Libyan Arab EFL undergraduates found both groups used direct strategies for suggestion acts, with gender differences observed.

Hinkel's (1979) cross-cultural study analyzed the production of advice acts by Chinese and American speakers. It aimed to identify variances in appropriateness and differences in research tools like DCTs and multiple-choice questionnaires. The study found that English natives used direct and hedged advice acts, while Chinese respondents used indirect strategies or nothing. Martinez-Flor's (2003) study analyzed the production of advice acts by 232 non-native speakers from two proficiency levels: university and secondary school. The study found that higher proficiency groups performed better and used more appropriate advice acts and modification devices. However, both groups used strategies not found in the taxonomy model, possibly due to pragmatic transfer. Widiana et al. (2017) investigated advice-giving semantic formulas in two different cultures, Japanese and American, in the domain of friendship. Anwar and Kamran's (2021) study analyzed advice acts in Pakistani English language learners compared to native speakers. The study found that Pakistani English learners (PELs) were less pragmatically competent, using direct strategies like imperatives and negative imperatives. Native speakers used



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indirect and non-conventionalized indirect strategies more frequently, and used mitigation devices more frequently than non-natives. The research used a quantitative research method.

Conclusively, the review of the past literature suggests that there is hardly any study triggering the pragmatic competence of Pakistani L2 learners in realizing FTAs namely ordering, suggesting and advising as target features in a single study. Although (Anwar et al. 2020 and Torghabeh and Rabieefar 2015) examined pragmatic appropriateness of Iranian and Pakistani L2 learners in realizing order acts, (Alcon 2001; Alfghe & Mohammadezadeh 2021; Anwar & Kamran 2021; Banerjee & Carrell, 1988; Heidari-Shahreza 2013; Li 2010; Pishghadam & Sharadini 2011; Rintell 1979; Yildiz, 2020) analyzed the pragmatic ability of L2 learners in terms of realizing suggestion acts in different contexts, and (Anwar et al. 2020; Hinkel 1979; Martinez-Flor 2003; Widiani et al. 2017) inspected the pragmatic appropriateness of learners belonging to different settings in realizing advice acts yet such a study deems pertinent as examine the overall pragmatic ability of learners to perform FTAs.

Research Methods

The study utilized a qualitative research design. The researchers, by employing purposive sampling technique, involved BS English novices (n=60) studying in three public-sector colleges of Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan. The samples were (n=20) each from Govt. Graduate College of Science, Wahdat Road Lahore (GGCS), Govt. MAO Graduate College, Lahore (GMAOGC) and Govt. Islamia Graduate College, Civil Lines (GIGCCL). The data were collected with the help of the Discourse Completion Task (DCT) having hypothetical constructs asking participants to realize order, advise and suggest in various scenarios. The data were analyzed through three different coding frameworks namely directness and indirectness adapted from Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1981), modification strategies adapted from (Edmondson (1981), House & Kasper (1981) and Edmondson & House (1989) and a rating scale, with components such as formality, informality, amount of information, correctness and relevance, adapted from previous research studies such as Cohen (1994), North (2000), and Taguchi (2006). The data were analyzed qualitatively through a content analysis approach.

Analysis and Discussion

The qualitative analysis of the strategies used against DCTs by respondents helped determine how the strategies were used in terms of directness, politeness, and formality.



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Directness and Indirectness

The 1380 responses of the participants against DCTs were also analyzed qualitatively to acquire deeper insights. The responses were analyzed through a content analysis approach. The responses indicated that the respondents, while using FTAs, remained direct most of the time. However, sometimes they responded in an indirect way. The direct responses have been reproduced here. Statements showing directness in them are as follows:

Get up and clean your room immediately. (Order 8: GGCS 13)

Colleagues! **Mark** the sheets in time. (Order: GGCS 15)

What a mess, **clean it**. (Order 1: GIGCCL 8)

Pay proper attention in marking papers. (Advice: GGCS 14)

Keep social distancing. (Advice 10: GGCS 12)

Kindly **mark** the sheets. (Advice 11: GIGCCL 7)

The statements given above belong to *mood-derivable* strategies. The strategy has been used in different ways. Orders have been given in brief sentences. Another direct strategy used most of the time was the *explicit performative* strategy. The sentences reflecting this strategy are:

I will **suggest** him to have tea and think about the solution of this problem. (Suggestion 4: GGCS 1)

I will **order** him to clean it also says him cleanliness is good for health. (Order 1: GGCS 1)

I should **advise** them to become responsible student and advise them to submit assignments within due date. (Advice 7: GGCS 6)

Once I will **suggest** him then if he can't accept my suggestion then he will do this, because he is not closed to me so, I have no right on him. (Suggestion 5: GMAOGC 15)

Yes I will **advise** him to maintain social distancing because it is necessary for all of us against COVID 19. (Advice 10: GMAOGC 15)

I would **tell** the constructor to pick up this bricks because they blocked the path so removed it from here please. (Order 8: GIGCCL 3)



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Apart from *mood-derivable* and *explicit performative* strategies, *declarative* strategies in realizing the FTAs were also mostly employed. But this strategy was used in cases of advice, not for ordering and suggesting. For example:

*Listen to me boy I think it **should** be your first priority to be courteous with your customers to be cool.* (Advice 11: GGCS 9)

*Yes he **should** follow the legal patterns n laws for the safe side.* (Advice 8: GMAOGC 10)

*You **must** follow the SOPs strictly dear.* (Advice 10: GGCS 19)

*You **must** follow guidelines given in the map to make building.* (Advice 8: GIGCCL 4)

Mitigation Strategies

The content analysis of the data suggested that Pakistani English language learners not only used fewer mitigation devices but also responded less politely most of the time. Such responses have been reproduced below:

***What the hell** are you doing! **Go and check** the patient immediately. Are you not seeing him moaning with pain?* (Order: GGCS 7)

*Labour **why the hell** you are doing this. **Stop mounding** these bricks in front of my house.* (Order: GMAOGC 2)

***What a mess, clean** it.* (Order 1: GIGCCL 8)

***Remove** the bricks **immediately**.* (Order 8: GGCS 4)

*Nurse, urgently **check** the patient condition because it is my order to you.* (Order 5: GGCS 17)

*Smoking is bad for health so **don't do** this act. **It's immoral**.* (Suggestion 2: GIGCCL 1)

The examples given above clearly reflect impoliteness. The words "*what the hell*", "*why the hell*", and "*what a mess*" show limited knowledge of mitigation devices and their use on the part of the respondents.

Rating Scale

The researchers adapted the appropriateness rating scale, having contents such as formality, informality, amount of information, correctness and relevance, to qualitatively gauge the responses of the participants. The analysis of the responses is as follows:

Formality and Informality

In order to be pragmatically appropriate, one needs to be formal. One should use language according to the rate of imposition, status, age, gender, and so on. Most of the respondents of the



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current investigation were found to be deficient in bringing formality to their statements. Some of the informal sentences have been represented below:

*Show me your license and ID card. **Who are you? Don't you know** about traffic rules? (Order: GGCS 2)*

*Look students **you guys** are doing great work but **you guys** are working way too slow. Project submission date is close. So work fast and complete you project as soon as possible. (Order 2: GIGCCL 1)*

*Excuse me please! I think **you guys** are not marking the papers in time. Try to mark them well in time. (Order 11: GIGCCL 6)*

The instances given above do not follow the norms of formality and informality. In utterance, a traffic warden is not acquainted with the driver, so he should have used formal language. But the words like “*Who are you? Don't you know traffic rules?*” show that he is trying to be informal. The same is the case with the rest of the utterances. The words “*you guys*” make the utterances informal. Though formal utterances needed to be produced in these situations.

It was also observed that Pakistani ELLs not only remained informal in their responses but also used slang expressions in most of their responses. Some sentences showing slang expressions have been reproduced as follows:

***Just chill Dad**, he would himself be responsible for his deeds. Let's have some tea and forget about him. (Suggestion: GGCS 2)*

***Hey!** Do it fast. You are doing very slow. (Order: GGCS 11)*

***Hey**, hurry up check the patient status hurry up, hurry up. (Order: GMAOGC 4)*

As seen in the above examples, instead of taking care of formality and informality and using language according to the context, slang expressions have been used. The words like “*Just chill, Dad*” and “*Hey*” show that speakers tried to be informal in situations where they needed to be formal.

Amount of Information

Another important component of the rating scale was the amount of information in the response. The current data reflected that most of the responses of Pakistani ELLs had less information in them. The following responses prove this point:



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If I know him I'll suggest him. (Suggestion 5: GGCS 3)

Remove the bricks immediately. (Order: GGCS 4)

Remove the bricks quickly. (Order: GGCS 12)

Yes I need to order him. (Order: GGCS 1)

Keep social distancing. (Advice 10: GGCS 12)

Nurse check him. (Order: GMAOGC 5)

Kindly mark the sheets. (Advice 11: GIGCCL 7)

Complete your work. (Order: GMAOGC 9)

What a mess, clean it. (Order 1: GIGCCL 8)

Let's go somewhere. (Suggestion 3: GIGCCL 11)

The above examples reflect limited linguistic ability because the speech acts have been uttered in too few words. No strategy has been used.

Correctness and Relevance

For a response to be appropriate, it is imperative that it is correct and can be accepted as relevant. The current data had several such sentences that are incorrect and cannot be accepted as better responses. The following sentences exemplify this case:

Yes, I will go with him and take a coffee. (Suggestion 3: GGCS 3)

Relax dad. He will realize his mistake. Give him some time. (Suggestion 4: GGCS 12)

See your license and ID card for inspection immediately. (Order: GGCS 16)

I'll let him by the expensive one. (Suggestion 5: GMAOGC 13)

No, I am not directly advised him I will inform his boss because his boss has right on him. (Advice 11: GMAOGC 15)

Let's watch new drama on you tube and spend this bore time. (Suggestion 3: GIGCCL 5)

Let's go somewhere. (Suggestion 3: GIGCCL 11)

The above-mentioned responses are either irrelevant or incorrect. The first two utterances, for example, are highly irrelevant. The speaker in this case needed to suggest his father to take tea, but in the first utterance, "coffee" has been suggested, while in the second instance, no such suggestion has been made. The fourth utterance shows a morphological error or mistake where the word "by" has been used instead of "buy". Likewise, the expression "No, I am not directly advising him" in the fifth sentence is not taken as accurate.

Besides incorrect responses, the data abound in incorrect structures showing either syntactic or grammatical errors. The following sentences have been reproduced as a reference.



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*Oh babysitter, you are ordered **do not allow child to watch TV until he completed** his work.*
(Order GGCS 4)

*If **we don't** do our job truthfully than **we might** kill **their** dreams.* (Order 11: GIGCCL 2)

*I **made it clear yourself** about that report which I asked you to type it i need it today not tomorrow Get it done urgently.* (Order 4: GIGCCL 7)

*I would tell the constructor to pick **up this bricks** because they blocked the path so removed it from here please.* (Order 8: GIGCCL 3)

*First of all **I will asked** herself that if **he have** any problem then shared it with free of mind or any depression he will easily concentrate into him work.* (Order 11: GGCS 9)

The above sentences reflect grammatical inaccuracies. It has been observed that grammatical rules have not been followed while responding to different situations. The utterances, for example "you are ordered to not allow a child to watch TV until he completes his work", "If we don't do our job, we might kill their dreams", "I will ask..." prove the point.

Hence, the qualitatively analyzed data of this part of the study suggested that the majority of Pakistani L2 learners' responses were found to be deficient in realizing FTAs. The majority of the respondents employed direct strategies, namely *imperative or mood-derivable* and *scope-stating* for order acts, *imperative* and *declarative* for suggestion acts, and *declarative, imperative, or mood-derivable* and *explicative performative* for advice acts. The data also suggested that Pakistani ELLs employed fewer mitigation devices in their responses. The majority of the responses had a lesser amount of information in them. There were several responses that were either unacceptable or syntactically incorrect. A large number of responses lacked formality. At times, some responses were given in slang. The results of the current study are supportive of the findings of the previous research studies (Alcon 2001; Alfghe & Mohammadezadeh 2010; Anwar et al. 2020; Anwar & Kamran 2021; Banerjee & Carrel 1988; Heidari-Shahreza 2013). There may be different reasons for the pragmatic deficiencies of L2 learners in realizing FTAs, such as L1 transfer, little cultural or contextual knowledge of the target language, little focus on pragmatic teaching, and lack of practice.

Conclusion

The aim of the study was to explore the pragmatic competence of Pakistani college-level ELLs in realizing speech acts of order, advice, and suggestion. The realization of the said speech acts is difficult for L2 learners as it requires them to have sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic abilities. The current study, in this context, analyzed the responses of Pakistani L2 novices and



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found them deficient pragmatically. They followed direct strategies more and used fewer mitigation devices. Their responses did not follow the norms of formality and informality. They used a lesser amount of information in their responses. Their responses were deficient in correctness and relevance. Hence, they were found deficient in realization of FTAs appropriately. As the study was diagnostic in nature, it highlighted the pragmatic deficiencies of L2 learners. The future researchers may investigate the causes of these deficiencies and explore strategies to improve the situation.

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