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Pre-service English as a Foreign Language Teachers' Awareness of the Pragmatic Aspect of Language

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Abstract

The objective of this survey study was to explore pre-service English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' opinions concerning the pragmatic aspect of language and their awareness of certain pragmatics concepts. Thirty-three pre-service EFL teachers from a state university in Türkiye participated in the study voluntarily. As a data-collection instrument, a survey with Likert scale questions and a few additional questions was used. Results of the descriptive and frequency analysis demonstrate that the pre-service EFL teachers understood the value of pragmatics in language teaching and learning since they mentioned communicative competence as an important aspect of language use. They also believed that learning a language requires an understanding of both its linguistic and communicative components. The definitions of *pragmatics* given by participants reveal that they are knowledgeable with the concept's theoretical underpinnings. The results highlight that participant teachers learned certain pragmatics concepts, like speech acts, pragmatic awareness, and face-threatening acts, in their university courses, but they were less familiar with some pragmatics concepts compared to others. Results suggest that more emphasis should be given to pragmatics in teacher education curriculums to make teacher candidates more aware of the importance of pragmatics and more capable of applying their theoretical knowledge of pragmatics in actual language use.

Keywords: pragmatic awareness, English as a foreign language, pre-service EFL teachers, communicative competence

Introduction

Pragmatics, which deals with understanding what people say in a specific cultural context, the way they say it, and why they say it (Sciberras, 2016), is seen as one of the major communicative competence components (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Borovina & Semren, 2022; Sciberras, 2016). Various definitions of pragmatics exist in the literature. Levinson (1983) describes pragmatics as "the study of language from a functional perspective, that is, that it attempts to explain facets of the linguistic structure by reference to non-linguistic pressures and causes" (p. 7). From the viewpoint of foreign language teaching, Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor (2003) define pragmatics as "encompass[ing] speech acts, conversational structure, conversational implicature, conversational management, discourse organization, and sociolinguistic aspects of language use such as choice of address forms" (p. 1).

Pragmatically competent speakers perform the language functions appropriate in a specific context. Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) assert that pragmatic competence is directly related to native language culture, class instruction, input via teachers, learners' proficiency level, and the possibility of living in the target-language society. Thomas (1983) argues that a non-native who speaks the target language grammatically competently but pragmatically unsuitably is perceived by a native speaker as rude because of his/her impoliteness and insincerity. Having a good understanding of speech acts, pragmatic awareness, pragmatic competence, politeness theory, face-threatening acts, cooperative principle, first language (L1) transfer, and interlanguage is essential to be pragmatically competent (Kasper & Rose, 2002). In defining these concepts, *speech acts*, first explained by Austin (1962), include how people apologize, request, or investigate peoples' manners. *Pragmatic awareness* is related to understanding the speakers' intended meaning (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998). *Politeness theory*, which is related to *pragmatic competence*, is largely defined as protecting the face of the speaker and abstaining from *face-threatening acts*, such as giving negative feedback. The *cooperative principle* deals with making communication informative, clear, and relevant (Grice, 1975). The term *L1 transfer* means that speakers' first language affects their second language learning process, either positively or negatively. Finally, *interlanguage* is a system affected by both first and second languages, and it is a developing system (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003).

Regarding foreign language context, teachers are seen as one of the primary sources of improving students' pragmatic knowledge and abilities (Hergüner & Çakır, 2017; Sciberras, 2016; Shokouhi & Rezaei, 2015) as non-native language learners do not have native speaker intuitions to speak the target language appropriately (Rose, 1994). Pragmatic instruction is especially important in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts in which learners are not exposed to the target language in natural environments (Jorda, 2005; Shokouhi & Rezaei, 2015). Providing students with sociocultural and sociolinguistic aspects of the target language is crucial to their using the target language appropriately. Therefore, teacher candidates should be taught pragmatic knowledge explicitly during their teacher education programs (Gürsoy, 2011).

Unfortunately, the pragmatic competence of pre-service EFL teachers is often disregarded (Schauer, 2019; Sciberras, 2016). The pragmatic aspect of language does not receive as much attention as other aspects of language, such as grammar and vocabulary, in teacher education programs (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003). However, especially in recent decades, pragmatics is perceived as an important knowledge base for teachers of language (Taguchi, 2011). Language teachers are now anticipated to be a bridge between pragmatic knowledge of the target language and teaching this knowledge in the

classroom (Cohen, 2016). Future language teachers need to be aware of the pragmatics of the target language (Ekin & Damar, 2013). Teachers should give more importance to the pragmatic aspect of language in the classroom as a lack of pragmatics causes communication problems in the target language (Shokouhi & Rezaei, 2015). As learners of English as a foreign language do not have enough exposure to the target language in authentic situations, special attention is necessary to teach pragmatics in the classroom (Shokouhi & Rezaei, 2015).

In the literature, there are various studies investigating pre-service EFL teachers' pragmatic awareness and their views concerning pragmatics in teaching English in the Italian context (Sciberras, 2016), Croatian context (Borovına & Semren, 2022), Pakistani context (Kausar, 2016), and Algerian context (Khabcheche & Hamıtouche, 2022). Moreover, in the Turkish context, studies are present inquiring about pre-service EFL teachers' pragmatic awareness through discourse completion tasks (Ekin & Damar, 2013; Hergüner & Çakır, 2017; Yılmaz, 2014;). However, few studies exist investigating pre-service EFL teachers' views regarding the importance of pragmatics in language teaching and the theoretical knowledge they gain during courses in their teacher education programs in the Turkish context. That is why the present small-scale study aims to discover whether pre-service EFL teachers emphasize pragmatics and whether they are provided with the pragmatic aspect of language in their teacher education programs. To this end, the following research questions were aimed to be answered.

- What are pre-service EFL teachers' views concerning pragmatics in English language teaching?
- To what extent are pre-service EFL teachers aware of pragmatics concepts?

Methodology

As suitable for the present descriptive study, a survey design was used. Through this survey design, data were collected at a single point in time to describe happenings in a specific population (Connelly, 2016). This study aimed to describe teacher candidates' awareness of pragmatics and their beliefs regarding the pragmatic aspect of language.

Participants

Participants in the study were 33 fourth-grade pre-service EFL teachers. They were all enrolled at the department of English Language Teacher Education at a state university in Türkiye. Their native language was Turkish, and none of the participants had lived in a foreign country for more than four months. Participants did not take a standalone pragmatics course in their undergraduate program, but pragmatics concepts were mentioned within relevant courses, such as Sociolinguistics and Language Acquisition. Considering that the courses they took in the Teacher Education program were conducted in the target language, English, participants assumably were advanced-level English users. They were informed about the study aims and procedures beforehand, and only voluntary participants were involved in the study.

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected through a questionnaire adapted from Kausar (2016) and Sciberras (2016). Questionnaires are used widely in language education research because of their practicality in collecting data in a short time (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009). The questionnaire included 12 Likert-type items with four points ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" and a few additional questions that aimed to understand participants' awareness of pragmatics. The questionnaire was administered to voluntary fourth-year EFL teacher candidates in a class environment by the researcher at the end of the second semester in 2019 after the teacher candidates took all the courses in the curriculum.

Data Analysis

Data analyses were performed both quantitatively via SPSS through numerical representations (Babbie, 2010) and qualitatively through content analysis via MAXQDA. Descriptive and frequency analysis, which included calculating means, standard deviations, and percentages, were performed. Moreover, for the open-ended questions, the data were transcribed in a word processor, and codes were extracted. Themes were identified to represent the data better. Analyzed data were represented through tables and figures to make results clear, understandable, and easy to follow.

Results and Discussion

Participants' Thoughts on the Pragmatic Aspect of Language

It was clear from the participants' statements that they gave importance to communicative competence in English (Table 1). Most of the participants (97%) agreed that knowledge about how to use language is as important as linguistic knowledge, consistent with the study by Kausar (2016) in the Pakistani context. In addition, most participants thought native-like speaking ability is desired (84.8%), and communicating flawlessly in English is worth admiring (90.9%).

Most of the participants (72.8%) also agreed that communicative skills should be taught in a classroom environment by teachers, and more than half of the participants (75.8%) disagreed with the opinion that practice in the classroom to improve communicative competence is not beneficial, indicating that participants believed in the importance of teaching communicative skills in the classroom as consistent with the results of Kausar (2016). Moreover, most of the participants (75.7%) stated that while teaching communicative skills, teachers should focus on grammar and vocabulary. More than half the participants (94%) thought teachers help improve students' communicative skills and, more specifically, agreed that tasks given by teachers improved students' communicative skills.

Table 1

Participants' thoughts on the pragmatic aspect of language

		Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
1	Learning vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation is learning English.	33.3	48.5	18.2	0
2	Linguistic knowledge as well as knowledge of how to use language is important.	36.4	60.6	3	0
3	English is learned because it helps in passing examinations.	0	36.4	60.6	3
4	Textbooks provide sufficient knowledge about culture, conversational rules, and their use in language.	3	72.7	21.2	3
5	Activities to develop communicative competence in the class are of no use.	0	24.2	30.3	45.5
6	People who can communicate in English flawlessly are worth admiring.	30.3	60.6	9.1	0
7	Communicative skills should be taught in the classroom by the teachers.	27.3	45.5	24.2	3
8	I have an idea of how one can learn about culture and language use.	15.2	72.7	12.1	0
9	Tasks given by the teacher in the classroom are helpful in developing communicative skills in learners.	15.2	78.8	6.1	0
10	The class focused on communicative language teaching along with the explanation of grammar and vocabulary.	3	72.7	21.2	3
11	I prefer vocabulary, grammar, and sentence drills in the class.	0	72.7	24.2	3
12	Native-like English speaking ability is desired.	33.3	51.5	12.1	3

Additionally, most participants disagreed with the idea that the aim of learning English is only to pass exams, suggesting they assign importance to other aspects, in parallel to the results from Kausar's (2016) study. Interestingly, most participants also agreed that learning the English language includes learning vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation (81.8%), and they communicated a "preference for vocabulary, grammar and sentence drills" (72.7%), contrary to what Kausar (2016) reported in the Pakistani context. Participants likely implied correct and appropriate use of grammar and vocabulary by agreeing with the statements because most participants (73%) agreed there should be a focus on grammar and vocabulary besides communicative activities in the classroom. Consistently, Shokouhi and Rezaei (2015) also stated that teachers should focus on the appropriate use of language besides grammar. In this study, most participants (73%) thought textbooks include necessary knowledge regarding culture and appropriate use of conversational language. In addition, most (87.9%) thought they know how to learn about the culture and use of the target language.

Pre-service EFL Teachers' Awareness of Pragmatics

Most participants (76%) stated they knew what pragmatics was (Figure 1), as consistent with the study by Sciberras (2016), and they defined *pragmatics*. Participants who stated they did not know what pragmatics was also shared their opinions about what *pragmatics* may mean. Analysis of participants' answers showed that both groups of participants used the key phrases of "linguistic forms and meanings," "contextual meanings," "use of language in context," and "analysis of language in use" to define *pragmatics* as consistent with the definitions of O'Keeffe et al. (2011), Leech (1983), and Stalnaker (1996).
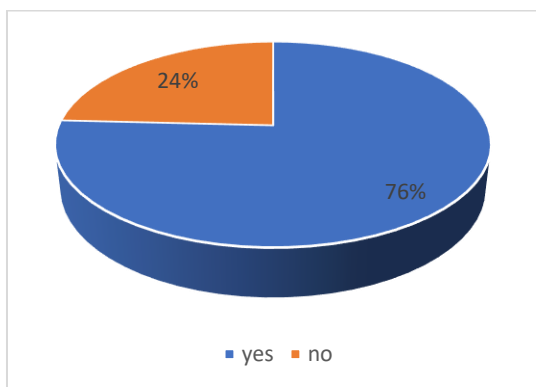

Figure 1. Do you know what pragmatics is?

Participants were also asked about the skill(s) they considered most important. They chose one skill among reading, writing, listening, speaking, or all the skills combined. Analysis of the results showed that most participants (64%) stated they gave importance to all four skills, consistent with the results of Sciberras (2016; Figure 2); 27% of the participants expressed they gave importance to speaking; and 9% of them stated they gave importance to listening. None of the participants chose either writing or reading alone. Relatedly, Nombre et al. (2012) mention that speaking and listening skills are more difficult to acquire in foreign language learning than writing and reading skills.
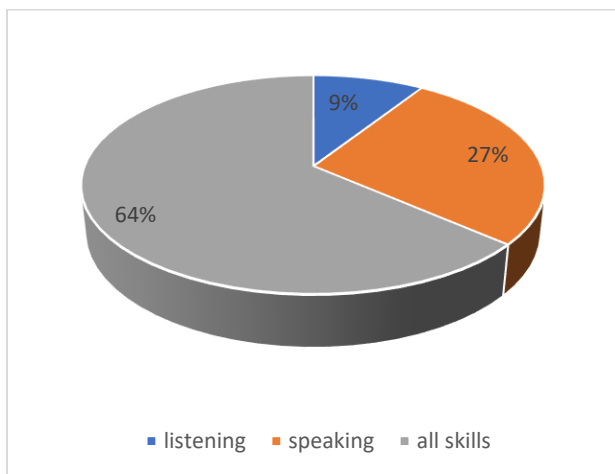

Figure 2. Which skills do you give more importance to?

Most participants (58%) stated they feel confident in speaking English in any situation, consistent with the results from Sciberras (2016; Figure 3). However, some of the participants (42%) stated they do not feel confident in speaking English in any situation. They mentioned three situations in which they do not feel confident in speaking. One of these is speaking before people. Participants stated they become anxious and have difficulty in speaking before people. For example, they stated that they get anxious during classroom presentations in front of other students and course instructors. Another situation where they have difficulty in speaking is formal or academic events. They expressed that when they meet people at academic events, they become anxious, and they do not feel confident in speaking. They also stated they have difficulty in speaking when they do not have enough knowledge on a given topic. Similarly, Raja (2017) found that Pakistani students thought they had public speaking anxiety. Rafada and Madini (2017) found that Saudi learners did not feel confident in speaking because of a lack of vocabulary and the presence of peer anxiety.
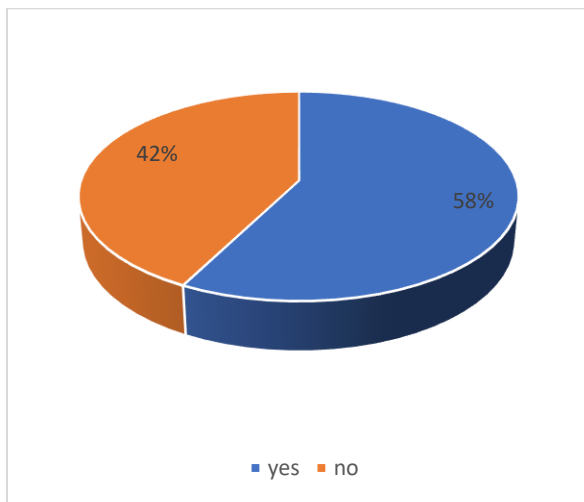

Figure 3. Do you feel that you can confidently speak in English in any situation?

Participants' awareness of various pragmatics concepts was also investigated, and an analysis showed that nearly all the participants stated they were taught speech acts (97%), L1 transfer (93.9%), interlanguage (90.9%), pragmatic competence (78.8%), and pragmatic awareness (72.7%) concepts in their courses at the university (Table 2). However, only 36.4% of the participants stated they learned the concept of cooperative principle. Only 30.3% of the participants stated they learned the concepts of politeness theory and face-threatening acts.

Table 2

Participants' learning about pragmatics concepts

Concepts of Pragmatics	Yes (%)	No (%)	I do not remember (%)
Speech acts	97	-	3
Pragmatic awareness	72.7	9.1	18.2
Pragmatic competence	78.8	3	18.2
Politeness theory	30.3	27.3	42.4

Face-threatening acts	30.3	27.3	42.4
Cooperative principle	36.4	27.3	36.4
L1 transfer	93.9	3	3
Interlanguage	90.9	9.1	-

In comparison, Sciberras (2016) found that most participants remarked that they studied the concepts of speech acts, L1 transfer, and interlanguage in their university courses. However, Borovına and Semren (2022) discovered that teacher candidates had a chance to develop a certain degree of pragmatic awareness, but it was acquired mainly outside of the university. The study by Khabcheche and Hamıtouche (2022) stressed that even if teacher candidates have a certain degree of pragmatic awareness, they have difficulty in transferring this pragmatic knowledge to actual teaching practices, indicating that simply being aware of pragmatic concepts does not guarantee the use of this knowledge in real teaching practices.

Conclusion

The results of the study showed that pre-service EFL teachers were informed about the importance of pragmatics and the appropriate use of language. Participants gave importance to communicative language skills and linguistic knowledge of the target language. In addition, they believe that classroom activities help students improve their communicative language abilities; therefore, teachers should design classroom activities to improve students' communicative language abilities. Results also indicated that most of the pre-service EFL teachers are aware of the concept of pragmatics, and they could define the term appropriately, suggesting they have an idea of what pragmatics is. Moreover, most of the participants gave importance to four language skills of English in teaching the language. Participants reported that speaking is more important than the other skills, indicating they are aware of the importance of pragmatics in learning a foreign language. Additionally, most participants believe they can speak confidently in any situation.

Participants also stated they were taught most of the pragmatics concepts (included in the survey) in their courses at the university. The concepts of L1 transfer, interlanguage, and speech acts were the most remembered concepts by the participants. A probable reason is that these concepts are mentioned in second language acquisition courses in their teacher education programs. However, most participants were not aware of the politeness theory, the cooperative principle, and face-threatening acts. They either could not remember or did not know these concepts.

Implications and Suggestions

The results imply that pre-service English teachers benefit from classroom activities fostering their communicative language abilities, and they are aware of the importance of pragmatics in teaching and learning a foreign language. However, the results reflect only the participants' self-reported theoretical knowledge concerning pragmatics and their personal views on the issue. For this reason, further studies should be designed that investigate whether pre-service English teachers can apply their theoretical pragmatics knowledge to their language use. Moreover, the results reveal that the pre-service teachers did not have a course that specifically focuses on pragmatics. Therefore, it is suggested that English

language teaching programs include a course on pragmatics to make students more aware of appropriate language use and to apply practical pragmatics instruction.

Limitations of the Study

The aim in conducting this study was to investigate pre-service EFL teachers' awareness of the pragmatic aspect of language, whether they give enough importance to pragmatics, and whether the courses they take in their teacher education programs include pragmatic aspects of language. One of the limitations of the study was the number of students surveyed. The number of participants could be increased in future studies either to support or refute current results. In addition, a discourse completion task can be given to participants to learn whether they can apply the pragmatics concepts they learned in their courses. The results of this small-scale research in Türkiye should be evaluated considering the above-mentioned limitations.

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