

TESTING PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE OF PUPILS AT THE PRIMARY LEVEL OF EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

From a terminology perspective, FLE has undergone slight changes in recent years. However, developing learners' communicative language competences at the highest possible level has remained one of its key goals. The paper provides insight into the development of pragmatic competence as one of the aspects of communicative competence from a testing viewpoint at the primary education. The international and national reference documents are viewed as key in defining what pragmatic competences are and what sub competences pupils should develop. The results show the possibilities of testing these sub competences by various activities that can provide us with interesting results and a detailed overview on what pupils are advanced in and what competences they lack.

KEYWORDS

Pragmatic competence, foreign language education, testing, English language, primary level, communicative language competences

INTRODUCTION

One of the most crucial aspects and most important goals of foreign language education as such is the acquisition of level a language proficiency that enables a learner to integrate into the language user society smoothly and easily, i.e. to use the language effectively in any situation under any circumstances. This requirement is also reflected in the framework documents for language teaching, which address this subject at national and international levels and offer a wealth of information on the 'know-how' of comprehensive language acquisition. Within the EU, the most important documents are the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and its extension documents, and the national curriculums of individual countries.

Looking at these guidelines and recommendations, from a terminology perspective we can surely declare that FLE has gone through slight changes. What we used to refer to as the four communicative skills in the recent past has transformed into communicative language activities and strategies, providing us with more detail and complexity on language acquisition as such. What has not changed, however, is the common goal FLE is sharing, which is the achievement of a certain proficiency level. However, in order to understand overall language proficiency, we need to include the following components in teaching and learning: the development of communicative language competences, the use of communicative language activities, and the use of communicative language strategies. This process is seen by the Council of Europe (2020) as a circular process, where competences can only exist under the circumstances that they are performed by the means of activities, and by performing activities we acquire competences and strategies.

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To succeed in language acquisition, it is crucial to develop communicative language competence complexly, i.e. to develop all its sub-competences. Pragmatic competence has been proven as one of the most crucial elements of language learning and a central element of having successful interactions in second and foreign languages (Bachman, 1990; Canale & Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983; Celce-Murcia, 2008; Savignon, 2007). Despite this, in teaching it is still often overlooked in the classes (Paulikova, 2021) and setting up classrooms for successful pragmatic development can be a difficult and challenging task (Choraih, Loutfi and Mansoor, 2016). Studies have also shown that a large number of study materials are inadequate as a consistent source of pragmatic input for language learners in the classroom and are unlikely to promote pragmatic growth (Vellenga, 2004). Incorporating its teaching in the English classes is therefore seen as vital, since it is pragmatic competence that allows us to use our linguistic knowledge in real life communication effectively and with success.

When it comes to testing English, the majority of primary school textbooks provide only grammar and vocabulary related tests, a few do incorporate communicative activities (skills). The international English exams as the IELTS, TOEFL, or PTE are complex and test language knowledge as a whole, but are very unlikely to be incorporated to test pupils on a regular basis in schools. This paper provides a theoretical background to pragmatic competence at the proficiency level A1, the possibilities of developing it via various activities and the possibility of testing it through these activities in the regular English classes. Such tests can become a good indicator of how developed our learners' pragmatic competence is, what strengths they have, and where they encounter difficulties.

PRAGMATICS AND PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE

Pragmatics is most frequently defined as “*the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication*” (Crystal, 1997:301). Crystal's definition points to the importance of language use in context, which encompasses both spoken and written forms concentrating on the individual, whose utterance is influenced by both the interlocutor and the sociocultural background of the particular situation in which the language is employed. Others view pragmatics as the study of applied linguistics that focuses on how language usage interacts with social and interpersonal contexts (Roever, 2010), as a field within semiotics that examines the relationship between linguistic expressions and their users (Trosborg, 1995), or a study dealing with the biotic aspects of semiotics, in other words, all the phenomena occurring around the functioning of signs (Levinson, 1983). Pragmatics analyses linguistic terms in utterances, interrupts people's meanings in various contexts, and understands how context influences messages (Trosborg, 1995).

Pragmatic competence possesses an important role within the communicative language competences. Its existence is strongly connected to the birth of communicative competence in 1972 (Hymes, 1972) and its further development by numerous scholars. The competence first appeared in the model of communicative competence proposed by Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983), though the phenomenon was acknowledged as strategic competence and discourse competence, which were seen as key to acquiring language successfully. The authors included pragmatics into sociolinguistic knowledge, whereas discourse was seen as a separate unit of language acquisition. As an individual and distinct element pragmatic competence was first emphasised by Bachman (1990), who defined it in detail and accentuated its importance within communicative competence. His model of pragmatic competence included illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence. Illocutionary competence comprised language functions and speech acts, which represent “*language to*

express a wide range of functions, and to interpret the illocutionary force of utterances or discourse, the appropriateness of these functions and how they are performed” (Bachman, 1990:94). On the other hand, sociolinguistic competence would entail using language to accomplish tasks in a context-appropriate manner. Different dialects, registers, natures, cultural allusions, and figures of speech would fall under this (ibid.). Later, although not naming this competence as pragmatic competence, Celce-Murcia, Dornyei and Thurell (1995) and Celce-Murcia (2008) stressed the significance of language functions, including the ability to regulate discourse, convey and understand communicative purpose, interpret speech act sets, as well as manage interpersonal communication, and communicate opinions, feelings, persuasion, and future plans. They referred to these as strategic competence, discourse competence, actional competence, and interactional competence, and positioned them in their suggested models as the focal points and means of developing all other aspects of communicative competence. Littlewood (2011) also emphasised pragmatic competence as an important aspect of successful foreign language acquisition. He understood it as the user’s capacity to employ language knowledge in both communicating and comprehending messages in real-world circumstances and the ability to deal with misunderstandings and difficulties in communication. He also emphasised discourse competence, which would stand for participating in conversation, using functional language, taking turns, and linking ideas in order to produce longer stretches of utterances.

In modern education of foreign languages, pragmatic competence is not portrayed in terms of conventional distinction between competence and performance. The CEFR (Council of Europe, 2020) emphasises that competence can be realized solely through action. The framework characterizes pragmatic competence as the effective use of language when producing utterances, emphasising the principles that govern the organization, structure, and execution of messages in communication. Within that, pragmatic competence is categorised into three distinctive areas: discourse competence, functional competence, and design competence. Discourse competence is seen as the ability to create cohesive and coherent texts with elements such as thematic development and turn-taking during interactions. Functional competence refers to the ability to adjust language use to various circumstances and to make appropriate sociolinguistic choices on the basis of communicative context. Design competence, last but not least, involves arranging language in accordance with interactional and transactional norms. What is more, the framework emphasises that rather than merely interpreting the literal meaning of words, pragmatic competence also entails understanding intended meanings within a given context. This includes the ability to convey meaning precisely and accurately via propositional precision. Moreover, fluency is a fundamental component of pragmatic competence, as well. The framework describes it as the ability to produce coherent and intricate messages or, more specifically, as the ability to communicate without unnecessary interruptions or pauses (ibid.).

PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE AT THE PRIMARY LEVEL

TEFL at the primary level of education in most European countries is most often associated with the proficiency level A1. The language education policies lie on the international reference documents and the national curriculums, which state the basic requirements on pupils in terms of their effective foreign language acquisition. In our case, these documents are the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001, 2020), The Breakthrough Manuscript (Trim, 2001), and the National Curriculum (SPU, 2022). The documents provide a comprehensive outline and guidance on the language and communicative competences, communicative activities and strategies, as well as concrete linguistic and grammatical topics and items that learners should at this level of proficiency master.

Within the specific sub competences of pragmatic competence, learners at this level should develop several components, all of which are considered equally important by the reference documents and include functional language use and managing and organising discourse. Within the functional language, they should be able to convey and seek information in terms of reporting, inquiring, responding, and self-correcting within the linguistic and grammatical range of their knowledge. They should express attitudes and ask questions in terms of agreement, certainty, knowledge, and emotional states. Furthermore, learners should be able to express permission, volition, obligation, and emotions regarding satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Within the functional range of language, persuasion in terms of suggesting, requesting, inviting, and socialising should also be mastered. They should develop simple discourse organising skills to initiate and end conversations, make simple phone calls, and manage written communications, as well as use various verbal and non-verbal strategies to repair communication. Within discourse, learners at this level are supposed to create coherent stretches of sentences in oral and written form, as well as be able to take turns in interaction tasks. The sentences should be simple, connected with simple conjunctions, yet often paused and interrupted because of additional time needed for idea organisation. Within turn-taking, learners are supposed to be involved in predictable conversational contexts that are often guided and managed by a more proficient interlocutor (Council of Europe, 2001, 2020; Trim, 2001; SPU, 2022).

For a better understanding of the competence, the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2020) in its companion volume has provided a simple description of the generic aspects and sub competences for all the proficiency levels. There are several components, yet at this level it is rather limited and dependent on the other communicative competences and the general linguistic range of learners. In case of level A1, the generic aspects that apply are propositional precision, coherence and cohesion, turn taking, and overall fluency. The following table provides a concise description of these aspects as well as their specification as seen in the other reference documents.

Table 1 Pragmatic competence at level A1 (Council of Europe, 2020, pp. 138-142; Trim, 2001, pp. 15-30; SPU, 2022, 9-20)

Generic aspect	Description	Specification
Propositional precision	Learners communicate basic information about personal details and needs of a concrete type in a simple way.	A range of language functions is used for imparting and seeking factual information, expressing and eliciting attitudes, getting things done (suasion), socializing, structuring discourse, communication repair
Turn taking	Learners contribute to a simple interaction in communication	Taking simple turns effectively to a well-structured, largely predictable interaction with one or more interlocutors, often with the help of verbal exchange patterns
Coherence and cohesion	Learners link words/signs or groups of words/signs with very basic linear connectors.	Simple sentences are connected with conjunctions <i>and</i> and <i>then</i>
Fluency	Learners manage very short, isolated, mainly pre-packaged utterances, with much pausing to search for expressions, to articulate less familiar words/signs, and to repair communication.	A range of language functions is used for imparting and seeking factual information, expressing and eliciting attitudes, getting things done (suasion), socializing, structuring discourse, communication repair

PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

It is vital to design and organize the teaching process in a way, which ensures a balanced distribution of all the components of communicative competence with the use of various communicative activities and strategies (Council of Europe, 2001, 2020; Paulikova, 2021). It is advisable to implement a multifaceted approach employing various techniques for teaching and developing pragmatics, which promotes a balanced development across all essential proficiency levels. Council of Europe (2001, 2020) recommends an action-oriented approach to teaching, where learners are seen as social agents having tasks that are required to be accomplished. This approach is executed mainly by task-based teaching, which offers learning by doing, in other words, providing an excellent stimulus for experiencing language (Nunam 1993; Piccardo, 2010).

For teaching pragmatic competence, we should involve activities that are designed to promote pragmatic awareness and facilitate communication practice (Kasper, 1995). Raising pragmatic awareness can be done by pragmatic instruction, always in a clear and explicit manner (Bardovi-Harling, 2003). A systematic and progressive increase in the difficulty of functional range of texts and the discourse structure, as well as their gradual practice, assists in improving functional language use of learners and their discourse competence (Council of Europe, 2001). Furthermore, interaction practice is recommended to be done via various groupings of students (Richards, 2008) and interactive and learner-centred activities are suggested because of their multiple benefits (Celce-Murcia, 2008).

Simulations and role-plays are one of the most real-life like activities that provide great opportunities for pragmatic language practice. Celce-Murcia (2008) suggests doing various phone call simulations, as well as written tasks and different types of interviews within this scope. Ladousse (1987) states that the use of role-plays is beneficial for introducing and practicing language functions, as well as other linguistic means of language. Enhancing the use of phatic language, role-plays and simulations provide support for shy learners, and offer an enjoyable and engaging way to acquiring the language. What is more, they contribute to increased fluency and foster interaction and motivation (*ibid.*). David (1996) highlights that simulations provide opportunities for collaborative engagement in tasks and problem-solving, as well as allow teachers to observe participation and improvement of their learners. Simulations and role-plays are also beneficial in developing oral fluency and preparing learners for using the target language in real life situations (Harmer, 2005).

Free speaking activities, such as situational games, dramatizations, and discussions or debates, are highlighted by Kováčiková and Gajdáčová-Veselá (2016). Using games in the English classes, firstly, plays a fundamental role in creating good and appealing circumstances for language acquisition (Ersöz, 2000). This strategy not only motivates learners to take part in the happenings and work together, but also moves attention from structural accuracy to messages being communicated (Yu-jing, 2000). Thus, games assist in relieving anxiety, providing opportunities for stress free language practice, and serve as an enjoyable break from traditional classes full of controlled practice (Ersöz, 2000; Nga, 2003). Secondly, drama in the classrooms encourages effective and meaningful communication among learners and offers an opportunity to practice target language in a playful way (Astride 2005). These activities are designed to promote interaction, allowing students to participate actively and focus on task completion (Rooney, 2004). With drama, learners' cognitive skills to understand the nuances of a play are used (Bailey, 1991), and a platform for expressing language appropriately in various sociocultural contexts is offered (Jones, 1990). Drama enriches oral communication and enables learners to utilize language meaningfully (Athlemoolam, 2004). Almond (2005) further emphasizes that provided that the instructional strategies teachers employ are of a good quality, the overall effectiveness of drama in skill development can be taken full ad-

vantage of. Last but not least, discussions and debates are also seen as an outstanding tool for practicing and developing pragmatic competences. Krieger (2005:25) states that debates are excellent “[...] *for language learning because it engages students in a variety of cognitive and linguistic ways. In addition to providing meaningful listening, speaking and writing practice, debate is also highly effective for developing argumentation skills for persuasive speech and writing.*” They are one of the most favourite activities of learners (Stewart, 2003) and provide teachers with an effective way to integrate the development of more essential communication skills at the same time (Davidson, 1995). Discussions provide excellent feedback after task oriented activities, promote the development of oral production and interaction, increase teacher-student and student-student interaction, promote meaningful communication and interaction, and assists in developing learner autonomy (Orlich et. al, 1985).

Other types of activities suggested for pragmatic competence development include precision dialogues, presentations, and talks, which practice both the suitability of linguistic means and the ability of turn-taking. Information-gap activities, jigsaw puzzles, and surveys develop interaction in contexts mirroring real-life situations. Storytelling methods are helpful in reproducing the language of everyday life (Thornbury, 2005). Activities focused on task completion, such as puzzles, or map navigation, alongside opportunities sharing opinions and transferring information are a great challenge for learners to use their own language resources, which helps developing their communication skills (Richards, 2006). Moreover, various written tasks such as portfolios or diaries are also considered very effective in developing learners’ pragmatic competences (Thornbury, 2005).

SCORING CHART DESIGN

On the basis of the theoretical knowledge encountered about the development of pragmatic competence at the proficiency level A1, a scoring chart for a pragmatic test competence was proposed. When developing the scoring chart, we investigated the four generic aspects of pragmatic competence that apply to this level. Since it was crucial to understand how different standardized tests and exams refer to evaluating language, a content analysis of several such examinations was conducted. Our intention was to create a scoring chart for the generic aspects of pragmatic competence that would apply to oral production and could be used when pupils are performing various communicative activities. Therefore, only speaking tests and exams were evaluated. We investigated the scoring systems of several oral examinations, including the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), the GESE (Graded Examinations in Spoken English), the PTE General (Pearson English International Certificate), the ACTFL OPI (oral proficiency interview of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) and the Cambridge English Qualifications. On the basis of these, a 5 point scoring chart for the 4 generic aspects of pragmatic competence that apply to proficiency level A1 was created.

Table 2 Scoring chart for pragmatic competence testing

Score	Fluency	Coherence and cohesion	Turn-taking	Propositional precision
5	Produces effortless, smooth, and well-paced utterance, delivers an intelligible message with no repetitions or false starts	Produces coherent and cohesive sentences that are logically sequenced, uses cohesive devices with no errors or slips	Reacts well and on time, uses pauses and gaps naturally in all cases, uses turn allocation excellently	Formulates accurate and clear messages, expresses thoughts with accurate and correct functional language
4	Produces a smooth	Organises sentenc-	Reacts well and on	Formulates accurate

	and intelligible utterance at a good speech rate, with occasional repetitions, false starts, or pauses	es into logical units, uses cohesive devices with minor slips or errors	time, uses pauses and gaps naturally in almost all cases, uses turn allocation with only minor slips	and clear messages, expresses thoughts well with functional language with minor slips or errors
3	Attempts to deliver the message with frequent repetitions and false starts, occasionally with longer pauses at times	Attempts to organise sentences into logical sequences, attempts to use cohesive devices with more or less success	Attempts to react in most cases, with pauses and gaps that are longer than natural at times, attempts turn allocation	Attempts to formulate accurate and clear messages, attempts to use language functions with minor or major slips and errors
2	Struggles to deliver message, has rather choppy, interrupted and fragmented utterance with long pausing, frequent repetitions and false starts	Organises words into single sentences with no attempts to logical sequencing, no use of cohesive devices	Gets often overlapped and/or has difficulty reacting, with long pauses or gaps, struggles with turn allocation	Formulates choppy and fragmented messages with hardly any functional language
1	Fails to deliver the message, has extremely choppy, interrupted and fragmented utterance with extreme pausing	Uses simple words without organising them into sentences with no logical sequencing, no use of cohesive devices	Gets completely overlapped and/or does not react, with extreme unnatural pauses or gaps, no turn allocation	Uses simple words with no propositional precision, does not use functional language.

As seen in the chart above, the 5 level score can be applied for every generic aspect of pragmatic competence separately. The procedure of scoring starts with a well-planned activity. While the task is being executed, the observer uses a simple evaluation sheet, where the individual generic aspects are rated. An example is provided below.

Table 3 Scoring chart evaluation sheet

Generic aspect	Score				
Propositional precision	1	2	3	4	5
Turn taking	1	2	3	4	5
Coherence and cohesion	1	2	3	4	5
Fluency	1	2	3	4	5

A noteworthy advantage of the scoring chart is that it is applicable to both individuals and groups. With individuals, the evaluation results can provide important insights and feedback for both the learner and the teacher, allowing them to gain a comprehensive understanding of the learner's strengths in pragmatic development, as well as areas for improvement. Moreover, the scoring chart allows evaluating each generic aspect of pragmatic competence in learners separately and individually. Hence, teachers obtain a detailed understanding of the developmental level of their learners' pragmatic competence with particular importance placed on its individual components. The evaluation results specify which areas of learners' pragmatic competence development are excelling and which call for extra practice and focus. For instance, a learner may demonstrate strong fluency in message delivery but may struggle with turn-taking. In such cases, the teacher can implement targeted activities aimed at enhancing turn-taking skills, such as information gap activities, specialized role-plays, or simulations.

The scoring chart may also be used for group evaluation, enabling teachers to gauge their learners' progress and overall pragmatic competence development, providing a thorough and comprehensive understanding of a group's advancement in the area. The suggested approach to utilizing a group measurement is to score a group's members individually and then calculate an average from the results. Consequently, the outcomes then serve as a valuable indicator offering an objective perspective on a class's progress.

Conducting scoring over a prolonged period of time to compare results of a study period, or executing a pre-test and post-test evaluation, can also be a benefitting and effective approach to measurement. Such evaluation may provide us with valuable insights into the progress of our learners' pragmatic competence and reveal whether we, as teachers, are delivering adequate and high-quality activities that facilitate the development of pragmatic competence.

CONCLUSION

Pragmatic competence is one of the competences embodying communicative language competences, and is crucial for the effective and successful use of language in everyday life. The article provides an overview of the theoretical background to developing this competence at the proficiency level A1, as well as an insight into the possibilities of teaching pragmatic competence in the English classes. In the paper, we propose a scoring chart for evaluating pragmatic competence at this level, which may serve as a valuable and important instrument in evaluating learners' ability to use their language knowledge in practical settings. The chart builds upon the essential generic aspects of pragmatic competence, including fluency, coherence and cohesion, turn-taking, and propositional precision. By evaluating these components, teachers can get a deeper understanding of their learners' communicative competences that are beyond grammar and vocabulary practice. The scoring chart was developed in accordance with several international assessment tools, and opts to ensure that the evaluation process is systematic and consistent with the established standards. Additionally, it accommodates both individual and group evaluations, improving its adaptability for various classroom environments.

Although the proposed chart possesses noteworthy advantages, it is important to mention several potential limitations of it. One of these limitations is the great degree of subjectivity involved in the scoring process. Different teachers may interpret and evaluate learners' performances differently, which could lead to bias or discrepancies in the results. Therefore, when conducting the evaluation, one must be well aware of all the specifications and details provided in the reference documents and adhere to them to the highest degree possible. This can complicate the scoring chart's practical use and may necessitate further, often time-consuming training. The tool, furthermore, is not standardized, which may lead to a decrease in the reliability in evaluating diverse educational environments. Finally, although the chart proposes a valuable insight into learners' pragmatic competence, one could encounter difficulties with sufficiently reflecting the complexities of communication in reality, in which unpredictable social and cultural factors are often play a role. Consequently, while we view the chart as a beneficial and valuable resource in the English classroom, its capability to evaluate pragmatic competence under more complex or diverse circumstances may be limited.

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