

## PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE: DEFINITION, THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS, AND TEACHABILITY

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Pragmatic competence is broadly defined as the ability to use language appropriately within social contexts, encompassing knowledge of *what to say, how to say it, when, and to whom* (Thomas, 1983). This competence entails a speaker's sensitivity to social norms, interpersonal roles, power relations, and cultural expectations. As conceptualized by Thomas (1983), pragmatic competence comprises two interrelated dimensions: **pragmalinguistics**, referring to the linguistic means available for performing communicative acts (e.g., grammatical structures, modal verbs, politeness markers), and **sociopragmatics**, which involves the understanding of how these linguistic forms are deployed appropriately according to social contexts, such as varying degrees of directness contingent on the interlocutor's status.

In the framework of communicative language ability proposed by Bachman (1990), pragmatic competence constitutes a core component of overall language competence, operating alongside organizational competence, which includes grammatical and textual knowledge. Similarly, Hymes (1972) introduced the notion of communicative competence as the knowledge not only of grammatical rules but also of the sociocultural conditions governing their appropriate use—specifically, knowledge of *when, where, and with whom* to communicate.

In the context of second language acquisition (SLA), pragmatic development frequently lags behind grammatical proficiency. Learners often produce syntactically correct utterances that, nonetheless, are pragmatically inappropriate, resulting in what Thomas (1983) terms pragmatic failure. Unlike grammatical knowledge, which tends to be rule-governed and can often be effectively transmitted through explicit instruction, pragmatics is inherently context-dependent and culturally variable. Kasper and Rose (2002) demonstrate that pragmatic competence does not automatically transfer from the first language (L1) to the second language (L2), particularly in settings where learners have limited exposure to authentic communicative situations. This challenge is especially pronounced in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, where opportunities for meaningful interaction in the target language are often scarce.

### Key Theoretical Contributions

Theorist	Contribution
Dell Hymes (1972)	Communicative competence model incorporating sociocultural norms
Bachman (1990)	Model of communicative language ability including pragmatics
Thomas (1983)	Distinction between pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics; concept of pragmatic failure
Schmidt (1993)	Noticing Hypothesis emphasizing awareness in acquisition
Kasper & Rose (2002)	Research on interlanguage pragmatics and instructional efficacy
Jeon & Kaya (2006)	Meta-analysis of pragmatic instruction effectiveness
Pienemann (1984)	Teachability Hypothesis and its implications for instruction readiness

### **Acquisition versus Instruction of Pragmatic Competence**

A fundamental debate within SLA concerns whether pragmatic competence emerges naturally through exposure and use or whether it can be consciously taught. Schmidt's (1993) **Noticing Hypothesis** is instrumental in this discourse, positing that learners must consciously attend to linguistic features, including pragmatic norms, to acquire them. Given the often subtle or implicit nature of pragmatic cues, learners frequently fail to notice these unless they are highlighted through instruction. Consequently, while some aspects of pragmatic competence may develop incidentally, explicit instruction plays a crucial role in raising learners' awareness, fostering reflection, and providing controlled practice opportunities, particularly in contexts where naturalistic exposure is limited.

### **The Cultural Dimension of Pragmatic Competence**

Pragmatic norms are inherently culture-specific. Speech acts such as requests or apologies that are considered polite in one culture may be perceived as excessively direct or even offensive in another. For instance, indirectness and deference are highly valued in many East Asian cultures, whereas Western cultures often favor directness as a marker of honesty and efficiency. This cultural variability presents a significant challenge for learners who may transfer L1 pragmatic strategies inappropriately to the L2, resulting in negative pragmatic transfer. Consequently, pragmatic instruction must extend beyond linguistic forms to encompass intercultural competence, equipping learners with the skills to navigate diverse sociocultural communication norms. Schmidt's (1993) **Noticing Hypothesis** is particularly instrumental in this discussion. According to Schmidt, language acquisition is contingent upon learners **consciously noticing** linguistic features in the input they receive. This means that learners must actively pay attention to specific language forms or functions—including pragmatic norms and cues—to successfully acquire them. The hypothesis challenges the assumption that mere exposure or implicit learning is sufficient for acquiring complex aspects of language, such as pragmatic competence.

Because many pragmatic features—such as politeness strategies, speech act realizations, and implicature—are often subtle or implicitly encoded within discourse, learners frequently fail to notice them naturally (Schmidt, 1994; Ellis, 2002). For example, indirect requests, sarcasm, or culturally specific conversational routines might go unrecognized without explicit focus, especially since these cues depend heavily on social context and cultural knowledge (Thomas, 1983; Kasper, 1997).

### **The Teachability Hypothesis and Pragmatic Instruction**

Pienemann's (1984) **Teachability Hypothesis**, initially formulated in the domain of grammar acquisition, argues that linguistic features can only be successfully acquired when learners reach a certain developmental readiness. While its applicability to pragmatics remains a subject of debate, some scholars (Rose & Kasper, 2001) contend that pragmatic instruction should be developmentally appropriate—for example, complex politeness strategies may be unsuitable for beginner learners lacking sufficient linguistic resources. Nonetheless, given the socially constructed nature of pragmatic competence, it is generally accepted that it is teachable at all proficiency levels, provided that instruction is adapted to learners' linguistic abilities and cultural backgrounds. Applying the Teachability Hypothesis to **pragmatic competence**—the ability to use language appropriately in social contexts—raises important theoretical and

pedagogical questions. Pragmatics, unlike grammar, involves understanding socially constructed norms that govern language use, which may not follow a linear developmental path analogous to grammatical structures. Therefore, some scholars argue that the rigid developmental sequencing implied by the Teachability Hypothesis may not fully capture the complexities of pragmatic learning (Rose & Kasper, 2001; Taguchi, 2008). Nonetheless, Rose and Kasper (2001) advocate for a **developmentally appropriate approach** to pragmatic instruction. They suggest that while all learners can benefit from pragmatic teaching, the complexity of the pragmatic features introduced should correspond to the learners' linguistic proficiency and cognitive maturity. For example, advanced politeness strategies—such as indirectness, mitigation, or honorifics—may be too challenging for beginner learners who lack the necessary vocabulary and grammatical resources to encode subtle social meanings effectively. Instead, beginners might focus on more straightforward, concrete speech acts like greetings, requests, or apologies before progressing to more nuanced forms (Kasper & Rose, 2002)

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