

Pragmatic Competence of Sudanese English Foreign Language (EFL) Learners at University Level

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Abstract

This descriptive analytical study aimed to explore the pragmatic competence of the Sudanese EFL learners at tertiary level. A pragmatic competence test (PCT) was developed to collect data from 126 participants; 104 EFL learners majoring in English and 22 EAP learners who were willing to take part in the study. The participants were divided into two main groups. The first group was composed of the fourth level and the second level of English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners, while the second group was composed of the second level of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) learners. Each main group was divided into two sub-groups to provide data. A test was used to collect data and the results were processed to measure the performance of each sub-group. The results were correlated and it was found that the academic level had an effect on the pragmatic competence of the fourth and second level EFL learners. It showed that there was a significant difference in favor of the fourth level. As to the effect of gender on pragmatic competence, the statistical analysis showed no difference in the pragmatic performance due to gender difference. Finally, the analysis of the effect of the type of syllabus on the pragmatic competence of the 2nd level EFL learners and the 2nd level EAP learners showed statistically significant differences in favor of the 2nd level EFL learners. It was concluded that the existing syllabus properly addresses its audience intercultural communication needs. However, it was recommended that more practice needs to be added to sustain the current level of the students' pragmatic competence.

Keywords: pragmatic competence, linguistic competence, EFL, language education, Pragmatics Competence Test (PCT)

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There are a number of issues concerning contemporary Sudanese studies that give rise to an increased interest in research on pragmatic competence among Sudanese EFL learners. This research has approached the subject of pragmatics competence from different angles. Some studies targeted participants from secondary level who lack pragma linguistic and socio-pragmatic competences. Also, the majority of these studies used questionnaires or interviews to collect data. These tools could be used to collect data to measure perceptions but not competences. In addition, these studies used limited types of speech acts to measure the Sudanese EFL learners' pragmatic competence. However, pragmatic competence comprises a variety of speech acts and other basic aspects. Furthermore, it is noticed that the Sudanese EFL college students cannot communicate successfully in English because they still face difficulties when attempting to perform speech acts in different life situations, for instance, when apologizing, requesting, refusing a request, complimenting or complaining. They also may not be able to effectively get involved in native-like situational language routines such as: offering services or giving thanks, congratulating others and discussing common issues with native speakers. Further, the Sudanese EFL learners seem to be unable to successfully interpret the speakers intended meaning or convey their meaning in native-like social situations which requires abilities to comprehend pragmatically implied meanings.

1. 1 Research Objectives

This study sets out to achieve the following objectives:

1. Measure the Sudanese EFL learners' pragmatic competence.
2. Develop Sudanese EFL learners' pragmatic competence.
3. Provide evidence-based guidelines for enhancing Sudanese EFL learners' pragmatic competence.

1.2. Research Hypotheses

The study examines the following hypotheses:

1. There are significant differences in pragmatic competence between learners based on the academic level to which they belong.
2. There are significant differences in pragmatic competence between learners based on gender.
3. There are significant differences in pragmatic competence between learners based on their disciplinary choices of English as (EFL) or (EAP).

1.3. Significance of the Study

This study is intended to contribute to discussions on the importance of pragmatic competence in EFL teaching and learning, especially in Sudanese schools. It identifies gaps in current teaching practices that focus mainly on linguistic competences. These instructional practices have produced linguistically competent but communicatively incompetent Sudanese EFL learners. The study is especially valuable to syllabus designers, English Language practitioners, language teaching specialists and administrators to draw their attention to shortcomings in the present English syllabus. The study suggests incorporating pragmatic competence more vigorously in the English language curriculum by allocating more time and resources to its instruction and allowing more exposure to the sociocultural norms of the target language use.

2.0. Historical Background of Pragmatics

Pragmatics, in Greek Philosophy, refers to the Greek word *Pragmaticia* which means life. Even though the term pragmatics is relatively new in a linguistic framework, many aspects of the subject which are now designated by the term are not new to linguistic concerns. In fact, much of what was referred to as rhetoric by the Romans and the Greeks seems today to be thought of as pragmatics. Pragmatics is a difficult term to define because it draws on other disciplines such as: sociology, philosophy, language philosophy, anthropology, psychology and ethnography. Also, it overlaps with the branches of linguistics, i.e., syntax, phonology, morphology and semantics (Encyclopedia Britannica). Generally speaking, pragmatics is a subfield of linguistics developed in 1970s. It is concerned with the study of language use in communication. A somewhat more comprehensive definition of pragmatics is that it studies language from the point of view of its users, the factors that govern their choice of language in social interaction and the effects of their choice on interlocutors (David, 1999). A detailed explanation of pragmatics is given in Yule (1996). That is, pragmatics may mean the study of speaker meaning, the study of contextual meaning, the study of how ideas are more communicated than said, and the study of the expression of relevant distance between the speaker and the listener.

2.1 Chomsky's Theory of Linguistic Competence

Chomsky is the founder of the term "linguistic competence" in his theory of Transformational Grammar. According to him, competence is the ideal language system that enables speakers to produce and understand an infinite number of sentences in their language, and to distinguish grammatical sentences from ungrammatical sentences. This is unaffected by "grammatically irrelevant conditions" such as speech errors. In Chomsky's view, competence can be studied independently of language use, which falls under "performance", for example through introspection and grammaticality judgments by native speakers. Furthermore, the term linguistic competence refers to the unconscious knowledge of grammar that allows a speaker to use and understand a language. Also known as grammatical competence. As used by

Chomsky and other linguists, linguistic competence is not an evaluative term. Rather, it refers to the innate linguistic knowledge that allows a person to match sounds and meanings.

2.2. Hymes' Theory of Communicative Competence

Hymes (1971) introduced the concept of communicative competence in order to amend restrictions found in the original notion of competence defined by Chomsky (1965). Chomsky was the first to define a dichotomy between competence and performance. Competence was defined as consisting of the mental representation of linguistic rules that constitute the speaker-hearer's internal grammar while performance was described as consisting of the use of this grammar in the comprehension and production of language (Ellis, 1994). Thus Canale and Swain (1980) attempt to provide a wide-range view of communicative competence which encompasses four components, as shown in table 1 below:

Table 1

Components of Communicative Competence

Grammatical competence	Includes knowledge of phonology, orthography, vocabulary, word formation and sentence formation.
Sociolinguistic competence	Includes knowledge of sociocultural rules of language use. It is concerned with the learners' ability to handle for example settings, topics and communicative functions in different sociolinguistic contexts.
Discourse competence	Is related to the learners' mastery of understanding and producing texts in the modes of listening, speaking, reading and writing.
Strategic competence	refers to compensatory strategies in case of grammatical or sociolinguistic or discourse difficulties

However, according to Bachman's (1990) identification of communicative competence; pragmatic competence was used as a replacement to sociolinguistic competence. As pragmatic competence is considered an indispensable component of communicative competence the lack of which will result into inappropriate use of language. Communicative competence can be broadly defined as what a speaker needs to know in order to communicate appropriately within a particular speech community. It involves knowing what to say to whom, when, and how to say it appropriately in certain situations. It also involves the social and cultural knowledge, the factors enabling the speaker to use and interpret linguistic forms (Troike, 2006). For two or three decades, a primary goal of the English Language Teaching (ELT) has been the development of communicative competence. The classroom practices have shifted from the traditional approach which focused on the acquisition of linguistic knowledge: vocabulary, pronunciation, and syntax to the facilitation of learners' communicative competence.

2.3 Pragmatic Competence

Pragmatic competence is divided by Leech (1983) into two main aspects: pragma linguistic knowledge and socio-pragmatic knowledge. Also, Thomas (1983) subdivided pragmatic competence into two categories: pragma-linguistic competence and socio-pragmatic competence. The former refers to the ability to use grammar rules to form sentences correctly while the latter refers to the ability to communicate properly according to the social rules.

Bachman's (1990) pragmatic competence consists of illocutionary and sociolinguistic competence: the knowledge of speech acts and language functions and the knowledge of specific language conventions in specific contexts, respectively. Pragmatic competence entails a variety of abilities concerned with the use and interpretation of language in contexts. It includes speakers' ability to use language for different purposes: to request, to instruct, to effect change. It includes listeners' ability to get past the language and understand the speaker's real intentions, especially when these intentions are not directly conveyed in the forms: indirect requests, irony and sarcasm are some examples. It includes commands of the rules by which utterances are strung together to create discourse (Bialystok 1993).

2.4 Speech Acts Theory

Speech acts theory is considered one of the most influential notions in the study of language use. It reflects the fundamental cultural values and social norms of a target language and demonstrates the rules of language use in a speech community (Blum-Kulak, Rose & Kasper, 1990). People do not only produce utterances which contain grammatical structure and words when they speak, but also perform action through those utterances. Utterances that perform an action are generally called as speech acts. (Yule, 1996). Austin (1962) as the most prominent figure of this theory has criticized the former traditional concept of language function that constricted language use in two things: either stating a fact or describing a state of affair. Austin (1969) based his rejection of the former views of language use on his conception of language as a tool for performing and carrying out some social activities as well as its fact stating nature. Hence, he added a new and broad meaning to the function of words or utterances.

3. Research Methodology

This is a quasi-experimental analytical study in which the researcher adopts a method that is based on observed and measured phenomena. Quantitative method was used in analyzing the data. In this chapter, the researcher implements the following: after a brief introduction the researcher gives a description to the participants of the study, then presents a thorough background of the instrument used for data collection. Then the researcher shows the procedure executed and finally a summary is given.

3.1 Participants

The participants of the present study are all undergraduate students. The total number of these participants is 126 English major students (EMS). Only 22 of them are EAP students who learn English for academic purposes. So, the total number of the English Foreign Language learners (EFLs) majoring in English is 104. The system of co-education is followed in the University of Khartoum. The participants of this study consist of three main groups. Each group represents a specific variable. This study aimed to find out the pragmatic competence of these three groups and make comparison between their pragmatic performances.

The first main group of participants consists of two sub-groups of participants: 4th year EFL and 2nd year EFL learners; their total number is 54, each sub group consists of 27 participants. These two sub-groups of participants are majoring in English. The aim is to assess the differences in their pragmatic competence according to their academic level. Their pragmatic performances will be shown later.

The second main group of participants consists of two sub-groups: 4th year EFL male and 4th year EFL female participants. Both groups specialize in English language and attend their course of study at the Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of Khartoum. Each sub-group is composed of (14) participants, the total number is 28. The researcher aims to measure and compare the ‘influence of gender variable’ in the pragmatic performances of the two sub-groups.

The third main group of participants represents two sub-groups: the first sub-group consists of the 2nd year EFL participants majoring in English. The 2nd sub-group includes the EAP participants who study English for Academic Purposes. The EAP participants are majoring in different fields other than English language, as Arabic language, French language, Geography, Psychology, History etc. Each sub-group consists of 22 participants. The total number of this group is 44 participants. The aim is to measure the pragmatic competence of both sub-groups, 2nd year EFL and 2nd year EAP participants and to measure the effect of disciplinary difference.

3.2 Instrument of the Study

The researcher used pragmatic competence test, henceforth (PCT), as a tool to collect data for this study. This (PCT) is a type of Discourse Completion Test (DCT) which was firstly designed, developed and used by Blum-Kulak (1984). PCT is characterized by ease of management to examine a large number of participants at one place and time. When PCT was compared with the other instruments that were used in collecting data of EFL learner’ pragmatic ability as: Role-plays, Interviews, Discourse Completion Tests (DCT) and Recording Authentic Data (RAD); it was found to be the most useable and valid one. (Stubbs 1996). It does not require much time to administer. However, the scenarios and situations of this test are fabricated and not authentic (Michael B. & P. C. Grundy 2002). The PCT used in the present test is a multiple pragmatic competence test (MPCT) which consists of three main sections: a scenario, a dialogue and multiple-choice items. Some contributions made by the

researcher to adapt the PCT: the PCT of this study was adapted by the researcher from an already approved test which was previously used in Finland. So, the researcher introduced some modifications in the PCT that would make it consistent with the local atmosphere of the foreign language classroom in Sudan to facilitate the Sudanese EFL learners' understanding and responding to the different scenarios of the PCT. To conclude these modifications:

First, 20 scenarios were selected from the total number of the scenarios of the original Pragmatic Competence Test (PCT) to avoid difficulty and monotony due to lengthy scenarios.

Second, The PCT was used as it is without any change to its content as regards the literary complicated scenarios, metaphorically used utterances and idiomatic expressions in order to get an actual result of the real pragmatic comprehension of the participants in the PCT.

Third, European/foreign names used in the original PCT were replaced by Arabic and Sudanese names to give it some local authenticity and familiarity.

Fourth, the researcher also, exerted a great effort in redesigning the general formation of the (PCT) by organizing the PCT basic parts (scenarios, dialogues, questions, multiple choice-answers) in a table of five columns.

3.3 Validity

Before applying the PCT on the participants, the researcher distributed it to six experts of language and linguistics at the University of Khartoum, Faculty of Arts, English and Linguistics Departments, in order to judge the feasibility of using the PCT. Their comments were summarized in that: The PCT with its three sections is linguistically correct and communicatively appropriate. So, generally, the PCT tool used in the present test is valid.

3.4 Validity and Reliability:

To know the internal validity and reliability of the test, the equations below are applied to the test scores of a sample of 25 randomly selected participants. To measure the correlation; the researcher used Pearson's correlation co-efficient, by using SPSS program.

- a) Reliability: = 0.994
- b) Validity: Shown in Table 2 below.

To calculate the internal validity coefficient of the test, the square root of the reliability coefficient is shown in (Table 2).

Table 2

Correlation Coefficients, Reliability and Validity of the Test

Group	Correlation	Reliability	Validity
Students	0.992	0.994	0.996

This means that the test has a very high degree of reliability and validity. This ensures the feasibility of applying it on the sample of this study.

3.5 Procedure

The total number of the examinees was 126, each test consisted of 5 pages. The researcher prepared copies of the (PCT) to be distributed to the 126 participants. The researcher administered the test on the three main groups of participants individually, which consisted of six sub-groups. After distributing the test, the researcher explained to the examinees the formula of the test and showed them how to answer the question of item 4 in each scenario. In addition to that, the researcher explained to the respondents the definition of “Pragmatics” and “Pragmatic Competence” to facilitate their understanding and response. Some of them were perplexed because it was the first time to participate in (PCT) and to deal with its formula: scenarios, dialogues and multiple choice answers. The participants were also shown how to answer by ticking the most appropriate box from the multiple answers provided in the third part of the PCT. Some of the participants were informed not to work together; so as not to affect the reliability of the study findings.

The same procedures were subsequently followed on the other two main groups of participants, which consisted of four sub-groups: fourth year EFL female participants and fourth year EFL male participants and 2nd year EFL participants and 2nd year EAP participants. This procedure of administering the test has been completed within three weeks. Data were collected from all the three main groups.

4. Examination and Discussion of the study hypotheses

This section presents the data analysis, results and discussion.

4.1 Effect of academic level

The academic level variable was used to measure the effect of academic level on the EFL participants' pragmatic comprehension and ability to use English language appropriately. Hypothesis one presumes that “there are significant differences in pragmatic competence between learners based on the academic level to which they belong”. T-test was used to verify this hypothesis. Table 3 reports the findings.

Table 3

Participants' Pragmatic Competence Based on Their Academic Levels

The 2 EFL groups	No.	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	D. F	Sig	The Result
4 th year level	27	48.5185	14.92383				There is a difference
2 nd year level	25	35.4400	10.52014	3.625	50	0.001	

Table (3) indicates that p-value (sig.) is 0.001 which is less than α value (= is 0.005), thus, confirming the hypothesis that there would be a significant difference in the pragmatic competences between the 4th year and 2nd year EFL learners based on their academic level in favor of the fourth level. This result will be discussed in detail in the following paragraphs. The statistical result confirmed the first hypothesis of the present research that: there are statistically

significant differences in the pragmatic competence between the 4th year and the 2nd year EFL college learners. This finding showed the effect of the academic level on the EFL participants' pragmatic comprehension and production. That is why the 4th year EFL participants outperformed the 2nd year EFL participants in the (PCT). This result is expected because the 4th year EFL participants had been exposed to English language for four years while the 2nd year participants were being taught English language for only two years. Hence, the gap in the two groups of participants' pragmatic performances could obviously be attributed to the difference in academic level, that is to say, the time-factor which would definitely affect the amount of the received linguistic input of the target language in the EFL classrooms by both the 4th year and the 2nd year participants.

Although, the two groups of participants (the 4th year EFL, and the 2nd year EFL learners) were not explicitly exposed to pragmatic instruction and the sociocultural norms of the target language use in their classrooms as necessary factors that guarantee good pragmatic comprehension in EFL context; however, the 4th year EFL participants have succeeded and attained higher scores in the (PCT). The results reflected that the 4th year participants' language proficiency was a result of a longer period of learning the foreign language. This result is expected because the two groups of participants belong to different academic levels, hence, will have different linguistic abilities. This result shows marginal difference between the two groups. This is consistent with the first hypothesis of the study that "the academic level has a positive impact on EFL learners' pragmatic competence". By deduction, the 4th year EFL participants' marginal outperformance over the 2nd year EFL participants in linguistic and pragmatic comprehension is due to their advanced academic level (4th level vis-à-vis 2nd level).

It is possible and logical to suggest that this small gap between the two groups' performances in PCT apparently occurred as a result of the difference in the time of exposure to the target language. That is to say, the more EFL learners received linguistic knowledge in classrooms, the more their language proficiency and language awareness increased. The long period of exposure to the foreign language in their classrooms, was an important factor that yielded better language proficiency which affected the 4th year EFL learners' pragmatic performance in the PCT. This is regardless of exposure to pragmatic knowledge. There is a strong evidence to believe that the 4th year participants' success in the (PCT) is accredited to their language proficiency. So, it is worth to mention in this regard that there is a large number of previous relevant studies which state that foreign language learners' proficiency alone is assumed to be a more determining factor on the EFL pragmatic comprehension and production.

It is also possible to say that success in selecting the appropriate answers in the (PCT) by the 4th year EFL participants of the present study does not absolutely mean that they possess the full pragmatic ability to respond appropriately in different life-situations. That is, concerning the (PCT) which is used as a tool in the present study, there are some common forms of expressions that are frequently used by native speakers of English. Those expressions are formulated in simple formulae that make it easy for respondents to distinguish, for instance,

the use of the form: How are you? In (a greeting formula), or a routine expression as: How old are you? Both expressions do not require high language proficiency or pragmatic knowledge to be comprehended and produced by the respondents. Hence, when the 4th year EFL college participants were faced with such situational routine expressions, they could easily respond by choosing the appropriate answer even if they did not have high language proficiency or pragmatic competence. So providing the 4th year EFL learners with a specialized syllabus would help develop their pragmatic competence.

It is useful to point out that the first group of respondents - the 4th year EFL participants- who attained high scores in the PCT were exposed to somewhat comprehensive English Language syllabus which contains limited pragmatic knowledge and few authentic materials which would help raise the EFL learners' pragmatic and language proficiency. Although the 4th year EFL participants have not been fully exposed to the required pragmatic instruction, their pragmatic performance in the (PCT) was still high. This result could also be attributed to the type of syllabus which is supposed to be a comprehensive syllabus that could develop their language proficiency and language awareness. According to the findings, there is apparently a big gap between the pragmatic competences of the two groups of participants. Due to the high performances of 4th year EFL participants in (PCT), it was assumed that they had already been exposed to a specialized English syllabus which was carefully designed to meet the EFL learners' communication needs, expectations and desires and at the same time, satisfy their interests in the foreign language learning and acquisition. Regarding its content; this syllabus is especially designed for the English major college students that is why it incorporates English literature with its basic branches: drama, poetry, novels and fiction. That is, the 4th year EFL college participants are involved in acting or role-playing tasks, and participating, as speech partners in any native-like dialogues or life-like conversations. Moreover, this syllabus would provide the EFL learners with good opportunities to practice the four language skills: Listening, Speaking; Reading and Writing via carefully prepared learning units and lessons. Hence, the 4th year EFL participants should have been exposed to listening comprehension passages with drills, reading comprehension passages with drills, speaking practices and writing practices.

It is believed that this type of syllabus would provide them with adequate opportunities to communicate verbally and in writing in the classroom. So, when the 4th year EFL college students use the target language frequently, freely, and spontaneously, they will be highly motivated and feel somehow confident and encouraged to interact verbally in the target language in classrooms. In addition to that, they would also have the opportunity to comprehend and practice highly complex literary aspects as figures of speech and metaphors. So when these linguistic aspects are included in the college syllabus, they will no doubt facilitate the EFL college learners' pragmatic comprehension and production and their ability to communicate successfully. It is possible to speculate that the 4th year EFL participants had been exposed to such syllabus that was why they were able to perform well in the (PCT) and managed to respond somewhat appropriately. Designing a comprehensive English syllabus

containing the authentic language models and comprehensible linguistic forms, though, entails a careful and scrutinized implementation, but eventually, yields an effective learning process that results in successful communication. There are many studies that assert the significance of providing EFL learners with the specialized syllabus that maintains the inclusion of pragmatic instruction into the college English textbooks.

So, the act of teaching the EFL learners' pragmatic functions and sociocultural norms of the target language use means the inclusion of the target language pragmatic knowledge into an English syllabus especially designed for the tertiary level. It is worth to be mentioned that in addition to the carefully designed syllabus; the efficient, specialized language teacher can always create the suitable learning environment to involve students in communicative tasks and interactional activities that yield successful communication.

The Success of the Sudanese college 4th year EFL participants in the (PCT) could also be attributed to the college English language teacher's efficiency and methodology. College language teachers in Sudan, in general, are assumed to hold the traits that positively affect the learning process. That is, they tend to involve their students in actual communicative activities and encourage them to practice group work, pair work, role plays etc. so as to adapt them to use language verbally, and to be able to communicate with each other confidently and unhesitatingly in classrooms. It should also be noted that when the three main pivots of the learning process (teacher, textbook and student) are logically and methodically integrated in the teaching/learning processes, the result will be effective learning output and eventually, successful language learners.

The 4th year EFL participants' better pragmatic performance in the (PCT) could also be attributed to their teachers' efficiency and methodology. Teachers who are highly proficient in English as a foreign language and are also methodically efficient will provide their students with both the necessary linguistic information and familiarize them with the target language pragmatic knowledge. Not only that, but they are capable to adopt the current teaching trends as Communicative Language Teaching Approach "CLTA". The results would help develop the EFL learners' communicative competence and language proficiency and equip them with the adequate skills to use the foreign language effectively in the future.

The impact of motivation on the 4th year EFL learners

The 4th year EFL participants were assumed to be highly motivated to learn English that is why they succeeded in the (PCT). Motivation affects foreign language learners' attitude towards the target language, learners' personality, tendency to learn and acquire the target language and to have social status. So, the 4th year EFL participants developed a positive attitude towards the target language community culture (TLCC) which is considered a strong motive that urges the language learners to behave the way they do when involved in any social interactions with the native speaker in accordance with the sociocultural norms of the target language use. This attitude gradually motivated the 4th year EFL participants to affiliate

themselves to the target language community (TLC) i.e., to be a member of that community. This affiliation entails fulfilling certain conditions such as: acquiring knowledge, improving their communicative abilities and also, improving their social status. All these conditions require that the 4th year EFL participants exert great effort in reading, to be avid readers of anything related to English language. Hence, it was found that the 4th year EFL participants had a strong desire to read anything related to the target language not only to increase their linguistic information and improve their linguistic knowledge and ability, but also to have cultural and social background about the target language culture. It is also, believed that the 4th year EFL participants had the tendency to use sources of linguistic knowledge other than the textbooks. That is, apart from textbooks, there are also a lot of other sources from which motivated students can enrich their knowledge about the foreign language. These materials can be used as supplements to the textbook such as English novels, magazines, newspapers, movies and TV serials. In addition, the internet provides easy access to stores of knowledge and specialized information in no time. All this could help develop the 4th year EFL female/male participants' linguistic and pragmatic competence in general. Hence, motivation as a factor, would have positively influenced the 4th year EFL participants' linguistic ability, acquisition of linguistic knowledge and pragmatic competence. In addition to the good academic level in English that the 4th year EFL participants already possessed; they were also highly motivated due to their enrolment and attendance at a prestigious teaching institute.

The impact of pragmatic instruction on the EFL learners' pragmatic comprehension and production has generally been investigated by a large number of pragmatics studies, which came to the conclusion that: early exposure to the pragmatic knowledge in the foreign language classrooms is necessary for the EFL learners' pragmatic comprehension and production.

Contact with the target language community members

For further interpretation to the 4th year EFL success in the (PCT), it is assumed that the 4th year EFL participants had access to the target language culture by being in actual contact with the native speakers of English language during summer vacations or scientific journeys. This interaction has raised their pragmatic awareness and enabled them to perform highly in the PCT. Moreover, findings in some previous studies also stated that: only providing the EFL learners with proper pragmatic instruction in the EFL classroom is not enough for the real acquisition of pragmatic competence.

4.2 Gender variable

This study hypothesized that “there are significant differences in pragmatic competence between learners based on gender”. T-Test is used to verify this hypothesis (two). Table (4) below reports the findings.

Table 4

Differences in (EFL) Learners' Pragmatic Competence Based on Gender

The 2 Gender Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	D. f	Sig.	Result
Males	14	51.4286	15.37087	0.447	26	0.658	No Difference
Females	14	53.9286	14.16640				

Table (4) shows that p-value is 0.658 which is bigger than α value (= is 0.005); hence, this result contradicts the hypothesis that there are significant differences in the pragmatic competences of the two groups based on their gender.

It is necessary to point out that there are few studies investigating the impact of gender variable in English as Second Language (ESL) and English as Foreign Language (EFL) learning in general, but the majority of these studies assert the effect of gender variable in this respect. According to the present study results, there were no differences with statistical denotations between the pragmatic competences of the two groups: 4th year EFL male and female college participants in the (PCT). Based on this result, both groups of participants attained high scores which indicates that they possess a considerable degree of pragmatic competence. This result about the second hypothesis of the present study reflects similar levels in pragmatic competence of the two gender groups.

It is possible to state that this result is expected due to basic common features between the two groups. This can be explained as follows: that both the 4th year EFL female participants and their male counterparts were exposed to the same college English syllabus. They also studied attend their English language course of study at the same faculty; i.e. Faculty of Arts, English Department, University of Khartoum. They both majored in English. Moreover, they were probably taught by the same English language teachers; hence, they were provided with the same learning opportunities and environment.

It is necessary to point out here that this result does not support the second hypothesis of the present study (which stipulates that: "there are significant differences in pragmatic competence between the 4th year EFL learners based on gender). However, before interpreting this result, it is necessary to show that it is still inconsistent with findings. However, it is possible that gender hypothesis was influenced by some factors that could be stated as follows:

First, the 4th year EFL females' scores were slightly higher than that of the males. This is possibly because there was marginal statistical difference between the means of the two groups in favor of the females. Although this difference was not so big, however, it indicated the existence of some difference between the pragmatic performance of the males and females in favor of the latter. To put it more explicitly, the female group means is (53.9286) while the males participants' means was (51.4286.), indicating a slight difference between the two groups. Further, this would lead us to believe that 4th year female EFL participants were more pragmatically competent than their male 4th year EFL counterparts.

Second, it is to be recognized that the gender hypothesis of the present study, although not supported by the statistical result, yet is in conformity with results in a large number of previous relevant studies which found that: female EFL learners were better in pragmatic comprehension and production than their male counterparts. Moreover, findings in a considerable number of previous studies indicate that female EFL participants outperform their male counterparts in pragmatic comprehension tests (PCT). A good number of previous pragmatics studies addressed the question:

Why did both the female/male participants performed as they did in the PCT?

There seem to be a general agreement in these studies that certain factors are at work as explanations of the gender differences in pragmatic competence. It is assumed that both groups of respondents - male and female 4th year EFL learners have fulfilled some conditions that allow them to do as they did in the PCT. These conditions could be explained as follows:

4.2.1. Impact of high motivation

Both groups, the 4th year EFL male/female participants are assumed to be highly motivated learners. Motivation affects learners' attitude towards the target language, learner's personality, learners' tendency to learn and speak English as a foreign language, learners' tendency to meet their needs and interests. So, the female and male participants positive attitude towards the target language community culture (TLCC); entails fulfilling certain conditions such as: acquiring knowledge and improving their communicative ability and also improving their social status.

All these conditions require that 4th year EFL male/female learners exert great effort in reading. To read anything related to English language. Hence, it was found that both males and females participants had a strong desire to read not only to acquire linguistic knowledge and raise their language awareness, but also to have cultural and social background about the target language culture. It is also believed that both 4th year EFL male and female participants would have the tendency to use sources of linguistic knowledge other than the textbooks. That is, apart from textbooks, there are also a lot of other sources from which motivated students can enrich their knowledge about the foreign language, and these materials can be used as supplements to the textbook. English novels, magazines, newspapers, movies and TV serials can all be exploited. The internet has made it easy today for learners to access unlimited knowledge in a fraction of a second to urgently acquire and improve linguistic and pragmatic competences. Hence, motivation as a factor, seemed to have influenced the 4th year EFL participants' linguistic ability, acquisition of knowledge and pragmatic competence. That was beside the good academic level the 4th year EFL participants already possessed by virtue of their enrollment as regular students of the University of Khartoum.

4.2.2. Exposure of 4th year EFL male and female learners to pragmatic instruction of the target language

Based on the statistical result of the 4th year EFL female and male participants' performances in the (PCT), it is possible to speculate that the Sudanese 4th year EFL college participants, both females and males, were exposed to the pragmatic instruction of the target language. It was suggested that the two groups of participants performed high in the (PCT), due to the target language pragmatic instruction they received in their classrooms. The impact of pragmatic instruction on the EFL learners' pragmatic competence has been investigated by a large number of previous studies which came to one conclusion that: early exposure to the pragmatic knowledge in the foreign language classroom is necessary for the EFL learners' pragmatic comprehension and production. (Taguchi, Naoko 1996; Kasper, House 2001). Other relevant studies confirmed the positive role of the instructor to the success of Sudanese 4th year EFL college learners in pragmatic competence for both males and females (Mahjoob 2005; Le 2004; Cohen, & Olshatain 2002; Taguchi 2012).

4.2.3. Effect of being in real contact with the target language community members

It is suggested that both the 4th year EFL female and male participants seemed to have access to the target language culture by being in contact with the native speakers of English language. It is assumed that if they had not been involved in actual communicative interactions with the target language community members, they would have not been able to score highly in the (PCT).

4.2.4. The effect of English Language teachers' efficacy

College language teachers are expected to be highly efficient and capable of using the most current language teaching methods and innovative techniques so as to convey the teaching message in the full sense of the word. It is also possible to expect that the English language teachers who taught the 2nd year EFL participants were not only highly proficient in English as a foreign language, but were also efficient in providing students with the necessary linguistic information and familiarizing them with the target language pragmatic knowledge. That is, they also tend to adopt the current teaching trends as the Communicative Language Teaching Approach (CLTA), which would help to develop the EFL learners' in the future.

4.2.5. Impact of specialized English Language syllabus

It is useful to point out that both groups of respondents - the 4th year EFL female and male participants - who attained high scores in the PCT, were exposed to special English language syllabus but which did not fully contain sufficient authentic materials or pragmatic knowledge that would help develop their pragmatic comprehension and production. That is, they were taught English language according to a syllabus designed to contain dialogues, role-plays and few communicative tasks, which encourage the learner to interact verbally in the classroom, but still considered insufficient because it did not comprise all the necessary aspects of pragmatic knowledge and the sociocultural norms of the target language use. However, the 4th year EFL male and female participants' performance in the (PCT) was still somewhat high

which was attributed to their high linguistic ability, motivation, and exposure to pragmatic knowledge in the classroom.

4.3 Disciplinary difference

This part examines the effect of learners' disciplinary choices of English as EFL or EAP. Hypothesis Three postulates that "There are significant differences in pragmatic competence between learners based on their disciplinary choices of English as (EFL) or (EAP)". T-Test is used to verify this hypothesis. Table (5) reports the findings.

Table 5

Learners' Pragmatic Competence Based on Their Disciplinary Choices of English as EFL or EAP

EFL and EAP groups	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	T	D. f	Sig.	Result
EFL	25	36.6400	9.11446	2.620	48	0.002	There is a Difference
EAP	25	26.000	18.14295				

Table (5) shows that p-value is 0.002 which is less than α value, i.e. ($= 0.005$); thus, confirming hypothesis three that there would be significant differences in pragmatic competence between learners based on their disciplinary choices of English (EFL or EAP) in favor of the 2nd year EFL learners.

The 2nd year EFL participants outperformed their 2nd year EAP counterparts in the (PCT). This result does not only show that the 2nd year EFL participants' pragmatic performance is better than the EAP 2nd year participants', but also asserts the effect of the disciplinary difference and confirms the hypothesis of the present study. However, it is believed that there are basic factors assumed to have positively affected the 2nd year EFL participants' performance in the PCT.

4.3.1. Effect of linguistic ability

This result showed the effect of linguistic ability that could be attributed to the 2nd year EFL ability, as the gap between the means of the pragmatic competence of the two groups was big; that the 2nd year EFL participants' pragmatic performance was higher than that of the 2nd year EAP performance. This result, by deduction, could be referred to as the "difference of specialty"; where the 2nd EFL participants were English major students (EM), the EAP participants were non-English majors (NEM). This indicates that the 2nd year EFL college participants possess better linguistic ability than their EAP counterparts. Moreover, the 2nd year EFL participants have been exposed to specialized English syllabus for two years, which explains why they were able to perform better than the 2nd year EAP participants in the (PCT). Furthermore, it is assumed that they were provided with sufficient learning opportunities to use the target language correctly and probably, appropriately. Therefore, it is possible to suggest that the 2nd year EFL college participants were linguistically moderately efficient as a result of the type of learning they had received, their language learning input and the learning

environment they were in. Moreover, on comparing the 2nd year EFL pragmatic performance with the EAP performance, it is found that the 2nd year EAP participants were not able to respond successfully in the PCT because they did not receive the necessary linguistic knowledge, not mentioning pragmatic knowledge. In brief, they have not undergone the same learning circumstances that would have enabled them to effectively respond in the PCT.

4.3.2. Effect of English Language teachers' efficiency

It is possible to expect that the English language teachers who taught the 2nd year EFL participants were not only highly proficient in English as a foreign language but were also efficient in providing them with the necessary linguistic information and familiarizing them with the target language pragmatic knowledge. Such knowledge might help develop the EFL learners' language proficiency and communicative competence and equip them with the adequate skills to use the foreign language effectively in the future.

The better performance of the Sudanese college 2nd year EFL participants in the (PCT) vis-à-vis their EAP counterparts in the present study could be attributed to some other basic factors. So, college language teachers in Sudan, in general, and at the University of Khartoum in particular have the aptitudes that affect the learning process positively. When a language teacher is knowledgeable about the essential requirements of the teaching profession, will effectively and easily carry out the teaching process. It is believed that the college language teachers of the University of Khartoum have both language proficiency and language teaching methodology to enable them how to teach language according to the current trends of teaching. This type of teachers is always sensitive of gaps in their students' linguistic information, actual needs and interest, and individual differences. That is, they tend to involve their students earlier in actual communicative activities and encourage them to practice group work, pair work, role plays so as to adapt them to use language verbally, and to be able to communicate with each other confidently and unhesitatingly in classrooms. It is also known that when the three main pivots (teacher, textbook and student) are integrated in the teaching/learning processes, the result will be effective learning output and eventually, successful language learner.

To conclude this part, the teachers' efficiency and methodology is regarded as an important factor in the 2nd year EFL participants' better performance in the PCT. Language teaching is a highly complex process that entails the integration of the major learning/teaching factors to render the 2nd year EFL learner a successful language communicator who is able to appropriately communicate in different social contexts. It is found to be a necessary aspect to have highly efficient English language teachers who are capable of raising the EFL learners' linguistic ability and familiarizing them with the target language pragmatic knowledge. While the 2nd year EAP participants were being taught English language by the same highly efficient teachers, but according to different teaching strategies that only focus on providing them with general instruction of the language and familiarizing them with some grammatical rules

according to their prescribed course of study. This is because the 2nd year EAP participants are not English major students.

This result shows weaker performance on the part of the EAP participants but what is more important is that, it shows the real influence of disciplinary difference and confirms the third hypothesis of present study. That is; the 2nd year EFL college students outperform the 2nd year EAP students in PCT because they belong to a different disciplinary level.

4.3.3. Impact of 2nd year EFL learners' exposure to explicit pragmatic instruction

Based on the 2nd year EFL college participants' performance on the pragmatic competence, it is possible to suggest that they had been exposed to the target language pragmatic instruction. Exposure to pragmatic aspects of the target language is considered one of the main factors that contribute to the promotion of the foreign language learners' pragmatic comprehension. When the 2nd year EFL participants have been provided with the target language authentic materials and the sociocultural norms of language use, they will have developed the ability to comprehend and produce communicative acts in the target language. There are many previous relevant studies which stressed the necessity of teaching sociocultural knowledge and providing the EFL learners with the adequate pragmatic instruction (Gu Xiao 2004; Ziang 2001; Bardovi-Harlig 2001).

It is possible to suggest that the 2nd year EFL learners' better performance in the PCT was due to their contact with the target language community members and highly efficient teachers of English. To sum up this part, the findings of the above studies all focus on one main result; that the acquisition of pragmatic competence basically entails systematic introduction of pragmatic instruction and target language authentic knowledge in the EFL syllabus. However, it has been recognized that this factor is required to be applied and generalized on all language learning contexts: whether learning English as a second language (ESL), or learning English as a foreign language (EFL) or even, learning English for academic purposes (EAP), in order to develop language learners' pragmatic competence.

However, it deserves to point out in this respect that in order to have pragmatically competent EFL/EAP learners a collection of factors needs to be fulfilled: language proficiency; type of syllabus via which the target language is taught, English language teachers' efficiency and strategies; exposure to the target language pragmatic knowledge and access to the target language culture, and finally learner's motivation. Moreover, the fact that EAP learner's performance improves after being engaged in awareness-raising, explanation and production activities leads to pedagogical implications for the study of these pragmatic aspects in the foreign language learning setting, particularly in the EAP classroom.

It is a fact that both linguistic competence and pragmatic competence are necessary conditions for the ESL/EFL learners; however, linguistic competence (knowledge of language rules) ought to be learnt before pragmatic competence because it represents the basis for general linguistic knowledge. However, the language learner who is highly proficient and

linguistically competent in English still may not be able to communicate successfully and use the target language contextually appropriate. The situation first demands careful implementation of formal training to the teachers of English language, to familiarize them with the necessary pragmatic knowledge, so as to teach their students how to use the target language and how to communicate verbally in their classrooms. At the end of the day, these teachers would help develop the Sudanese EFL learners' pragmatic competence.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The study in this paper explored the effect of three variables – comprising the study hypotheses - on the pragmatic competence of Sudanese EFL learners at university level. The study hypothesized that there are significant differences in pragmatic competence between learners based on (1) their academic level (levels 2 and 4), (2) on gender, and (3) on their academic disciplinary choices of English as (EFL) or (EAP). The study arrived to several conclusions summarized in the findings below.

5.1 Findings

The present study aimed to investigate the pragmatic competence of the Sudanese EFL college students via three variables which have been tested in order to meet the research objectives. The first variable of the present study explored the impact of the academic level on the EFL learner's pragmatic performance; the research compared between two groups of participants to test their pragmatic competence: the 4th year EFL and the 2nd year EFL college students. The result indicates that the 4th year EFL participants outperformed the 2nd year EFL participants in the (PCT). This finding confirms the first hypothesis of the present study that, there were significant differences in pragmatic competence of the participants enrolled in different academic levels. Further, the 4th year EFL participants were assumed to have better language proficiency than the 2nd year EFL participants and that was due to the length of time (4 years) during which they have been exposed to the linguistic and pragmatic knowledge of the target language. To sum up this point, the result of the first variable of this study actually reflects the impact of the academic level on the EFL learners' pragmatic competence.

The second variable measured the effect of gender difference on the EFL 4th year college learners' pragmatic competence. A comparative analysis was made to find out the difference in pragmatic performance test (PCT) between the EFL female and male college students. There was no statistical difference between the pragmatic performance of the 4th year EFL female and male participants in the (PCT). That is, both groups showed similar pragmatic comprehension and production. What is to be noticed here is that, this result does not support the present study hypothesis which assumes that there are significant differences in the pragmatic competence between the 4th year EFL female and male participants. This result is attributed to the similarities between the two groups of participants: that they are at the same academic level, both are English major students (EM), both study at the same college, and both

are exposed to the same learning opportunities and environment. However, a number of previous studies that have tested hypotheses similar to the one of the present study, have found that there are significant differences between the female and male EFL participants in pragmatic competence and language proficiency.

The third variable tests the disciplinary difference to find out if there is any significant difference in pragmatic competence between the 2nd year EFL and EAP college students. The result indicates that there are significant differences in the pragmatic competence between the 2nd year EFL and EAP participants. That is, the 2nd year EFL participants outperformed the 2nd year EAP participants in the (PCT). This result was expected because the 2nd year EFL participants were English major students (EMS), and were exposed to specialized English syllabus for two years, while the EAP participants were studying English for academic purposes and they specialized in subjects other than English language.

Based on the above mentioned results; the first result confirms the first hypothesis that the academic level does affect EFL participants' pragmatic competence. So, it is believed that learning English for four years resulted in language proficiency that has an impact on the EFL learners' pragmatic comprehension and production. The second result about gender difference did not show any statistical differences in the pragmatic competence between male and female Sudanese EFL learners. Both groups experienced the same learning opportunities and environment and attained the same result in the (PCT). However, this result does not support the second hypothesis of the present study that there would be significant differences in pragmatic competence of the participants based on their gender, but at same time, it is consistent with many previous relevant studies. Regarding the disciplinary variable, the EFL learners outperformed the EAP learners in the (PCT) because the latter lack the required linguistic and pragmatic knowledge. To conclude this part, the Sudanese EFL learners need to be provided with the target language pragmatic knowledge through systematic exposure to the foreign language specialized syllabus. To be successful communicators i.e., to be able to use the target language not only grammatically correct but also communicatively appropriate and according to the social context, is the ultimate goal of the present research.

5.2 Recommendations

- Most of the present English textbooks in Sudan hardly contain adequate pragmatic instruction or authentic materials with communicative activities that help develop the Sudanese EFL learners' pragmatic competence. So, Sudanese EFL students need to be exposed to the necessary learning materials through carefully designed English curriculum. Furthermore, the Sudanese EFL textbooks at all levels of education in general, and at college level in particular, should be modified and amended to include more dialogues, communicative tasks and conversational practices: role-plays, pair works and verbal communication activities. It is recommended that communicative competence should be

developed through effective reading, that is; communicative competence should be given more attention in the present syllabus and students should be given enough opportunities to practice English in authentic communicative situations.

- It is also recommended that Sudanese EFL learners be familiarized with the target language sociocultural norms and pragmatic instruction, to do more communicative activities and practice speaking English inside the classroom to improve their communicative competence. Sudanese syllabus designers have to increase the uses of authentic material and native-like communicative situations in English language textbooks to maintain more practice of the target language in classrooms. Textbooks as the major source of the learning process should also contain a suitable number of speech acts, conversational implicatures use, situational routines language and how to use politeness strategies appropriately to promote both teachers and foreign language learners' pragmatic awareness and comprehension.
- Moreover, speech acts deserve further attention when designing materials and textbooks for Sudanese learners of English because they are considered the most fundamental source of social and cultural values of the target language community. The more the language learners are provided with the sufficient target language pragmatic knowledge and adequate learning opportunities, the more they are successful in performing different speech acts.
- It is also possible to suggest that college English language teachers be highly proficient in English as a foreign language, and efficient in providing their students with the necessary linguistic information and familiarizing them with the target language pragmatic knowledge. Such teaching would help develop the EFL learners' in the future.
- In addition, some methods of teaching English language which are used in Sudan are not suitable for developing the communicative skills of the English language students. So, these methods of language teaching, especially the traditional ones, at all educational levels, need to be replaced by current and communicative methods of teaching, such as the Communicative Language Teaching Method (CLTM) and Eclectic methods. This also entails hiring college teachers of English who have already been trained on how to teach foreign language methodically and how to use it appropriately.
- Hiring highly efficient and experienced teachers would greatly help develop the EFL learners' communicative competence and language proficiency and equip them with the adequate skills to use the foreign language effectively in the future. That is, in order to have pragmatically competent Sudanese EFL learners who can use English successfully; it is a prerequisite to expose them to at least a specialized syllabus and qualified teachers who can provide them with the target language sociocultural norms and the pragmatic functions in their classrooms.

5.3 Pedagogical implications

Regarding the process of teaching, most of the teaching situations in the Sudanese classrooms still adopt the traditional approaches to language teaching and learning. This partly explains why the communicative value of the linguistic forms is not considered in traditional teaching practice. Emphasis is only on grammatical rules of the language not on how to use the language. English language teachers should be efficient and able to use the most current and effective methods of language teaching such as the Communicative Language Teaching Method (CLTM) and Eclectic Method.

These methods offer good opportunities for the students to verbally communicate in the target language frequently because these methods focus on developing the students' ability to participate in their classrooms. So English language teachers must be well-trained and equipped with the necessary skills for teaching the foreign language according to current trends of language teaching. In addition, they must be provided with the pragmatic knowledge and authentic materials that allow them to develop their students' communicative competence.

To interact effectively within a particular discourse community, students should know that it is not sufficient to be skillful in nonverbal communication and ignore the role of language in verbal communication. Students should activate both nonverbal and verbal aspects of communication in order to effectively express their thoughts and feelings. It is the job of teachers to train their students in this respect. An effective teacher can overcome the shortcomings of a text by creating native-like language practices and life-like classroom environment. However, it is not an easy job for even highly qualified language teachers to overcome the shortcomings of a text in a given syllabus, which necessitates the preparation of the adequate curriculum.

5.4 Implications for syllabus design

This study recommends the necessity of designing English curriculum that would help develop the Sudanese college students' pragmatic competence, in addition to linguistic competence. The suggested syllabus should be carefully designed by efficient syllabus designers and language teaching specialists to include pragmatic instruction of the target language and authentic language and native-like social situations and communicative activities in classrooms. Target language pragmatic knowledge should be introduced into the syllabus in various ways as situational language, group work tasks, role plays and dialogues that involve the foreign language learners in communicative activities spontaneously.

Most textbooks of English language curriculum in Sudan are inadequate. Much emphasis is put on the grammatical and lexical properties of linguistic forms. How these forms can be used in real communication is not considered. So, the ability to use language appropriately according to the social situation that is, to use the foreign language successfully; is one of the problems encountered by Sudanese university EFL learners because they have been learning the target language through an inadequate curriculum. That is why, designing a comprehensive syllabus containing authentic language models with pragmatic instruction and

comprehensible linguistic forms is considered a necessary condition. However, such a syllabus definitely requires careful preparation and scrutinized implementation.

5.5 Suggestions for further research

Participants in this study are all students attending their courses of study at the University of Khartoum. It would have been much better if some of these participants also belonged to other national universities to give a wider range of selection and variation. It is also suggested that a similar study be conducted to cover a bigger number of Sudanese EFL learners than the 126 of the present study. It is also believed that if postgraduate level participants had also been involved in the (PCT), it would have given the present study a wider scope of research, especially that pragmatic comprehension and production entail higher language proficiency.

Furthermore, more pragmatics studies need to be conducted that focus on how to design textbooks to include the necessary pragmatic knowledge, authentic materials and communicative activities. Textbooks, however, are not the only source of pragmatic input for the EFL learner in the classroom. The college English language teachers are expected to offer some practical ways to include pragmatic aspects when designing the English textbooks to provide the EFL learners with the adequate communicative activities which would help develop their pragmatic competence and, if possible, contribute to overcome the shortcomings in the textbooks. All these future research suggestions will help in understanding the various factors that facilitate the Sudanese EFL learners' pragmatic competence development.

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