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# ASSESSING TANZANIAN EFL LEARNERS' SOCIAL PRAGMATIC PROFICIENCY

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## ABSTRACT

This study assessed the proficiency of Tanzanian EFL learners at social pragmatics level. 50 secondary school EFL learners in secondary schools were involved in the study, 25 from a rural secondary school in Kilimanjaro region and the other 25 from an urban school in Dar es Salaam region. Data were gathered using a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) which consisted of six speech events. In each event they were requested to imagine they were participants in the events in which they were performing particular speech events of expressing displeasure, giving administrative directives and in ordering at a restaurant, advising someone who is in emotional difficulties, showing courtesy and, lastly, communicating refusal. The responses for each speech event were arranged in recurrent forms of locutionary acts and frequencies were computed for each locutionary act and analyses were based on the range from the most appropriate and polite to the most likely or potentially infelicitous illocutionary acts.

The findings revealed that EFL learners in under study had various ways of executing social language engagements. The majority, however, seemed to fail to link the illocutionary force and locutionary act, resulting into either impoliteness of total inefficity of the illocutionary act. It was suggested that teachers be trained into proficiency based instructions so as to make their learners true communicants using English rather than making half-baked pseudo linguists who claim to know rules of Grammar of English but cannot communicate using the language.

**KEYWORDS:** EFL Learners, Illocutionary Acts, Infelicity, Social Pragmatics

## INTRODUCTION

Pragmatics has been defined in a variety of ways in relation to authors' theoretical orientation and audience (Kasper and Rose, 2001). Crystal (1997: 301) views pragmatics 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 has on other participants in the act of communication'. In other words, pragmatics deals with 'speakers' communicative intentions, the uses of language that require these intentions, and the strategies that hearers employ to determine what these intentions and acts are' (Davis 1991:11). Since language is used in context, knowledge of pragmatics is necessary to achieve communication. Hence, pragmatic components have been included in many second and foreign language teaching contexts (Kasper 1997, Kasper and Rose, 2001).

Following the 'sociolinguistic revolution' in early 1970s (Johnson 2001:50), rules and principles of pragmatics entered the field of SLA. In his article 'On communicative competence', Hymes (1970) revisited Chosmky's (1965) concept of competence by approaching it from a pragmatics standpoint since he introduced the notion of 'the appropriate'. Being 'appropriate' in relation to the context in which language is used and evaluated has since then been an area of

interest among applied linguists. In that line of thought, knowledge of grammar rules should be complimented with the ability to use these rules (Hymes, 1972). Therefore, it could be claimed that Hymes' notion of 'the appropriate' represents learners' pragmatic competence even though the latter is not used as a theoretical term.

According to Canale and Swain (1980), there are three main components of communicative competence: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence. Communicative approach primarily targets at facilitating the integration of all these kinds of knowledge that comprise communicative competence (Canale and Swain 1980:27). While Canale and Swain admitted the importance of grammatical competence, they emphasized that construction of grammatically correct speech is not enough when interactional and discourse contexts are not taken into consideration.

Thus, sociolinguistic competence, which encompasses the knowledge of sociocultural rules of use and discourse, is crucial for the interpretation and transmission of messages. In particular, sociocultural rules of use define what is in Hymes' words 'the appropriate' (Hymes 1970), respecting contextual features such as topic, role of participants, setting and norms of interaction. What is more, grammatical forms are expected to be used in appropriate attitude, register and style so as to convey meaning.

More specifically, the term pragmatic competence, as defined by Backman (1990), includes illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence. The former is the knowledge of conventional rules needed for the performance of acceptable acts while the latter is related to the knowledge of sociolinguistic conventions for the performance of appropriate functions for particular contexts. This article is concerned with illocutionary competence, which in Searle's (1969) words, encompasses utterance acts, propositional acts and illocutionary acts, together with language functions, for example the heuristic, the ideational and the imaginative function as they are specified by Halliday (1973). In employing illocutionary competence, one is able to interpret the illocutionary force of utterances and combine language functions to construct coherent stretches of speech.

In a nutshell, drawing on Hymes' (1970), Jakobovits (1970), Campbell and Wales (1970) and Munby (1978), a key-term for the notion of 'pragmatic competence' is appropriacy. In other words, an EFL learner is expected to develop the ability to make appropriate language choices when using language. There are cases in which a speaker perceives a language choice as appropriate while another does not. Sociocultural factors such as educational background, socioeconomic status, lifestyle and personal experiences affect linguistic choices. What is more, in foreign language learning, learners have either no or little firsthand experience of living and interacting with native speakers of the language. Hence, the learner's sense of what is appropriate or not in the foreign language is mainly developed through instruction or self-study. Despite the variety of factors that contribute to linguistic variation, some choices are generally conceived as the most appropriate ones for particular contexts. Abiding by 'rules of conventionality' (Van Dijk 1977:189-90 in Backman 1990:89), these choices are deemed acceptable for the particular context and can be used as guidelines for both instruction and assessment of pragmatic competence.

**Empirical Studies**

This study would not be the first in the world in assessing pragmatic competence of EFL learner. A good number of studies have been conducted, the examples of which are as follows:

Jaén (2007) made an assessment of the collocational competence of students of English Linguistics at the

University of Granada. Results revealed that students possess a poor collocational competence, the scores concerning the productive items being, as expected, significantly lower than the receptive ones.

Xiao-le (2011) explored whether explicit and implicit instructions of request strategies would be effective in helping Chinese EFL learners gain pragmatic knowledge and achieve pragmatic appropriateness in on-line communication. He found that both explicit and implicit groups demonstrated improvements after the intervention, but to different degree. The explicit group showed greater progress in the appropriate level of formality, directness, and politeness realized through the syntactic patterns, internal and external modifications, and sequence of request components.

Hardovi-Harlig and Dornyei (1998) explored the extent to which instructed L2 learners of English were aware of differences in learners' and target-language production in grammar, which addresses the accuracy of utterances, and pragmatics, which addresses the appropriateness of utterances given specific situations, speakers, and content. The results showed that whereas EFL learners and their teachers consistently identified and ranked grammatical errors as more serious than pragmatic errors, ESL learners and their teachers showed the opposite pattern, ranking pragmatic errors as more serious than grammatical errors.

Li, Suleiman and Sazalie (2015) investigated Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic competence in terms of both awareness and production. Three research instruments were employed to collect data: a multiple-choice discourse completion task (MDCT), a written discourse completion task (WDCT), and a retrospective interview. Eight-five English major undergraduates from a university in China participated in the study. The results showed that Chinese EFL learners' ability to identify and produce contextually appropriate utterances needed to be promoted, and their pragmatic awareness was found to be positively correlated with their production. Compared with the ranking of imposition, Chinese EFL learners were more aware of the interlocutor's social power and tried to display the power distance in their language. However, they had difficulties in using appropriate strategies and linguistic features to achieve communicative intentions, and a very serious problem that they encountered was the intended meaning and force of different linguistic forms and strategies.

Liu and Huang (2012) assessed routines, conversational implicature and the speech acts of request and apology among three groups of Chinese EFL learners with different levels of English proficiency using MDCTs and found significant differences among the three groups of learners in their performance on routines and speech acts, but not on conversational implicature. The result indicated the imbalance development of different aspects of pragmatic competence.

Li and Jiang (2014) reported on a survey of English majors' pragmatic competence in terms of their knowledge of speech acts, appropriate language use, and culture. The study showed that Chinese learners' linguistic knowledge did not contribute to their pragmatic competence and they scored highest in cultural knowledge, followed by the appropriateness of language use. They, however, did poorly in speech act knowledge. The result of the interview, however, was not discussed by the researchers.

Glaser (2009) studied the dispreferred speech act of disagreeing by 27 Native Speakers and 27 Non-Native Speakers' college students in the US, taking part in preparatory ESL courses with the goal of passing the TOEFL to be admitted to regular college courses. Their English language proficiency ranged at intermediate according to the ACTFL proficiency guidelines. The participants were given questionnaires containing ten Discourse Completions Tasks (DCTs). She found that the native speakers showed more variations in their showing to disagreement strategies.

Cancino (2015) assessed the opportunities for learner involvement and negotiation of meaning that teachers provide in the unfolding interaction in an EFL setting. Classroom data from a Chilean EFL setting were collected in order to assess how teachers deploy a number of interactional features when managing contingent learner turns. He noted that a number of interactional features were found to influence the quality and amount of negotiation of meaning and learner involvement.

As it can be discerned from the above named studies, the majority of the studies on EFL interlanguage pragmatics have been in Asian world, notably in Japan and a few in Europe. African studies, to the best of our knowledge are missing in this area of interlanguage pragmatics. The current study seeks to fill that gap, by assessing social pragmatic competence of EFL learners in Tanzania.

## METHODOLOGY

50 secondary school EFL learners in secondary schools took part in the study, 25 from a rural secondary school in Mwanga district, Kilimanjaro and the other 25 from an urban school in Temeke district, Dar es Salaam. They were served with a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) which consisted of six speech events. In each event they were requested to imagine they were participants in the events in which they were performing particular speech events. The first was testing their ability to express displeasure and disapproval. The second was their ability in executing directive speech acts in giving administrative directives and in ordering at a restaurant. The third task sought to test the learners' ability to provide a piece of advice especially to a person in emotional difficulties. The fifth was their ability to show courtesy and the last one was testing their ability to communicate refusal in turning down advances for friendship.

The responses for each speech event were arranged in recurrent forms of illocutionary acts and frequencies were computed for each illocutionary act and analyses were based on the range from the most appropriate and polite to the most likely or potentially infelicitous illocutionary acts.

## FINDINGS

The findings are organized in the chronology of the six speech events as was arranged in the DCT, as follows.

- **Expressive**

Expressive function of language, which is concerned with linguistically communicating one's emotive aspect of displeasure and disapproval were performed variously by the learners as summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1: EFL Learners' Expressing Displeasure and Disapproval**

| Locutionary Act | Expressing Displeasure | Expressing Disapproval |
|---|---|---|
| Imperative, Direct | 10 | 23 |
| Interrogative, Polite | 18 | 24 |
| Declarative with 'Please' | 22 | 0 |
| Declarative without 'Please' | 7 | 0 |
| Potentially Infellitious | 3 | 13 |

The use of declarative sentence with 'please' was most dominant form of expressing displeasure, with 22 (37%) out of 60 respondents followed by use of interrogative form, by 18 (30%).

The use of declarative without 'please' which is a direct form of expressing displeasure, was the least used form of expressing displeasure, with only 7 (11.7%) of the respondents. the most direct form was direct imperative in which the speaker informed their addressee what they (addressee) have done/not done to them and express the perlocutionary effect of what the addresses said or did to them. This was used by 10% (16.7%) of all respondents.

As for expressing disapproval the majority (24, which is 40% of all the respondents) used polite interrogative while 23 (38%) used imperative form that was of direct mode. Lack of variability in expressing disapproval was manifested in the use of neither declarative with 'please' nor declarative without 'please'. Also 13 (21.7%) of the learners proved pragmatically incompetent in this expressive aspect that has the potential infelicity.

In a study by Du (1995) of complaints among Mandarin speakers, he observed that complaining 'suggest' the most recurring strategy followed by 'try to cope', 'other', 'hope' and 'complain'.

- **Requesting**

Trosborg (1995) views requests as illocutionary acts whereby requesters convey to requestees that he or she wants the requestees to perform an act which is for the benefit of the requesters. She classifies requests as an *imposetive speech acts* because they impose on the requestee. In the current study, the language use for requesting was assessed in four communicative situations and the mode of rendering communication was at four options as summarized in table 2, where in frequencies of uses by the respondents are also presented.

**Table 2: EFL Learners' Pragmatic Competence in Asking**

| Mode of Communicating | Asking for Help | Asking for A 'Lift' (Indirect) | Requesting for Discount | Asking For Favour |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Imperative, Direct | 6 | 0 | 17 | 17 |
| Interrogative, Polite | 32 | 42 | 28 | 43 |
| Declarative with 'Please' | 19 | 7 | 0 | 0 |
| Declarative without 'Please' | 3 | 8 | 13 | 0 |
| Potentially Infelicitous | 0 | 3 | 2 | 0 |

The findings indicate that the use of interrogative form for speech situations (asking for help, 32); asking for a ride, 42; requesting for a discount, 28, and asking for a favour, 43 predominated over and above all other forms of locution acts. This is indicative of these EFL learners' pragmatic competence is the realm of requesting since the most polite form of requesting is the use of interrogative form. However, in asking for a help 19 out of 50 used a declarative form with a 'please' which is yet another polite way of requesting, only that it is more formal than the use of interrogative form. Very few in this category of requesting produced potentially infeliticious locationary act.

A related study to this one was by Jalilifar (2009) of the request strategies used by Iranian learners of English and Australian NSs of English. He chose the request situations basing on the social factors of power and social distance. Results indicated that the learners with higher proficiency displayed indirect kind of requesting, whereas the native group displayed a balanced use of this strategy. Another similar study was by Hashemian (2014) who studied the use of requesting speech act by Iranian nonnative speakers (NNSs) of English and Canadian native speakers (NSs) of English. Data were obtained by a discourse completion test (DCT) including 12 situations and was translated into Persian to elicit the data from the Persian NNSs. It was observed that the Iranians revealed more variations in their request performance and were more sensitive to power differences.

- **Directives**

In the speech situations of directives, the giving of administrative directive was expressed through use of polite interrogative by 37 out of 50 respondents as contrasted with a formal way of using declarative sentences with a please (by 15 (30%) and fearless (only 6(12%) used the least polite one involving an imperative sentence without a 'please'.

However, for ordering at a restaurant, about two thirds (31, which is 62%) of the respondents used the most impolite of giving a directive, which is use of direct imperative as composed to 15 (30%) and 13 (26%) who used polite forms of a declarative 'please' and a polite interrogative, respectively.
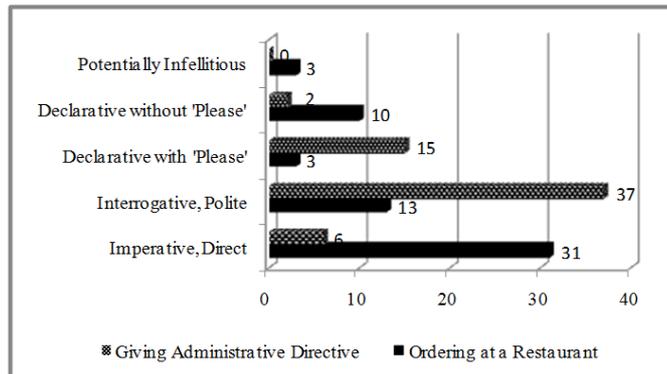


**Figure 1: EFL Learners Competence in Directing**

However, a significant number (10, which is 20%) used equally less polite declarative forms of locutionary acts with a 'please' in ordering at a restaurant.

- **Advising**

Advising was contextually restricted to giving a piece of advice in a situation of searching for a solution out of a predicament. Only a single speech situation was provided to test this aspect of speech acts the results of which are presented in figure 2.
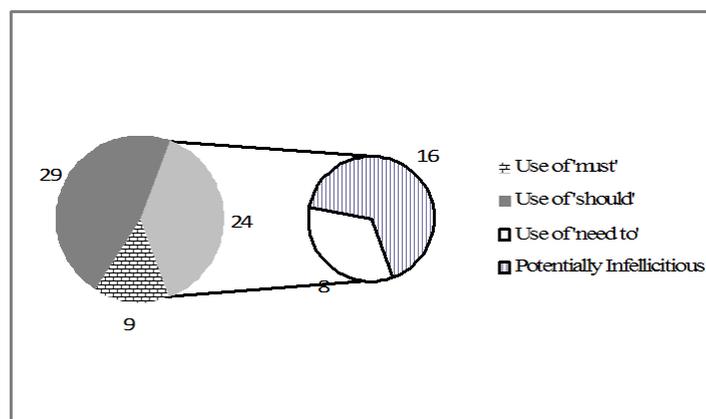


**Figure 2: EFL Learners' Pragmatic Competence**

The results show predominance of a compulsive modal auxiliary 'should' in providing advice since over half (29, which is 58%) used this auxiliary. The use of 'should' communicates inevitability on the part of listener, hence giving them

no explicit alternative paths to their predicament. This is, in the eyes of many native speakers, not polite but in the context of these EFL Learners, their Bantu background make them find should an acceptance word in giving a piece of advice. The same goes for 'must' – even stronger (hence impolite) marker of compulsion and inevitability, which was used by a (18%) of the responds.

The likely choice and thus the most appropriate 'need to' was used by only 8 (16%) respondents. Therefore, one can conclude that while it is true the majority of these EFL learner could give advice correctly (save for the 16 (32%) whose locutionary acts were potentially inficilies) any 16% did so appropriately or politely.

- **Showing Courtesy**

Showing courtesy was tested in a single instance where one is in a situation requiring one to be left alone and we were interested the mode of communication an offer to leave the sufferer alone to provide him or her with some privacy. Figure3 below illustrates differing forms of communication such offer.
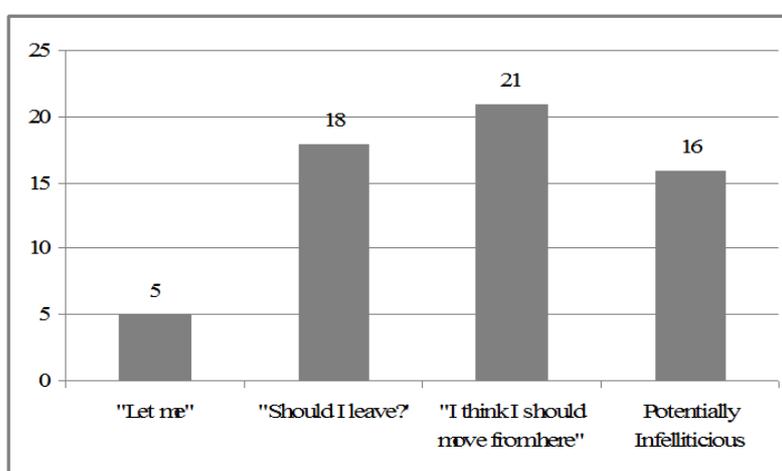


**Figure 3: EFL Learners Competence in Showing Courtesy**

The findings as shown in figure 3 show that 21 (42%) indicated they would explicitly express their inevitable moving out to give the experiencer some space. However, 18 (36%) opted for asking for the opinion of the experiencer in their use of an interrogative form 'should I leave' this communicating their offer to be in solidarity with their colleague. Only 5 (10%) used a self committal 'let me' when communicating their choice of leaving to give their colleague save space. Nonetheless, 16 (32%) produced infelicitous locutionary acts.

Generally, these EFL learners know one way or another of expressing courtesy though the most polite are is the interrogative "should I leave". This is because it allows the person who is an object of sympathy to reply in a manner s/he sees convenient to him/her.

- **Refusal**

Refusal in this context was about a lady turning down advances for friendship by a very persistent boy. The learners were asked to imagine they were the girl and their varied responses are summarized in figure 4 below.
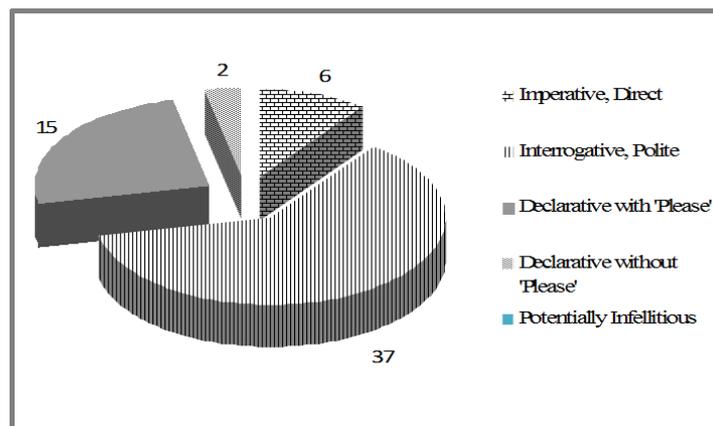
**Figure 4: Different Forms of Expressing Refusal**

The findings show that about three quarters of all respondents (74%) used interrogative which is the most polite way of turning down ones advances for friendship without threatening their face. 15 (30%) used declarative forms with a 'please' a yet polite way to refuse someone's offer of friendship, only second to interrogative form. Only a small number 6 (12%) choose a blatant imperative, which is the most impolite. So, again, here the EFL learners were, in their majority, conversant with appropriate and polite way of refusal.

A similar study was by Al-Eryani (2007) investigated refusal strategies in Yemeni with 20 EFL learners. Data were obtained through a discourse completion task (DCT) with six refusal situations. The Yemeni learners' performance was compared to the American NSs to find any deviation from the L2 norms. The refusal strategies selection by the learners revealed the occurrence of both pragmatic competence and pragmatic transfer according to their social status (i.e., higher, equal, or lower) and based on the situation itself.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study has established that EFL learners in Tanzania have various ways of executing social language engagements. The majority, however, seem to fail to link the illocutionary force and locutionary act, resulting into either impoliteness of total infelicity of the illocutionary act. Secondly, the knowledge of grammar plays a vital part in ensuring pragmatic competence of the learners; in other words, even with a caution by Dell Hymes (1976) that rules of grammar are useless without rules of usage, we argue that knowledge of grammatical rules is still a foundational stone upon which rules of usage are applied. Thirdly, failure to get things done using language has a lot to tell about the mode of language teaching in Tanzania where, as research informs, is form focused rather than communicative. It is therefore suggested that teachers be trained into proficiency based instructions so as to make their learners true communicants using English rather than making half-baked pseudo linguists who claim to know rules of Grammar of English but cannot communicate using the language.

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