



Original Contribution

**DEVELOPING ENGLISH PRIMARY LEARNERS' PRAGMATIC
COMPETENCE: PSYCHOLINGUISTIC APPROACH**

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ABSTRACT

The article presents practical ways to harmonize English teaching by balancing linguistic, sociolinguistic competences with the pragmatic one at primary school. We employ psycholinguistic approach to facilitate close to real life communication in the classroom. The PURPOSE of this paper is to reveal an experimental psycholinguistic shift from prioritizing linguistic with the elements of sociolinguistic competences to a more balanced model of teaching speaking young primary learners, which resembles natural communication and includes pragmatic competence too. METHODS: The paper presents the results of an action research carried out among 9-10-year old schoolchildren from 3 primary schools. During the research, we turned to interviewing teachers and learners, used questionnaires and observation. We employed analysis and experiment during the intervention. The RESULTS reveal students' interactive problems while speaking in English realized in their bodies, articulatory blockages predetermined by emotional and psychological tension as well as the lack of appropriate language and pragmatic skills. In CONCLUSIONS, we have developed a range of recommendations with examples to facilitate teacher's work with primary students' pragmatic competence along with linguistic and sociocultural ones.

Key words: communication, interaction, harmonization, primary schooling, a balanced model.

INTRODUCTION

Communication is a natural way of exchange between people, which reveals their understanding and reflections about the world, events, situations, etc. Pragmatic component of communication presupposes effective realization of interlocutors' goals in discourse in the given context (1-3). Correspondently, this process requires the expression of thoughts and ideas interesting enough for the targeted audience to reach a speaker's goals. Then a vivid interaction of interlocutors takes place. So, pragmatic competence is the ability of a speaker to be an effective communicator reaching his/her goals using appropriate items out of his/her arsenal of available linguistic and extra linguistic means.

Correspondently, developing students' communicative competence in English presupposes gradual mastery of oral production, and comprehension along with pragmatic, sociolinguistic and linguistic competencies (4, 5). At Ukrainian schools, pupils usually learn to communicate in English with the help of communicative formulas, grammar constructions, topical vocabulary, which gradually give them the possibility to express themselves from the simplest to more sophisticated forms. It means that linguistic and partially sociolinguistic competencies take the lead in the process of learning a foreign language. As a result, approximately only 1/4 of a typical Ukrainian class could be considered successful in speaking English. Ukrainian teachers claim there are little resources and skills to develop students' communicative skills with the inclusion of the pragmatic competence as well.

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According to the “Typical study programme for Grades 3-4” developed by Shyian, the students should communicate within familiar topics and react to simple phrases and express their urgent needs (6). It means that primary school students can acquire a range of communicative means to understand others and express themselves. The task of a teacher is to explain and show how to employ this or that speech tool effectively in a given context of communication.

The purpose of this paper is to reveal an experimental psycholinguistic shift from prioritizing linguistic with the elements of sociolinguistic competences to a more balanced model of teaching speaking young primary learners, which resembles natural communication and includes pragmatic competence too. The latter presupposes natural turntaking, flexibility, cooperation, propositional precision, cohesion and coherence, thematic development, effective addressing the audience, being interesting for an interlocutor, etc (2).

This paper follows the idea of M. Balconi and S. Amenta that pragmatic competence is characterized by some unique properties:

- *variability*: the property of communication that defines the range of communicative possibilities, among which is formulating communicative choices;
- *negotiability*: the possibility of making choices based on flexible strategies;
- *adaptability*; the ability to modulate and regulate communicative choices in relation to the communicative context;
- *salience*: the degree of awareness reached by communicative choices;
- *indeterminacy*: the possibility to re-negotiate pragmatic choices as the interaction unfolds in order to fulfill communicative intentions;
- *dynamicity*: development of the communicative interaction in time (7).

The Research questions are as follows:

1. Why is it sometimes difficult for students to adequately react to a communicative stimulus in English?
2. What recommendations could be suggest for developing English primary learners’ pragmatic competence?

3. How can teachers stimulate students’ natural communicative production and comprehension with the help of psycholinguistic approach?

We put forward the **hypothesis** that implementing psycholinguistic approach to develop natural ways of communication adequate for primary learners’ physical, psychological and interactive needs gradually forms their pragmatic competence of interacting in English.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research experiment took place during the academic year of 2021–2022. In our research, we have purposefully selected the students with clear difficulty to express their ideas orally in the classroom or to communicate with their classmates in English. We have organized our study with 85 primary school students aged 9–10 from 3 Uman schools (Ukraine) while testing the idea of the so called “Children’s University” initiated at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Pavlo Tychyna Uman State Pedagogical University. We worked individually and in groups in the form of blended learning. The participants were informed about the action research and gave their consent as well as their parents did.

Stages of research:

- I. Preliminary stage to find out the reasons of the students’ speaking problems.
- II. Developing recommendations and intervening them in the classroom
- III. Analysis and interpretations of the research results.

During the first stage of the research, we observed the way the students participated in the communicative activities tracing the obstacles on their way to clear communication. With the help of an interview, we figured out some aspects of the communicative problems. Finally, the open questionnaire was applied to learn those aspects of problems which the students did not feel easy to reveal while being interviewed (the students gave answers anonymously). On having summed up the results of the preliminary stage, we developed some recommendations and techniques to stimulate the development of students’ communicative competence taking into

regard the pragmatic component of the process. Finally, we made conclusions about the results of the experiment.

RESULTS

The observation showed that teaching English often meets the problem of students' adequate reaction to a communicative stimulus. Some students keep quiet while being asked a question or just say, "I don't know". Some sort of a physical blockage appears which prevents the students from active participation in speaking practices and activities. The students' body



Figure 1. A student's posture before intervention.

It takes time and special efforts to overcome this problem. In our case study, the positive changes required up to 6 months.

In the preliminary interview, we developed a range of questions to find out the students' subjective understanding of their speaking

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language in such uneasy situations shows tension: turning away the face with their eyes down, flashing, crunching hands, turning from one side to another, balancing on one foot, etc. In general, a student's posture is not natural. It is crooked with no steady base as shown in **Figure 1**. It is characterized by chaotic movements of uneasiness. The feet or arms are usually crossed. The students breathe out heavily or just do not breathe normally holding their breath for some time of "danger". Their posture resembles the one of an embryo trying to hide and find a "safer" place.



Figure 2. A student's posture during and after intervention.

problems. It is remarkable that the pupils did not feel easy to talk about their communication problems in the classroom that is why the interview questions indirectly addressed the problem.

Table 1. Preliminary interview results “Students’ subjective perception of the speaking problem”

<i>Subjective reasons</i>	<i>%</i>
Lack of grammar and vocabulary	80
No ideas to express	60
Feeling uneasy	30

According to the preliminary interview (**Table 1**), the students point out the lack of vocabulary and grammar skills as the main reasons for their inability to communicate their thoughts and ideas orally. 60% associate their problems while speaking with the absence of ideas. While 30% could not single out any special reason for their speaking problems.

The results of the observation as well as the interviews with teachers proved that students have a limited arsenal of linguistic formulas to use in a given situation and skills of corresponding reactions to a verbal stimulus in

English. It is remarkable that all the topics were familiar to the students (“My house”, “School”, “Food”, etc.). When being asked about the same issues but in their mother tongue, the learners eagerly replied, which proves that the problem reduces to low linguistic and pragmatic competences when it comes to communicating in a foreign language.

Our next step was to find out students’ academic likes and dislikes while learning a foreign language as we needed to operate effective and involving activities during the intervention.

Table 2. Top 3 students’ academic likes and dislikes

Likes	Dislikes
Activities with high positive emotional feedback and involvement	Long routine activities & homework
Cooperative physical and communicative activities	Drilling
Being imitators, investigators, creators	Negative error corrections & criticism

Table 2 shows that it was crucial for students to be involved in the activities during which they could experience joy, laughing and smiling while interacting with classmates and the teacher. It means that creating the atmosphere of joy and success where students are free to improvise and express their desires is one of the key issues to developing their pragmatic competence (8). The learners also liked cooperating with each other, having a physical contact and having an emotional response. Students also adored moving from one place to another while performing or doing some speaking activities. At the same time, students’ attention was an issue for the teacher to fight for. The activities which lasted for more than 10 minutes provoked yawning, tiredness and the loss of interest. The students also felt

embarrassed when being interrupted with the teacher’s error corrections and negative feedback. One more issue is that at the age of 9-10 the students are open to perceive and learn some grammatical material, and teacher’s explanations but at the same time we should be careful with drilling (not to turn the whole class into grammar execution) (9).

During the intervention stage, we focused on developing the materials and the system of class activities, which would gradually develop students’ communicative competence balancing all its components with pragmatic competence. As a result, we have developed a range of recommendations for teachers, which proved to be effective during the intervention stage.

DISCUSSIONS

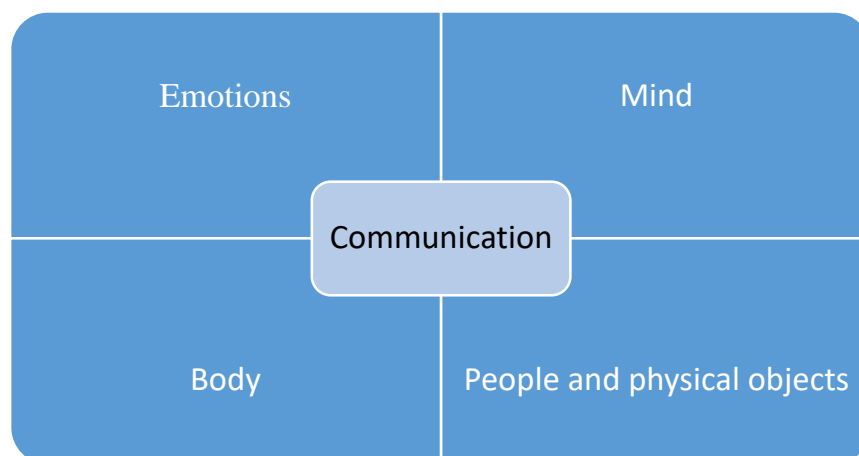


Figure 3. Spheres involved while developing students' pragmatic competence.

We employ psycholinguistic approach for developing pragmatic competence regarding communication as an active involvement of a speaker's mind, body and emotions in communicative exchange with interlocutors and the outer world in general as presented in **Figure 3**. The crucial point is that student's effectiveness of communication and its natural flow requires harmonization of all these spheres.

That is the reason why we state that formation of learners' pragmatic competence should start with the willingness and readiness to cooperate with others. Primary school children should be constantly given the ideas that:

communication is joyful;

other people are willing to listen to me and to cooperate with me;

I'm open to speak and interact with others;

The world around me is friendly;

I can trust you and you can trust me, etc.

We recommend to make some stickers or inscriptions with the above-given reminders in the classroom or copybooks. Such messages should be visible for students and proved in the process of communication. In case, not all the notions are familiar to students, it is possible to substitute written messages with symbolic ones. Another recommendation refers to balancing students' minds, body and emotions with the help of a small physical workout up to 3 minutes. Such a short training will activate not only learners' body but also their cognitive sphere. It is

preferable to introduce such activities at the beginning and / or end of the class to stimulate the students and to low down their tension and anxiety. Employing physical activities and movements (mouth and tongue gymnastics; stretching & breathing; "feeling the base"; "feeling your partner and the atmosphere in the classroom", etc.) also proved to be useful whenever the teacher can observe lower picks of learners' involvement in communication. They stimulate cognitive activity of the brain, promote self-confidence and trust to the communicative partners.

Physical reactions are also good for practicing some language formulas. It is worth combining them with the corresponding body movement, e. g.:

- making a gesture when saying, "Here you are!";
- smiling while offering a drink;
- sitting or jumping when guessing the end of an idea expressed;
- having an eye-contact when addressing the interlocutor;
- smiling while shaking and holding hands, etc.

These simple things are extremely helpful for establishing and maintaining the communicative contact. They take away students' worries and uncertainty about partner's attitude to them. Moreover, they create some involving and friendly atmosphere in the classroom.

One more issues, which is worse practicing in this regard, is student's posture and position in the learning environment. Teaching learners how to stand or sit in a proper way, to breathe while speaking and look at your audience help to be more confident and relaxed. We recommend drawing primary school children's attention to these issues at the beginning of the class or whenever it is appropriate in the given learning context. It usually takes from several seconds to several minutes but produces a massive effect and raises students' confidence, self-control and self-discipline.

Physical objects around the students can totally form their own learning environment giving pragmatic vision of the world (10). Our next recommendation is to use whatever at hand for studying English apart from those materials, which were deliberately produced for teaching (flashcards, toys, lego, etc.). This sort of experimenting provokes students' vivid interest especially when they become active creators of their learning environment. In this regard, we are suggesting permissiveness in the positive sense of this notion meaning students are allowed to create close to real life or imaginary situations or objects. For example, while studying the topic "City" we employed pieces of close to imitate some road and river, boxes from candies stood for some buildings, pencils were used for bridges, etc. Using materials of various forms, shapes and colours is beneficial as they stimulate different parts of the brain. Such sort of activities is involving for learners as they open up their creative potential and imagination. They stimulate their pragmatic reproduction of the world physically, verbally and emotionally.

The teacher is welcome to experiment with places and manner of doing some activities as well. During the intervention, we tried to develop every new communicative activity in a different place changing parts of the room or in a different student's position (sitting, standing, jumping, dancing, etc.). For instance, while learning new prepositions of place we employed a paper mouse with a sticker every time changing its position in the space in relation to other objects (table, wardrobe, mirror and even students' clothes). If to speak about students' position, we asked them to change it every time as in such a way we

stimulated their blood circulation and muscles activity. Using linked activities (quiet-noisy, active-passive, etc.) will also contribute to better learning results as in such a way we are activating right and left semi-sphere of children's brains (11). For example, after an active gaming activity we turned students' hands to writing and creating a poster sitting at the desk cutting out some pictures, drawing and writing.

Keeping in mind variability of pragmatics (2), we would recommend providing communicative models close to real life situations. Such examples give the understanding of native speakers' pragmatic intentions (12). For example, while teaching ethical formulas *Sorry-Pardon-Excuse me* it is worth explaining the clear rules about when, how and why speakers use these expressions. The teacher can help the learners to compare how these phrases function in their mother tongue and in English (13). After that, it is necessary to provide some video examples of the situations, which would clearly exemplify social rules. It is preferable to select vivid and breathtaking models from real life communication or very close to that. Then the teacher can turn to practicing *Sorry-Pardon-Excuse me* in small dialogues role-playing some situations. Another advantage of using communicative models is that students can reach their interactive pragmatic goals immediately thus experiencing some communicative success (14). It activates cooperation and trust among students and teachers.

While developing pragmatic competence it is crucially important to familiarize the students with the algorithm of actions usually taken by speakers in typical situations ("Meeting someone for the first time", "In the shop", "Travelling", etc.). In this regard, linguistic, extralinguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic components of communication working together develop students' cognitive level of oral communicative production as well as their imagination (15). For example, *imagine the last time you went shopping. What did you do? What did you say? Imagine you are... What shall you do?* Some visual associations representing people's actions in typical situations along with their analysis can be helpful and boost students' oral or written

production. Learners can also be asked to show and role-play such situations.

Finally, praising in class is another instrument of psycholinguistic support for learners and the way to create positive atmosphere in the classroom. To develop such sort of an atmosphere it is advisable sometimes to omit the correction of students' grammar or vocabulary errors so that not to block the potential of their oral production. It gives the idea that making mistakes is natural. One cannot succeed without making mistakes. Error correction can come after students' interaction and after some praising (8). Raising students' self-confidence with praising, positive feedback, encouragement, adequate error correction stimulates students' mastery and growth as well as self-reflection.

CONCLUSION

Psycholinguistic approach proved to be effective in terms of developing primary students' pragmatic competence along with linguistic and sociolinguistic ones. The intervention effects are seen gradually (from the first psycholinguistic practices up to six months). There are several reasons for that. Firstly, the results depend on the learners' personality types and wiliness to cooperate with the teacher and class. Secondly, the nature of personal psychic and physical blocks. Thirdly, the ability to learn the foreign languages.

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