

# **CHILDREN’S PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE (ISSUE ON FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION)**

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## **Abstract**

Having a competence of a language means knowing how to use the language properly, both in terms of the grammatical and lexical aspects and in terms of the other social aspects that underlying the use of the language. Pragmatic competence includes in the social aspects that must be owned by speakers of a language. Pragmatic competence involves illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence.

Children acquire this competence through people surrounding them. They acquire it in some stages. Firstly, they learn how to understand and make inference in daily conversation. Then they learn how to perform an act via utterances. The last is they learn how to say something politely. This competence becomes improved as children get older.

**Keywords: pragmatic competence, children, illocutionary competence, sociolinguistic competence**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Language is a means of communication. People use language to communicate their thought, ideas, and feeling. They also use language to interact with other people both for maintaining relationship and sharing information with others. Language covers not only grammatical and lexical aspects but also other aspects related to culture.

Speakers of a language must have knowledge not only of the grammatical and lexical systems but also the other aspects that help the speakers to use language appropriately. Those aspects are sociolinguistic, discourse, strategic, and pragmatic competence (Hymes, 1972; Canale and Swain, 1980; Bachman, 1990 in Hasbun, 2004). Having the competence of the three aspects, besides the grammar, helps the speakers use the language in daily interaction appropriately.

Pragmatic competence is “the ability to communicate effectively and involve knowledge beyond the level of grammar” (Thomas in Grossi, 2009). Pragmatic competence covers illocutionary and sociolinguistic competence (Hasbun, 2004, Rasekh, 2005). The first refers the ability to understand the speech act and speech function. It means that having the illocutionary competence, a speaker is able to select an appropriate form of language that can convey his/her intention effectively. Moreover, the illocutionary competence allows someone to understand or recognize an intended meaning conveyed by others. The latter is related to the culture in which the language exists such as politeness and formality. This paper discusses pragmatic competence acquired by children.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Pragmatic Competence**

Yule (1996) defines pragmatic as the study of language use. It studies about how language is used in real communication. It does not deal with grammatical and lexical aspects of languages. It goes deeper on how language is manipulated to help speakers gain their intention/purposes. It also investigates about how language relates with the culture of the speakers.

From the definition of pragmatics, hence pragmatic competence can be defined as the competence to use language in real context. Pragmatic competence consists of illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence (Rasekh, 2005).

#### **1. Illocutionary Competence**

Illocutionary competence refers to the ability to understand speech act and speech function (Rasekh, 2005). Yule (1996) defines speech act as ‘actions performed via utterances’. It means that every utterance produced by a speaker represent certain action that the speaker wants to perform. For example, when someone says ‘Can you help me?’, she/he is performing an action, i.e. requesting someone (the hearer) to help her.

Speech act consists of three elements. They are locutionary act, illocutionary act, and perlocutionary act. Among the three elements, understanding illocutionary act is the most important since it can help someone (the hearer) understand what a speaker wants to convey

through his/her utterances, i.e. requesting, giving compliment, expressing complaint, or inviting.

Similar utterance may have different intended meaning when spoken in a different context. For example, the utterance of 'it's hot here' may have two meanings. The first is that the speaker may want to give information to the hearer about the weather in the city when the utterance is spoken to someone who just moved/came to the city. The second is that the speaker may want the hearer to do something such as opening the window or turning the air conditioner when the utterance is spoken in common situation.

In contrast, different utterances may convey similar meaning like the utterance of 'can you help me?' and 'hey, don't just sit down! We have a lot of things to do!'. Those two utterances have different form, but it conveys the same purpose; that is the speaker wants someone (the hearer) to help him/her. The intended meaning of an utterance is the communicative purpose that the speaker of the utterance intends to gain. The communicative purpose is also known as illocutionary force.

There are five types of speech acts. They are declarations, representatives, expressives, directives, and commissives. The five types of speech act can be seen in the following table: (Yule, 1996)

Speech Act type	Direction of fit	S = speaker X = situation
Declarations	Words change the worlds	S causes X
Representatives	Make words fit the world	S believes X
Expressives	Make words fit the world	S feels X
Directives	Make the world fit the words	S wants X
Commissives	Make the world fit the words	S intends X

Among the five types of speech acts, the four types (representatives, directives, expressives, and commissives) are performed by children in their daily conversation.

## 2. Sociolinguistic competence

Sociolinguistics is the study of language related to the society. This field of study concerns with investigating why language users speak differently in different social context, the functions of language as well as the way the language used to convey social meaning (Holmes, 2001). Hence, sociolinguistic competence refers to the competence or the ability to use language based on the social context. It covers the ability to choose communicative acts and suitable strategies to apply them depending on the contextual features of the situation (Rasekh, 2005)

When speaking, people must consider many different kinds such as what to speak, how to speak, whom they are speaking to. According to Holmes (2001), there are four social factors that influence the choice of language. The first factor refers to the persons involving in the conversation. They are who is speaking and with whom the speaker is speaking. It means someone will speak differently to different people. For example, an employ will use more polite language when he speaks with his boss than when he speaks with his friend.

The second factor, the setting, is the place where the interaction occurs. It also influences the choice of the language. For example, someone will use formal language when he is in the office. But, while he is at home, he tends to use vernacular when speaking with his friends or his family.

The next is topic. It refers to what the participants of the conversation are talking about, whether it is about politics, entertainment or others. Talking about politics is different from talking about gossip in the case of the language choice. When talking about politics, economy, and other serious topics, people tend to use formal language. However, they prefer to choose informal style when they are gossiping or talking about light topics.

The last social factor is function. It refers to the purpose of the speaking. The goal of someone's speaking determines the choice of language. For example, when the purpose of speaking is warning or threatening others, people tend to be straight forward because the speaker wants his utterances to be understood clearly by the hearer. It is different from when someone requests something from the others. In requesting, the speaker sometimes says his request indirectly in order not to offend the hearer.

From the explanation above, it can be concluded that the first aspect related to sociolinguistic competence is about the knowledge of the language use in social context. Having

this competence allows someone to be able to use language properly. Besides the above factors, there is another aspect that influences the use of language. It is related to politeness aspect.

Politeness is socially prescribed. It is based on the norms, values, and standards set by the members of the society in which the language exists. Some societies have strict rules or norms about being polite in communication. Javanese, for instance, has some complex systems of politeness. Before speaking to another, a Javanese has to decide which style she/he must use, whether it is high, middle, or low style. It is important for politeness. In relation to the complex system of politeness in Javanese, Geertz (in Wardaugh, 1988) states "it is nearly impossible to say anything without indicating the social relationships between the speaker and the listener in terms of status and familiarity".

Another language which has extremely polite people is Japanese. They have some ways to say the same thing. For example, when offering something, using negative form like "wouldn't you like to ....?" is more polite than using positive form. Longer utterance is more polite than the shorter one. Stating something with only local dialect is considered less polite than stating something by mixing the utterance with loan words from Chinese. (Wardaugh, 1988). Hence, every speaker of language has to be aware of the norms or rule set in the society that he/she is considered polite to the hearer. When the norms or standard is ignored, other people in the society will think that the speaker is impolite person.

### **Children's Pragmatic Competence**

Pragmatic competence is acquired naturally. Children acquire this competence from people around them. They learn this competence through the daily communication with their parents, teachers, and older children. Through the interaction children receive the input of the competence and get continuous feedback from older people who become the appropriate model for them.

The first competence children acquire is making inference. When they start to be able to produce one word, children learn how to make inference. They do it by using their knowledge

about the event that they experience in past time. For example, requesting milk, they will just simply say “milk” while pointing the object that represents their want.

When their language is getting developed, their ability of making inference also improve. Children in the age of two are able to catch implicit message. For instance, a boy of two years old requests for buying toy, then the mother says “you have already many toys at home”. Getting this answer, the boy may start to cry because he understands that his request is rejected.

The next stage is related to speech act. Children must learn which utterances can be used to perform which functions. They have to know what to say when requesting, asserting, or directing. By the age of three, children learn how to take this factors into account when performing or understanding an utterance. For example, a boy of three years old will understand whether it is asserting or directing when his mother says “you cannot drink milk too much”. Based on his experience, he understands that it is directive when it is said to respond his request for another bottle of milk.

As children get older, they add to their repertoire of speech acts and to the range of forms used to convey each one. In stating their request, in earlier age, children tend to express it directly. However, as their language gets improved, they can use indirect form to express a request. A boy of three and half years will say “mom, i don’t have this kind of toy car” for asking his mother to buy one for him. Another example is knowing that he isn’t allowed to drink milk too much, he simply says “mom, I want to drink milk. Just a little milk”.

A research conducted by Grimm (1975) indicated that five year old children find it easier to ask, order, and forbid than to allow and permit. While seven year old children are already able to perform directives. Yet, they are still difficult to perform a promise. It can be concluded that children still cannot perform an utterance that requests them to commit themselves in the future. (Horn and Ward, 2006).

In relation to politeness, Horn and Ward (2006) state “Up until age four, children rely mainly on direct questions and imperatives. As they get older, they add expressions like *please*, they give reasons, they add softeners of various kinds, and they start to state their wishes in generic form”. It means that before reaching the age of four years, children use direct utterance

to express their request. When they get older, they will be able to produce polite utterance and accompany the request with logical reason why they want the object. In addition, Horn and Ward also claim that children are politer to adults than to their peers, and politer to their peers than to younger children. Moreover, a study conducted by Axia and Baroni (1985) shows that children become more polite in requesting something when they encounter refusal.

## CONCLUSION

Having a competence of a language means knowing how to use the language properly, both in terms of the grammatical and lexical aspects and in terms of the other social aspects that underlying the use of the language. Pragmatic competence includes in the social aspects that must be owned by speakers of a language. Pragmatic competence involves illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence.

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