

## Correlation between Grammatical and Pragmatic Competences among Indonesian University EFL Learners

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### ABSTRACT

*Language competence not only refers to the underlying knowledge of the linguistic aspects of the language system under study, such as grammar and lexis, but also an understanding of the extra-linguistic features of a given communicative scenario, all of which contribute to meaning and the interpretation of meaning. This study aims to: (1) to determine whether there is a correlation between EFL Indonesian university students' grammatical competence and their pragmatic competence, and (2) to investigate the influence of students' grammatical competence towards their pragmatic competence. The data collected are from year 2 English students by using grammatical and pragmatic tests for students to answer. Their answers were analyzed quantitatively to obtain the mean score and further will be compared. The results show that: 1) students perform low on both aspects ( $m_1=8.78$ , and  $m_2=10.46$ ), 2) there is a moderate positive correlation between the two sections ( $r=.54$ ,  $p=0.01$ ), and 3) students' grammatical knowledge contributes on their pragmatic knowledge on medium level ( $t(65)=-.36$ ,  $p=0.01$ ). The average level of achievement that students could attain on grammar shows that it is still a challenging aspect in FL learning despite they have received 4 compulsory grammar subjects. This challenge should be taken into concern as the result of this study also shows that grammatical competence could affect learners' initial competence on pragmatic as weak. Therefore, there is a need of improvement on EFL teaching methods especially for grammatical subjects due to very low achievement on this central skill which will contribute to the other skills.*

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Correlation; EFL; Grammatical; Pragmatic.

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### 1. Introduction

The sub-components of language competence are lexical, grammatical, semantic, phonological, orthographic and orthoepic competences. Sociolinguistic competence refers to possession of knowledge and skills for appropriate language use in a social context. Pragmatic competence itself involves two sub-components: discourse competence and functional competence. A part of both of these competences is the so-called planning competence which refers to sequencing of messages in accordance with learners' interactional and transactional knowledge.

Grammatical and pragmatic competence has long been studied for their importance on learners' correctness and appropriateness in using the language. These two components, since earlier times have shown weak relationship (Thomas, 1983). Chomsky (1965) made a definite distinction between competence and performance, with the former characterized by an underlying knowledge of the rules of a system that organize the use of a language, away from any situational context. Performance, on the other hand, related to how that knowledge was applied in observed language behavior. Chomsky's view was criticized as early as 1970 (Campbell and Wales), who stated that he had omitted inclusion of real communication ability in his definition, pointing out the exclusion of "the ability to produce or understand utterances which are appropriate to the contexts in which they are made". Hymes, in 1971, further contributed to the argument stating that all sociocultural and situational factors relating to language use could not be ascribed only to linguistic competence, suggesting Chomsky's view was restricted. In response, Chomsky (1980) acknowledged that grammatical competence, which embraced knowledge of the structure of a language, was complemented by 'pragmatic competence'. Taylor (1988) stated that, through his assertions, Hymes had broadened the definition of competence to include not only knowledge of a system, but also the ability to use that knowledge.

On some level, the division of language competence into grammatical competence and pragmatic competence highlights a recognition that the two rely upon essentially different learning processes: one based on form (grammatical), the other based on experience (pragmatic). It is therefore a worthy area of investigation to test this assumption and examine the relationship between the two (Kecskes, 2018; Aswad et al., 2019; Rahman et al., 2019). If grammatical competence only focuses on form and the meaning is supplied by form, does this knowledge in any way contribute to pragmatic competence? If the two are completely disassociated, is it reasonable to assume that EFL learners with differing levels of grammatical competence will not display corresponding differences in their levels of pragmatic competence? That is, if we compare two learners, one showing a high level of grammatical competence, and the other showing a low level of grammatical competence, the assumption is that if their exposure to real life interactions in English is similarly limited, then it should expect no appreciable difference in their levels of pragmatic competence (Chen, 2010; Rahman & Weda, 2018; Hasnia et al., 2022).

In recent language learning model exists, known as the Common European Framework model (CEF model), and has been widely used as the standard model in categorizing learners to their designated level. This model is composed of three areas of knowledge: language competence, sociolinguistic competence and pragmatic competence. Each one involves both underlying knowledge and ability.

Findings of recent studies resonate with what Blum-Kulka (1991) has stated that the main obstacle to learners' exploiting their general knowledge appears to be their restricted L2 linguistic knowledge or difficulty in accessing it smoothly. Furthermore, to acquire control over their already existing pragmatic foundations, adult L2 or FL learners need to develop new representation of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge which are not existing in their L1 (Bialystok, 1993). Although researchers have been hand in hand attempted to identify the most effective method in teaching pragmatics in order to achieve ideal communicative competence, the area of whether learners' basic linguistic competence plays a role on the other competence is beneficial to be explored. For instance, being able to examine the relationship between learners' grammatical competence and pragmatic competence could inform not only where to start in teaching pragmatics, but also the potential contextualization of form-function instruction that suitable to develop pragmatic features such as speech acts.

Alhadidi (2017) researched the effect of L1 pragmatic transfer on the acquisition by Saudi speakers of English. 42 participants of Saudi speakers of English were involved and multiple choices questionnaire was employed to examine participants' pragmatic awareness of various speech acts. Specifically, it was undertaken to see if Saudi English speakers rely on their L1 pragmatics when they communicate in English, and do the beginner and advanced speakers transfer pragmatics from L1 to L2 equally. Result of analysis showed that beginner level of EFL learners tend to rely on L1 due to shortage of L2 pragmatic knowledge. During process of SLA, they actively transfer knowledge of their native language to generate their L2 acquisition process. In contrast, advanced group did not show L1 pragmatic during the acquisition meaning that the higher the level of proficiency, the less L1 pragmatic is transferred.

Similar result was elicited in Widanta et al., (2019) study that learners' pragmatic competence was still low as many pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic errors occurred. These two errors are related to learners' transfer from L1 to their L2 on several aspects such as noun phrase (NP) structure, the use of verb, noun, and prepositions.

One of the challenges that language teachers face is developing the language competence of L2 learners so that they can use language correctly and appropriately in a variety of social contexts. In this sense, language competence not only refers to the underlying knowledge of the linguistic aspects of the language system under study, such as grammar and lexis, but also an understanding of the extra-linguistic features of a given communicative scenario, all of which contribute to meaning and the interpretation of meaning, These can include gesture, silence or suggested meaning (implicature). In relation to this, language competence is divided into three main competency areas: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence. Where grammatical competence focuses on knowledge of the syntax or morphological structure of a language in order to derive at its meaning, and is, therefore, purely linguistic in nature, sociolinguistic and strategic competences concern themselves with an appreciation of the context in which an utterance is made, with an emphasis on maintaining social relationships and achieving personal aims.

No method has explicitly been developed to address 'specific' language competences, as described through the communicative competence models already covered, though many of them have direct paths to developing grammatical competence. Even in the communicative approach, the Presentation, Practice, Production technique is widely used in order to contextualize grammar and relate form to meaning. Nuridin (2019) attempted to develop an example of

pragmatic teaching practice by comparing the production of written and spoken discourses. In his study, he found that pragmatic competence is possible to be improved using the communicative competence model by Celce-Murcia (2007) whereas it also includes the discourse competence. He concluded that discourse competence is central in the development of other competences including the linguistic competence, interactional competence, sociocultural competence, and formulaic competence. Nugroho and Rekha (2020) have explored the most frequently used request strategies among EFL learners. They discovered that learners use conventionally indirect request very frequently and they suggested that it is necessary to equip learners with sufficient pragmatic competence starting from the teaching activities until the products (speech acts).

In Indonesia, the main objective of English language students is merely to pass the course; as such, the teaching of the language is confined to the form or the structure of the language rather than its use. Official tests are usually based on grammar, reading comprehension, and vocabulary. Consequently, the various parts or skills of language are taught and tested in isolation. This shows that little attempt has been made for teaching language use. In order to communicate effectively, a learner will require knowledge that goes beyond the level of grammar and lexis.

Another factor contributing to the limited space of pragmatic knowledge incorporated in an EFL classroom is the teachers' competences. Al-Qahtani (2020) explored to what extent Saudi's EFL teachers implemented pragmatic features in classroom activities. The study results indicated that these teachers had high awareness, however low on the level of implementation. The lack of inclusion of pragmatic features, then, leads to the need for training on the quality of teachers' teaching skills. All the explorations on pragmatic teaching method as well as the teachers' quality have one main goal that is to provide adequate input of pragmatic features. Compared with grammatical knowledge, pragmatic teaching instruction received lower attention although it has been known that it is one of the most challenging areas for EFL learners.

Based on the review above, it is no doubt that pragmatic competence is a very important component when it comes to teaching and learning a language, as it contributes to how effective a learner can be in managing conversations that go beyond a simple transfer of information. Although it is a branch of linguistics that began gaining attention in the late eighties, and has since been widely investigated by many researchers (Bardovi-Harlig, 2005; Rose & Kasper, 2001; Bardovi-Harlig & Griffin, 2005), there has been limited integration of its features in EFL classroom. For instance, in many English departments, half of the total study period are spent mostly to focus on teaching grammatical rules while paying little attention on the appropriateness aspect of the language use itself. Seeing this gap, this study aims to uncover whether there is a potential benefit in achieving high on grammar toward learners' pragmatic development.

## **2. Methodology**

This study used quantitative approach by asking 75 students to take a grammatical test and a pragmatic test who have completed the whole grammar-oriented subjects throughout their two years of studying English literature. This study postulated two research questions as follow:

1. Is there a correlation between students' grammatical competence and pragmatic competence?
2. Does grammatical competence influence students' pragmatic competence?

The study adopted grammatical and pragmatic tests from the previous study by Mojabi (2014) in determining correlation between grammatical and pragmatic competence among Iranian university EFL learners with no major modifications made to keep the realism and construct validity. The tests were compilation of test resources such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the Iranian University Entrance Examination (IUEE) and adapted to suit the participants' characteristics.

After the data is collected, the overall scores of the learners were calculated in order to determine the degree of their pragmatic and grammatical competence. For statistical analysis of the raw scores of the quantitative tests (grammatical and pragmatic) and the computation of their differences, the correlational analysis and paired-samples t-test were conducted using SPSS to see the effect size of each score differences. To account for learners' score overall, descriptive statistics will be presented to attain the mean scores of students' competence in both aspects. These descriptive statistics will then be compared from one situation to elicit their correlation. Finally, an account for the effect size was conducted by using paired-samples t-test followed by Cohen's d score to identify to what extent does one competence contribute to another. Comparison between scores obtained through paired samples t-test is limited on seeing if there's any contribution of one competence to another. Therefore, the extended quantitative analysis of

Cohen's d is beneficial to obtain a clearer approximation on how much does one's grammatical competence affect their pragmatic development by the effect size categorization.

### 3. Result and Discussion

#### 3.1. Learners' grammatical competence and pragmatic competence

Descriptive statistics are presented below to observe the heterogeneity of this dataset or to calculate the spread of students' scores in each section (grammatical and pragmatic). This analysis of descriptive statistics is also initially conducted to grasp an overview of the relationship between each section with students' overall achievement (total score). Students' overall score could be translated as their level of proficiency in each aspect. The comparison between students' score on grammatical and pragmatic sections would link to the observation of which competence that students could master more with the different exposures and instructions given. The result of the analysis is shown in the table below:

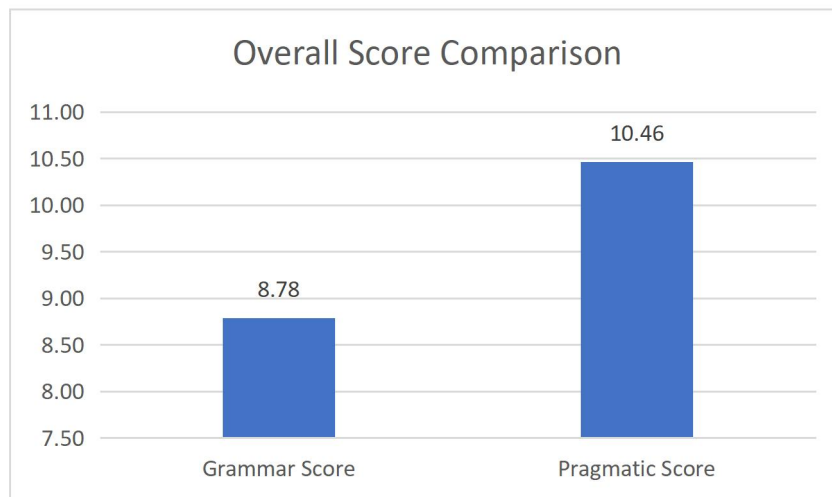
**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics**

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Grammatical_Score	65	8.7846	3.81401
Pragmatic_Score	65	10.4615	3.95710
Total Score	65	19.2769	6.92484

On table 1, it can be observed that there is not much different of students' test scores between the grammatical and pragmatic sections. The mean score in grammatical section is 8.78 and in pragmatic section is 10.46. Although the statistical result shows very minimum gap between two sections, but inferential procedure of paired-samples t-test is needed to see the significance level and the t-value.

Based on the standard deviation on table above, it can be recognized that both are having low standard deviations. For grammatical section, the standard deviation is 3.8, and the same for the pragmatic section is 3.9. Such low standard deviations show that the students' scores in both sections are spread homogenously and not so different from the mean. Therefore, the mean score is representative enough to reflect students' achievement in the two sections. On average, students performed poorly as they could not achieve even half of the total score (21). This finding is surprising because students achieve significantly different treatment on grammatical and pragmatic learning. Whereas they have completed 4 grammar courses in during their 2 years of study in English department, they have received no explicit instruction on pragmatic features.

Lastly, an initial overview of correlation between students' achievements with each section could be seen from the score gap. To have a clearer picture on the gap between students' scores in each section, a graph is presented below:



**Figure 1. Overall Score Comparison**

The mean of the total score achieved by students is 19.27. As the mean scores in the two sections are not so different (pragmatic section is 1.68 higher than grammatical section), the observation of which knowledge contributes more to students' achievement is also close to each other. Hence, pragmatic knowledge has slightly higher contribution on students' achievement.

### 3.2. Correlation between grammatical and pragmatic competence

Correlational analysis is conducted to understand whether one knowledge (grammatical) contributes to another (pragmatic). Result of correlational analysis is presented on table below.

**Table 2. Correlations**

		Grammatical Score	Pragmatic Score
Grammatical Score	Pearson Correlation	1	.537**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	65	65
Pragmatic Score	Pearson Correlation	.537**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	65	65

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The correlation coefficient (r) obtained is .54 (p = 0.01) which is a positive moderate correlation. A positive correlation in this finding indicates that increases in one variable are accompanied by increases in other. Therefore, the higher scores students achieve in grammatical section, the higher their pragmatic score will be. However, the correlational value is moderate which means that such effect is not that strong.

### 3.3. The effect of grammatical competence to pragmatic competence

Quantitative analysis of paired-samples t-test is continued to prove whether grammatical competence could contribute to pragmatic competence.

**Table 3. Paired Samples Test**  
**Paired Differences**

	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Grammatical Score - Pragmatic Score	-1.68	3.74	-3.6	64	.001

The result is statistically significant (p=.001). The paired-samples t-test shows that there is a difference of mean score between the grammatical section and pragmatic section  $t(65)=-3.6$ ,  $p=.001$  which indicates a low difference. As the result is significant, the analysis is continued to calculate the effect size. This calculation is aimed to answer the second research question, or to see whether grammatical knowledge influences pragmatic knowledge. The effect size is obtained through the Cohen's d measure. The effect size found is -.4 which indicates medium effect. Thus, grammatical knowledge does have influence on students' pragmatic knowledge although it is moderate.

### 3.4. Discussion

Grammatical knowledge and pragmatic knowledge have long been studied for their correlation and how they influence each other on one's language development. In the context of EFL learners, both skills are crucial as the goal of language learning is no longer merely on mechanical proficiencies but more on students' ability to develop communicative competence. Communicative competence highlights learners' ability to utilize their language capital (vocabulary, grammar) for daily communication in accordance with the context (pragmatic aspects).

The biggest conclusion of this study is how grammatical and pragmatic competence are not separated on learners' language development. It leaves Chomsky's (1965) dichotomy between competence and performance and moves forward with CEF model of communicative competence. This model fits the recent language development phenomenon among EFL learners where input could come from various sources and not only classroom teachings. Therefore, language competence and pragmatic competence or could also be called learners' competence and performance might develop together. One competence would contribute to the other which indicates a clear correlation between them.

This study begins with detecting learners' performances on both grammatical and pragmatic aspects. It was revealed that learners achieve low on average in both sections (below half) meaning that students still need improvements. There are several factors that contribute to learners' pragmatic competence. Since the earlier times, the prominent findings on pragmatic development by Bardovi-Harlig (2005) and Kasper & Blum-Kulka (1993) have confirmed that proficiency level is also a determinant which corresponds with the current finding.

Pragmatics has long been considered one of the acquired competences. This competence is neither learnt nor taught in classroom mode. One mother tongue pragmatic might be too different or difficult than L2 pragmatic. In this respect, Blum-Kulka (1991) states that the main obstacle to learners' exploiting their general knowledge base appears to be their restricted L2 linguistic knowledge or difficult in accessing it smoothly. Moreover, as Bialystok (1993) has already asserted that adult FL learners require new representation of pragmalinguistic knowledge that is not existing in their L1. Such acquisition then will allow control over their pragmatic performance.

The finding of low achievement on both aspects is striking since grammar has been taught since students' first semester and pragmatic will just be taught on students' third year of study. However, there is no significant difference on students' achievements on both sections. Aside from pragmatic pedagogy, teaching methods on grammar subjects require more attention so that students could absorb the lesson effectively and actually achieve the learning goals.

Accordingly, from the 1950s onwards, particularly in terms of teaching English in Indonesia, the emphasis was placed on the form or the structure and little attention was paid to the function or the sociocultural aspects of language in the hope and belief that the overt teaching of grammar, vocabulary or language forms to the students may help them eventually pick up language use on their own when needed (Fard, 1998). Indonesian education system of English pedagogic has put the linguistic knowledge components as the base of all curricula at almost all levels of teaching. The four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking competence are designed for learners to recognize and operate the language communicatively among them, thus L1 pragmatic may either interfere or absorb in the L2 communication. The exclusion of the L2 pragmatic knowledge in Indonesian English education system will surely prone to communication breakdown at international level of communication.

The language teaching must have begun to adopt communicative approach as suggested by Hussein et al., (2019). Communicative approach in language teaching falls under three theoretical premises:

1. The communication principle: Activities that involve communication promote the acquisition of language.
2. The task-principle: Activities that engage students in the completion of real-world tasks promote language acquisition.
3. The meaningfulness principle: Learners are engaged in activities that promote authentic and meaningful use of language.

The main goal in this approach is for the learner to become communicatively competent. The learner develops competency in using the language appropriately in given social contexts. Much emphasis is given to activities that allow the second language learner to negotiate meaning in activities that require oral communication in the second language. In the communicative approach, it is important to create an "information gap" between speakers. Thus, the need to communicate is authentic because communication must take place to narrow the gap and accomplish the task. Classroom activities must be varied and must include interactive language games, information sharing activities, social interactions, need for impromptu responses, and the use of authentic materials, such as the newspaper for oral discussions on current events.

The second analysis in this study is to identify correlations between learners' grammatical and pragmatic knowledge. Results show a moderate positive correlation indicating that grammatical knowledge contributes to pragmatic

knowledge on middling level. Previous literatures provided similar results on this aspect, although in most of them higher correlation is evident.

Bardovi-Harlig (1996) posits that the following factors have a direct influence on the acquisition or pragmatic competence: input, instruction, level of proficiency and length of stay living in the L2 culture, and the L1 culture. In addition, Lafford (2006) suggests that the study abroad environment serves as an unparalleled context for language learning and therefore serves as the ideal venue for the learner to truly become pragmatically competent as it provides a direct link between language and culture.

The finding by Alhadidi (2017) could be related to the current study as learners are found to have low proficiency on English thus the transfer of L1 pragmatic is high. This resulted in low results on both aspects of grammatical and pragmatic. Pragmatic transfer itself relies on learners' pragmalinguistic development. Learners' ability to form correct speech acts is dependent on their language acquisition process or as early as when they build pragmatic awareness.

An apparent effect is also found where grammatical competence contributes to learners' pragmatic competence. This finding elicits another possible reason why learners' pragmatic competence is low. Ermansyah (2019) found that English learners on their study focus on making complete correct sentences without linking it to the environment around the language. The environment of language includes the pragmatic function of English. Learners could learn pragmatic function only if teachers provided explicit instruction in class on a regular basis. Another competence that is possible to boost students' pragmatic development is the discourse competence. The discourse competence, for instance, in Nuridin (2019) is closely related to learners' pragmatic competence. This could be another alternative in teaching pragmatic competence integrated.

Pragmatic competence is a diverse and complex skill, so a comprehensive study of all its facets is unrealistic. However, one area where pragmatic competence is required is in the way learners manage common social functions, such as coping with opening and closing conversations, making requests, making suggestions or offers, apologizing, and giving compliments. It is also required to recognize the intended purposes behind the speech acts of others who are using language contextually in order to achieve their communicative purposes. The learners may be grammatically competent, but in many cases, they may act achievement in this area, as these may well inform future developments in designing materials and devising methods aimed at developing pragmatic competence.

The underlying reason is that Indonesian students are typically not exposed to teaching methods or materials which are associated with developing pragmatic competence (Karimnia & Zade, 2007 in Fujii, 2012) on regular English classes. This is especially true in academic settings, because research has shown the focus is traditional, concentrating solely on grammatical competence. Therefore, their performance in the 'Pragmatic Competence' tests will generally be expected to be poor, whereas their performance in the 'Grammatical Competence' tests will be expected to be higher.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The focus on pragmatic competence stems from the level of interest it has garnered over recent decades, particularly as it is recognized as an integral aspect of communicative competence yet often ignored in teaching approaches. Its relative difficulty as a taught component when compared to grammar has raised the question as to whether it is worth teaching. The development of what substitutes a complete set of knowledge in language has become very complex, which includes not only the technical tools of the language, but also the ability to use it in correct context. Thus, the goal of teaching English should include all subcomponents of language competence.

This study has explored the correlation between grammatical competence and pragmatic competence among EFL learners situated in Indonesian university. The results are based on the quantitative analysis which showed medium positive effect between the two variables and that learners' grammatical competence moderately influences their pragmatic competence. Such medium contribution suggests that in learning process, although the curriculum weights more on teaching English forms, how it would affect learners' pragmatic development should also be acknowledged. The shift from traditional teaching methods into the communicative approach would be necessary as it stimulates the four skills of language as well as recognizing the social context around the language use itself.

Another important finding on this study is how learners' achievement on both aspects are still low regardless of a big difference on the learning experience in classroom. Grammar has been taught explicitly for 2 years, meanwhile no subjects of pragmatics have been given for this group of learners. However, their achievements are relatively similar which indicates there needs to be a resolution for the grammar teaching methods. Future studies could be more practical for example experimenting a pragmatic-integrated materials in a grammar subject considering context for the language

use might help students' process of making sense of the language form itself. The experiments would start with hypotheses of whether there is any difference on learners' pragmatic development between two groups, which are the group that received pragmatic-integrated materials (experiment group) and the group that received form-oriented lessons (control group). Such experimental study would be more comprehensive in eliciting the correct way of implementing a contextualized foreign language learning with the main goal of achieving a far-reaching communicative goals.

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