


Chapter 3

Pragmatic Competence Development in Virtual Environments in Light of the COVID–19 Pandemic in Higher Education in Palestine

Mona M. Shalhoub

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3028-6233>
Eastern Mediterranean University, Cyprus

ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a study that investigated the perceptions of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' pragmatic competence development in virtual environments in higher education in Palestine for the academic year 2020- 2021 in light of COVID-19 pandemic. For this purpose, a mixed-methods approach was employed using a questionnaire, role-play, and semi-structured interview. Seventy-five undergraduate EFL learners from four universities participated in this study. Results of the quantitative phase revealed positive perceptions of EFL learners towards pragmatic competence development in virtual environments, with the majority of responses falling under the categories of agree or strongly agree. Responses to the role-play activity demonstrated that there were differences in the pragmatic aspects EFL learners employed in favor of females, particularly in the richness of linguistic resources and level of politeness. EFL learners acknowledged the importance of pragmatic competence as a means to successful communication and emphasized its teachability in formal instruction.

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INTRODUCTION

Pragmatic competence in virtual environments has been lately gaining researchers' attention in the field of foreign language education (Ajabshir, 2019; Gonzalez-Lloret, 2019; Hazaymeh & Altakhaine, 2019; Kaliska, 2018; Taguchi, 2020; Wain et al., 2019) as one of the essential components of language communicative competence (Caprario, 2020; García-Gómez, 2020) that has been previously asserted in (Bachman, 1990; Hymes, 1972) where most of the technologies today exist in the service of communication. Accordingly, for this service to be meaningful, Gao (2018) argues that pragmatic competence collectively designates the appropriate use of language in any given social medium where both implicit and explicit meanings take place. This appropriateness, as indicated by pragmatic competence, has been emphasized not only in traditional classroom setting, but also in the field of technology-mediated L2 pragmatics (Gonzalez-Lloret, 2019). Contextually, it has also been acknowledged by Yamchi (2017) for "encompassing under its rubric the core objectives of teaching English in Palestine" (p. 862). This is because the development of communicative competence is the voiced learning objective of English as a foreign language in Palestine whose absence may lead to ineffective or miscommunication when using English (García-Gómez, 2020).

Comparably, research confirms the advantage of traditional face-to-face environments for developing pragmatic competence over virtual ones (Saito-Stehberger, 2009; Taguchi, 2020). This is because "pragmatic competence is best developed in social interactions due to its socially grounded, context-sensitive nature" (Taguchi, 2020, p. 354). Still, under the current circumstances imposed by COVID-19 where communication via virtual environments dominates the academic scene, the investigation of how pragmatic competence is developed in these environments becomes indispensable. This has been accompanied by a scarcity of research in the field of pragmatic studies that explored the development of pragmatic competence from the perceptions of EFL learners (Gonzalez-Lloret, 2019; Kaliska, 2018).

Consequently, following the imposition of online distance learning (ODL) for the third semester since March (2020) in the light of COVID-19 accompanied by the very limited technological resources in Palestine as an occupied country, this chapter aims to examine how undergraduate EFL learners who have been learning English entirely online for the first time perceive pragmatic competence development in virtual environments in higher education in Palestine. Moreover, the study aims to find out what aspects of pragmatic competence EFL learners show in response to various situations that they encounter during their online classes. Finally, the study aims to find out how EFL learners perceive the affordances and limitations/challenges to pragmatic competence development.

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