

Enhancing Contextual Understanding: The Impact of Pragmatic Competence on Saudi EFL University Students' Reading Comprehension

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Abstract:

This study explores pragmatic competence as a factor influencing the reading comprehension of Saudi university EFL students. It also emphasizes that contextual interpretation plays an important role in retrieving hidden meanings, cultural references, and socio-platonic cues. It followed a mixed-methods design involving a reading pre-posttest and focus groups. Participants were randomly assigned into an experimental group of forty-two students, and a control group of thirty-eight students. Whereas the control group received traditional reading instruction, the students in the experimental group received explicit pragmatic instruction by means of reading comprehension activities. In the experimental group, the test quantitative results indicated statistically significant improvements in the students' ability to uncover implicit meanings and navigate across cultural references, highlighting the potential of pragmatic-focused instruction. Qualitative results obtained from the focus groups highlighted enhanced interpretive strategies, increased cultural awareness, and elevated learner confidence. It is concluded that reading comprehension instruction should be connected to the situational and cultural factors of language use. The study offers pedagogical insights for developing holistic instructional approaches, emphasizing the necessity of integrating pragmatics to foster higher-order comprehension skills among EFL learners.

Keywords: pragmatic competence, reading comprehension, contextual interpretation, cultural awareness

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Introduction

Reading for meaning is at the heart of language ability, especially when it comes to the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL). Reading does not involve, however, the mere general understanding of words and expressions but, importantly, an appreciation by the reader of the interaction between intricate linguistic features and contextual variables. In this respect, pragmatic competence, defined as the ability to use language appropriately in a given context and to infer implicit meaning (Ahmed, 2022), has emerged as an important factor in advancing a deeper degree of understanding. The importance of pragmatic competence in reading comprehension cannot be underestimated. Pragmatics concerns knowledge of precisely how language works in particular social and cultural contexts, hence enabling learners to grasp implied meanings, recognize cultural references, and decode socio-pragmatic cues in texts. Such skills, however, are more problematic in EFL contexts since they have fewer opportunities of exposure to real target language use and other cultural matters.

Pragmatic competence can be of great potential for Saudi EFL university students to reduce understanding gaps since these students face cultural and contextual barriers very often while comprehending English texts (Alhozali, 2023 Altheeby, 2018). The development of pragmatic competence might solve the problems stated above in a context where Saudi university students often depend on formal instruction and seem too busy to be exposed to immersive linguistic experiences. Previous research has established that pragmatic instruction is important in developing communicative ability but at the same time also greatly impacts reading comprehension, given that readers often need to infer meaning from contextual cues rather than direct statements (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Taguchi, 2011).

The connection of pragmatic competence with reading comprehension is deeply rooted in the nature of textual interpretation. Reading comprehension involves several cognitive processes: using prior knowledge, making inferences, and synthesizing the linguistic and contextual data. Pragmatic competence plays a vital role in facilitating such cognitive activities of the learner by offering him the required skills to handle ambiguities, understand indirect speech acts, and identify culturally located meanings. For example, the understanding of idiomatic expressions or culturally specific metaphors is impossible without the knowledge of words and at the same time without knowledge of the social and cultural conventions lying beneath the text. Without pragmatic competence, EFL learners may hardly reach a holistic understanding of the text; thus, it turns into superficial or misunderstood reading (Kasper & Rose, 2002).

Empirical results from previous studies have underscored a strong impact of pragmatic instruction on reading comprehension. For example, the studies by Taguchi (2008) have suggested that participants whose instruction had a pragmatic focus outperformed their counterparts in tasks requiring implied meaning comprehension. Along similar lines, Culpeper, Mackey, and Taguchi (2018) have highlighted the role of pragmatic competence in enhancing learners' ability to access authentic texts, arguing that knowledge of pragmatics reinforces not only linguistic accuracy but also interpretive competence. In the Saudi EFL context, Al-Mekhlafi and Nagaratnam (2011) reported improvement in the understanding of the culturally loaded texts by the students after pragmatic competence was included in their reading instruction. This was a pedagogical intervention that surmounted particular challenges relevant for Saudi learners (Al-Seghayer, 2024).

Despite the wealth of evidence supporting the integration of pragmatics into EFL curricula, pragmatic instruction remains underutilized in many educational settings. Traditional approaches to reading comprehension in Saudi EFL classrooms often prioritize vocabulary acquisition and grammatical accuracy, neglecting the broader contextual and cultural dimensions of language use. This gap in instruction leaves students incompetent to engage with authentic texts, which frequently contain implicit meanings and socio-pragmatic elements that extend beyond the literal interpretation of words. As a result, Saudi EFL learners may achieve high levels of grammatical competence while remaining unable to comprehend texts at a deeper level. This discrepancy emphasizes the pressing necessity of a paradigm change in language education in Saudi Arabia such that reading pedagogy emphasizes pragmatic competence (Alhozali, 2023).

This study attempts to address this research gap discrepancy by investigating how pragmatic training affects Saudi EFL university students' reading comprehension ability. Targeting Level-3 undergraduate students, the study aims to reach a crucial stage in language development when students should go from basic comprehension to more sophisticated interpretative abilities. By using a mixed-method approach, the study aims to provide both quantitative and qualitative analysis of the success of including pragmatics into reading assignments. The study specifically looks at whether pragmatic-oriented teaching helps students notice cultural variations, better grasp implicit meanings, and negotiate textual contextual complexity.

Literature Review

Pragmatic competence in EFL reading has gradually become an issue of scholarly attention, gaining more and more academic recognition of the value of its theoretical and methodological position. This literature review falls into three interrelated parts: (1) conceptual underpinning of

pragmatic competence and its importance for reading comprehension, (2) empirical studies into the efficiency of pragmatic instruction for improving comprehending skills, and (3) instructional strategies on integrating pragmatics into EFL pedagogical curricula

Conceptual underpinning of pragmatic competence and its importance for reading comprehension

Pragmatic competence is an important aspect of communicative competence; it is the ability to appropriately produce and interpret language in social and cultural contexts (Canale & Swain, 1980; Kasper & Rose, 2002). This competence consists of sociopragmatic knowledge, which deals with knowing social norms and conventions, and pragmalinguistic knowledge, which concerns how linguistic structures are interpreted in context (Taguchi, 2011). Despite pragmatic competence is traditionally associated with oral communication, its significance extends to written discourse, particularly in reading comprehension.

Reading comprehension is defined as an ability to construct meaning from text through the integration of linguistic, cognitive, and contextual resources. According to Kintsch (1998), pragmatic competence contributes to this process in that it allows readers to decode implicit meanings, infer what the writers intend to say, and understand socio-cultural references in texts. For instance, Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle has guided the reader through the process of interpreting indirect speech acts and implied meaning. This underscores the interrelationship between pragmatic competence and reading competence especially when the text involves some cultural or contextual features that might be unknown to the reader.

Like most of those in non-native contexts of English, Saudi EFL learners develop pragmatic competence in challenging conditions, given the general lack of exposure authentic language use. Deprived of pragmatically rich input, Saudi EFL learners typically turn into superficial readers who tend to focus only on the literal meaning while ignoring contextual dimensions of the text (Al-Issa, 2006). This would therefore give a reason for the focused teaching of the pragmatic dimensions of language in reading instruction.

Empirical studies into the efficiency of pragmatic instruction for improving comprehending skills

Empirical research has yielded positive results on how pragmatic instruction contributes to EFL learners' reading comprehension. For instance, in a quasi-experimental study, Taguchi (2008) showed that targeted training in pragmatics indeed enhanced students' ability to infer the implied meanings in reading classrooms. Similarly, Culpeper, Mackey, and Taguchi (2018) pointed out that pragmatic awareness was crucial for attaining sufficient comprehension in authentic texts, which contained references to certain aspects of culture and idiomatic expressions.

In Saudi Arabia, there is emerging research on the topic of pragmatic competence in its relationship to reading comprehension. For example, Al-Mekhlafi and Nagaratnam (2011) affirm the effectiveness of pragmatic instruction in the EFL classroom. Findings showed that the students from the pragmatics-treatment group performed better in comprehension exercises that called for an understanding of indirect speech acts and culturally-bound phrases. Alhozali (2023) also investigated the role of pragmatic competence in English literary text interpretation and argued that insufficient pragmatic awareness frequently led to misinterpretations in the form of various meanings of figurative and narrative language.

Another study was conducted by Taguchi, Li, and Tang (2017), who used a mixed-method design to probe into the effects of pragmatic instruction on the reading comprehension performance of Chinese EFL learners. It was found that participants of the experimental group showed higher scores of reading comprehension and also more confidence with regard to participating in texts that were culturally unfamiliar. Findings are thus in tune with Bouton's (1999) emphasis on the paramount gains of pragmatic instruction in developing the inferencing skills accompanying deep understanding.

Despite these advances, gaps remain in the literature regarding the specific strategies that are most effective in developing pragmatic competence among Saudi EFL learners. While explicit instruction has certainly proved effective in previous research, more elaborate research is needed concerning integrated approaches that embed pragmatics within other areas of language teaching, including vocabulary development and critical reading strategies.

Instructional strategies on integrating pragmatics into EFL pedagogical curricula

The realization of pragmatics within EFL curricula into actual teaching practice requires a shift from traditional, purely grammar-based approaches to a more inclusively wide framework that takes into consideration contextual and cultural parameters. According to Kasper and Schmidt (1996), pragmatic competence is best developed through explicit teaching, where learners are informed about the pragmatic conventions guiding language use in different contexts. Rose (2005) embraces this approach in emphasizing that what learners need is an opportunity to explore and manipulate pragmatically enhanced input.

In relation to reading instruction, pragmatic integration may be manifested in different forms, namely the use of authentic texts, role plays, and group activities that allow learners to discover cultural and contextual aspects. Alcón Soler (2005) discussed the effectiveness of providing authentic materials, such as newspapers and literary texts, to EFL learners to improve their pragmatic ability.

When learners are exposed to authentic texts, they are brought into contact with an enormous amount of pragmatic features, such as idiomatic expressions, metaphors, and culturally-bound references.

Another promising avenue is metapragmatic instruction, in which learners are explicitly instructed to attend to and analyze the pragmatic features in texts. Ishihara and Cohen (2010) have suggested a pedagogical framework for pragmatics instruction, combining the development of metalinguistic awareness with a range of task-based activities. Research findings have shown that such instruction enhances learners' implicit inference and socio-pragmatic understanding of language.

Al-Issa (2006) and Al-Seghayer (2024) called for attention to pragmatic instruction within university curricula. According to them, the teaching of pragmatic aspects needs to be tailored to suit students' linguistic and cultural background and allow learners to establish links between previously acquired knowledge and the new pragmatic elements being taught. For instance, Al-Seghayer (2024) suggested bilingual resources that would support both similarities and differences in the pragmatics of English and Arabic so that learners may use the mother tongue competence as a facilitating backbone for their new learning.

The reviewed literature highlights how pragmatic competence contributes to enhancing the reading comprehension of EFL learners. In addition, it provides a connection between pragmatics and the interpretation of a text, while the empirical investigations provide solid evidence regarding how pragmatic instruction leads to an improvement in comprehension skills. The pedagogical suggestions, particularly those related to explicit instruction and authentic materials, indicate practical means by which pragmatics may be incorporated within EFL curricula. However, extant literature still has gaps on how best to apply these within Saudi EFL classrooms. This study attempts to fill this research gap and undertakes an exploration of the effect of pragmatic instruction on the reading comprehension of Saudi university students. Findings may provide clues that are relevant both theoretically and practically.

Methodology

The study adopts a mixed-methods research approach to examine the influence of pragmatic competence on the reading comprehension of Saudi EFL university students. The procedure includes participant selection, data collection, instrument validation, statistical analysis, and ethical concerns. The study involved 80 Saudi EFL university students, randomly allocated to two groups: the experimental group ($n = 42$), which received explicit pragmatic-focused instruction integrated with reading comprehension activities, and the control group ($n = 38$), which followed traditional reading instruction devoid of pragmatic training.

Rigorous statistical methods were used to correctly assess the impact of pragmatic instruction on reading comprehension. The pretest and posttest mean scores, standard deviations (SDs), and sample sizes of both groups were calculated using descriptive statistics. An independent samples t-test was implemented to ascertain whether the mean scores of the pretest and posttest differed statistically. To validate the results, Cohen's d statistic was implemented to evaluate the magnitude of the effect and to standardize the practical value of pragmatic-focused instruction. This formula was employed to determine the effect size:

$$d = \frac{\text{Mean}_{\text{exp}} - \text{Mean}_{\text{ctrl}}}{\text{Pooled SD}}$$

where the pooled SD was calculated by taking the total variance of both groups, which ensured a reliable measurement of the influence of the instruction. Levene's test for equality of variances revealed that there was homogeneity across the groups, and the Shapiro-Wilk test was carried out to determine whether the data distribution was normal. This was done to verify the assumptions that were made via parametric testing. By following these processes, the appropriateness of the statistical analyses was assured, and the dependability of the results was strengthened.

Participants

Participants consisted of eighty university students who were studying at Level-3 at university. The sample was selected by a purposive sampling method since it is representative of a very critical stage in the development of EFL learners – the link from basic to higher level interpretive competencies. The assignment of the students to the groups was done in a random order, and they were divided into an experimental group consisting of 42 students and a control group of 38 students. The two groups were matched for gender, age group, and language proficiency based on the students' academic records and also based on the institution's standardized English placement tests; they were between 19-22 years.

The participants were at the intermediate level of proficiency in English, at the levels B1 and B2, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Pretesting ensured homogeneity and therefore a more valid test of the effectiveness of the intervention in the participants' reading comprehension. In addition, they shared similar educational experiences in terms of the EFL exposure, which focused on grammar and did not include direct pragmatic training. It is for this reason that they formed a very good baseline and, therefore, ideal candidates to undertake the study on the effects of pragmatics-centered education.

Data Collection

This data collection lasted a period of twelve continuous weeks. During this time, the experimental group received explicit pragmatic teaching, which was embedded into their reading comprehension assignments, while the participants in the control group went through the usual EFL classroom procedure. It follows, therefore, that the baseline collection of data fell into three successive phases: pretesting, an intervention stage, and post-testing, while qualitative focus group discussions were the tool for collecting qualitative data.

1. Pretest: A standardized reading comprehension test was administered to participants in each group before starting the study, to establish the required performance setting of participants in reading comprehension. Each of the thirty different questions in the reading comprehension test represented an aspect of reading comprehension. Aspects were understanding of implied meanings, identification of cultural references, and , and interpreting figurative language.
2. Treatment: During the treatment phase, the experimental group was involved in reading sessions based on pragmatic instruction two days a week. The actual texts used in these sessions included such materials as essays, short stories, and newspaper articles. Such texts were selected due to the rich pragmatic aspects included in them. Among the activities that were carried out were the discussions of cultural differences, identification of subliminal meanings, and the analysis of socio-pragmatic clues. Traditional reading instruction, on the other hand, was provided to the control group. This teaching placed an emphasis on vocabulary and grammatical precision, but it did not address pragmatic issues.
3. The posttest consisted of the administration of the same standardized reading comprehension test, which was used during the pretest, after the intervention to both groups. This allowed for comparison between performance before and after the intervention.

A total of ten participants in the experimental group took part in focus group discussions after the post-test. After the post-test, the focus group discussions were conducted. These allowed for a qualitative investigation into participants' perceptions regarding the pragmatic training and their perceptions on how the training had helped bring improvement in reading comprehension.

Validity and Reliability of the Instruments

The study utilized two instruments: a reading pre-posttest comprehension test and structured focus group discussions.

Reading Comprehension Test

The test comprised 30 multiple-choice questions designed to assess reading comprehension skills, including literal understanding, inference-making, and the interpretation of pragmatic elements such as implied meanings and cultural references. The test was adapted from validated reading comprehension assessments used in previous studies (e.g., Al-Mekhlafi & Nagaratnam, 2011; Taguchi, 2008).

Validity

The content validity of the test was ensured through expert review. Three EFL specialists with expertise in reading comprehension and pragmatics evaluated the test items for relevance, clarity, and alignment with the study's objectives.

Reliability

The test's reliability was confirmed through a pilot study conducted with 15 students from a similar demographic who were not part of the main study. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated for internal consistency, yielding a high reliability score of 0.87.

Focus Group Discussions

A semi-structured protocol was developed to guide the focus group discussions. Questions were designed to elicit participants' reflections on the instructional activities, their perceived improvement in reading comprehension, and any challenges they encountered during the intervention.

Validity

The focus group protocol was reviewed by the same panel of experts to ensure its alignment with the study aim and its ability to elicit meaningful responses.

Reliability

To ensure consistency in the qualitative data collection, the researcher conducted a mock focus group with three volunteers and revised the protocol based on their feedback.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the ethical guidelines established by the University Ethics Committee. The following measures were taken to ensure the ethical conduct of the study:

1. **Informed Consent:** Participants were provided with detailed information about the study's objectives, procedures, and potential benefits. Written consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement.
2. **Confidentiality:** Participants' personal information and test scores were anonymized to maintain confidentiality. Data were stored securely and accessed only by the researcher.

3. Voluntary Participation: Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and students were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty.
4. Minimization of Risks: The study posed minimal risk to participants, as it involved regular classroom activities supplemented with additional instruction for the experimental group. Efforts were made to ensure that both groups received equitable learning opportunities.
5. Debriefing: At the conclusion of the study, all participants were debriefed on the study findings and the significance of pragmatic competence in reading comprehension. The experimental group's instructional materials were also made available to the control group to ensure fairness.

Results

To examine the effect that pragmatic instruction had on reading comprehension, quantitative data that were produced from the scores of the experimental and control groups on the pre-test and post-test were evaluated using t-tests. Additional insights into the participants' perspectives of the intervention were gained via the qualitative data that resulted from focus groups.

Results of Quantitative Data

A comparison of the experimental and control groups' reading comprehension scores before and after the test is shown in this part. To highlight the influence that pragmatic instruction had on the experimental group's performance, detailed analyses are offered. These analyses include descriptive statistics, and t-tests. Interpretations are provided after each study, and the results are presented in tables that are thorough.

Pretest and Posttest Performance

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics for the pretest and posttest scores. The findings reveal that the experimental group's baseline mean score in the pretest was somewhat superior to that of the control group (66.19 vs. 64.78, respectively); however, this difference lacked statistical significance. The posttest results reveal a significant increase in the experimental group's mean score (79.94), whereas the control group's mean score rose only to 70.51. This notable improvement demonstrates that schooling focused on pragmatics significantly impacted students' reading comprehension by enhancing their ability to perceive implicit meanings and grasp cultural references in texts.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics of pretest and posttest performance

Group	Test Type	Mean	SD	Sample Size
Experimental	Pretest	66.19	4.80	42
Control	Pretest	64.78	5.51	38

Experimental	Posttest	79.94	5.06	42
Control	Posttest	70.51	5.02	38

The results on the pretest suggest that the experimental group had a slightly higher baseline than the control group (64.78), which is not statistically significant. The findings of the posttest, on the other hand, indicate that the experimental group's mean score (79.94) substantially increased in comparison to the control group's score (70.51), which suggests that pragmatic training had a major role in the development of reading comprehension.

Result of the T-Test

The statistical significance of the differences between the pretest and posttest scores was assessed using an independent samples t-test.

Table 2

Result of the T-Test of pretest and posttest performance

Comparison	t-test	p-value	Interpretation
Pretest Scores	1.22	0.227	Not statistically significant
Posttest Scores	8.36	<0.001	Statistically significant ($p < 0.001$)

Table 2 confirms that all groups possessed comparable baseline reading comprehension skills, as the pretest results showed no statistically significant difference among the groups ($t = 1.22$, $p = 0.227$). The posttest results demonstrated a highly significant difference ($t = 8.36$, $p < 0.001$), which strongly suggests that pragmatic instruction was an essential component in improving students' reading comprehension skills.

Cohen's d was calculated to evaluate the practical importance of the intervention, in addition to statistical significance. The effect size was calculated using the following formula:

$$d = \frac{79.94 - 70.51}{\sqrt{\frac{(42-1)(5.06)^2 + (38-1)(5.02)^2}{42+38-2}}} = \frac{9.43}{5.04} = 1.87$$

The effect size ($d = 1.87$) signifies a robust instructional effect, indicating that explicit pragmatic training significantly influenced students' reading comprehension ability. Since an impact size of 0.80 is considered large, this study shows that pragmatic elements improve reading instruction.

The results suggest that pragmatic training improves students' understanding of implicit meanings and cultural references in texts. The qualitative section supplemented these quantitative data to provide a complete picture of the intervention's impact.

Qualitative Findings: Insights from Focus Groups

In this qualitative section of the study, the aim was to investigate the experiences and perspectives of the individuals who were members of the experimental group and who were given instruction that was pragmatic in nature. A total of ten students from the experimental group took part in the focus group discussions, which yielded information that was both rich and thorough on the ways in which the intervention improved the students' reading comprehension skills. Enhanced capacity to comprehend implicit meanings, higher knowledge of cultural references, better confidence in reading, perceived relevance of pragmatic training, and problems experienced throughout the intervention were the five key themes that emerged from the analysis of the data.

1. Improved Capability to Decipher the Meanings of Implied Expressions

During the course of the talks, one of the frequent themes that emerged was participants' progress in recognizing and comprehending the underlying meanings included within texts. Before the intervention, a significant number of students indicated that they often struggled with phrases or sections in which the meanings were not directly conveyed about what they meant. One participant explained: "In many stories or articles, I couldn't understand what the writer was trying to say between the lines. For example, when they used sarcasm or indirect expressions, I would miss the point completely. Now, I feel I can notice these things more easily and understand them better."

This feedback demonstrates how students were able to understand sophisticated language elements such as inferred meanings, indirect speech actions, and rhetorical inquiries via the use of pragmatic training. Throughout the course of the reading course, participants consistently ascribed this progress to the specific attention that was placed on interpreting contextual cues, such as tone, word choice, and the link between sentences.

This capacity to infer implied meanings is an essential component of advanced reading comprehension, especially for EFL students who come across texts that are loaded with cultural and contextual subtleties. Based on the data, it seems that pragmatic training was successful in addressing this gap. This was accomplished by instructing students to rely on inferential procedures rather than exclusively dependent on literal interpretations. This is consistent with previous studies (e.g., Taguchi, 2008), which highlight the importance of pragmatic competence in the process of improving higher-order reading skills.

2. An increased awareness of allusions to cultural traditions

A further noteworthy aspect that emerged was the participants' increased awareness of cultural characteristics that were included in texts. A number of students stated how the intervention helped

them become more aware of the cultural the cultural underpinnings of language and how these influenced the meaning of words, phrases, and expressions. One participant remarked, "I didn't realize before how much culture affects the meaning of certain expressions. For example, in one lesson, we discussed an idiom, and it was explained how it reflects a cultural practice in English-speaking countries. That made me think about how language and culture are connected." Another student added, "When reading, I used to think that all writers use words the same way. Now I understand that their background, culture, and even their experiences can change how they express ideas."

When it came to assisting students in recognizing and interpreting such subtleties, the intervention's emphasis on real texts that included idiomatic terms, metaphors, and allusions that were culturally distinctive proved to be especially beneficial. Not only did this improve their understanding, but it also helped them develop a more profound sense for the social dimensions of language.

These findings highlight the significance of cultural awareness in the process of reading comprehension. Explicit training in pragmatics provides a bridge to comprehending the socio-cultural factors that are inherent in language for Saudi students, who may have little exposure to the cultural context of English texts. This is consistent with the notion that was presented by Culpeper, Mackey, and Taguchi (2018), which states that learners increase their capacity to navigate texts that represent a variety of cultural perspectives when they have pragmatic competence.

3. An increase in self-confidence while reading

When it came to interacting with difficult texts, participants reported experiencing a considerable increase in their confidence. Following the intervention, some students stated that they experienced feelings of intimidation when confronted with passages that looked to be confusing or difficult. One participant shared, "I used to avoid reading texts that looked too difficult or had too many unfamiliar words. But after these lessons, I feel more comfortable because I know I can use context to figure out the meaning, even if I don't know every word." One student reflected on how their newly acquired abilities allowed them to approach texts in a more strategic manner, "I learned to take my time and think about the writer's purpose and the hidden messages. It's not just about reading quickly anymore; it's about understanding deeply."

Structured practice of analyzing texts for pragmatic elements, such as tone, intent, and audience, appeared to play a critical role in building this confidence. By equipping students with practical tools for navigating complex texts, the intervention reduced their anxiety and fostered a more positive attitude toward reading.

It is concluded that confidence is an essential component of academic achievement, especially for EFL students who often come with texts that are outside of their linguistic and cultural comfort zones. The results imply that training that is focused on pragmatics not only improves comprehension abilities but also cultivates the self-confidence that is essential to interact with the reading materials. Previous research has shown that learners' anxiety over difficult language tasks may be alleviated using tailored teaching (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010).

4. The Perceived Significance of Instruction Based on Pragmatics

When asked about the relevance and applicability of the pragmatic training to their actual language usage, participants affirmed their agreement over and over again. A student noted, "What we learned in these lessons wasn't just for passing the test. It's something I can use in daily life, like when I watch English shows or read articles online." Another student noted the more widespread influence that the training also stating, "This method doesn't only help with reading. It teaches you how to think about the language, how to interpret it in different situations, and how to respond." It is possible that the intervention addressed not just participants' academic demands but also their communication capacity in a more general sense, as shown by the participants' understanding of the wider value of pragmatic abilities.

Findings clearly show the potential of pragmatic training to bridge the gap between academic reading tasks and actual language usage. The perceived relevance of pragmatic instruction illustrates this possibility. The intervention improved the learners' capacity to engage with English in a variety of settings by providing them with abilities that are transferable. This was in keeping with the objectives of communicative competence that were stated by Canale and Swain (1980).

5. Challenges Encountered During the Intervention

Participants acknowledged initial challenges in adapting to the instructional interventions. One student admitted, "At first, it was difficult to understand how to analyze the context or figure out the implied meaning. It felt very different from what we usually do in class." Another participant echoed the same idea, "We are used to focusing on grammar and vocabulary, so learning to think about pragmatics took time. But once we practiced more, it became easier." For many students, who were used to conventional EFL instruction that emphasizes grammatical precision above contextual comprehension, these obstacles highlight the novelty of pragmatic training.

These findings affirm that the initial challenges that were experienced by participants are reflections of the change in cognitive and instructional demands that were brought about by courses that were centered on pragmatics (Al-Seghayer, 2024). The fact that they eventually adapted and

received positive feedback, on the other hand, suggests that such obstacles are solvable with sufficient practice and help. When it comes to the implementation of new instructional strategies, this underscores the significance of scaffolding and progressive advancement respectively.

It can be concluded that the focus group discussions give persuasive evidence of the transformational influence that pragmatic-focused training has on the reading comprehension of Saudi EFL students learning. Participants reported considerable gains in their ability to comprehend cultural references and suggested meanings, as well as a rise in their confidence in reading and an awareness of the wider usefulness of pragmatic abilities (Abe & Suezawa, 2018). Although some difficulties were encountered at the beginning, the reaction from most people was favorable, which demonstrates that this strategy is effective in developing reading skills that are more in-depth and conscious of their context. The quantitative findings are supplemented by these qualitative insights, which provide a full knowledge of the ways in which pragmatic competence improves reading comprehension.

Discussion

The findings underscore the significant role of pragmatic competence in enhancing reading comprehension and provide valuable insights into pedagogical strategies for integrating pragmatics into EFL instruction. The pre-posttest results revealed a statistically significant improvement in the experimental group's reading comprehension scores compared to the control group. These findings align with previous studies that have demonstrated the efficacy of pragmatic-focused instruction in improving comprehension skills (Sánchez-Hernández & Barón, 2022). For example, Taguchi (2008) found that Japanese EFL learners who received pragmatic instruction performed significantly better in tasks requiring the interpretation of implied meanings, a result mirrored in this study.

This improvement can be attributed to the experimental group's exposure to authentic texts rich in pragmatic elements, such as idiomatic expressions, cultural references, and implied meanings. Similar findings were reported by Al-Mekhlafi and Nagaratnam (2011), who showed that integrating pragmatics into EFL instruction enhanced students' ability to interpret culturally embedded texts. The alignment between these studies and the current study underscores the robustness of pragmatic-focused instruction as a strategy for improving reading comprehension in diverse EFL contexts.

However, the magnitude of improvement observed in this study was particularly pronounced, suggesting that the explicit and systematic integration of pragmatics into reading activities, as implemented here, may be especially effective. This distinction highlights the study's contribution to the field by demonstrating the importance of structured, targeted instruction in fostering pragmatic competence and its impact on reading comprehension.

The findings from the focus groups provide deeper insights into the mechanisms underlying the experimental group's improvement. Participants consistently reported enhanced ability to interpret implied meanings, a theme that resonates with the work of Culpeper, Mackey, and Taguchi (2018), who emphasized the importance of pragmatic awareness in navigating authentic texts. Students' comments revealed a growing confidence in their ability to identify subtle cues, such as tone and context, which often carry the implicit meanings critical for comprehension.

Increased cultural awareness was another key theme that emerged from the focus groups. Participants highlighted how pragmatic instruction helped them understand the cultural references embedded in English texts, a finding supported by Alhozali's (2023) study on Saudi EFL learners. Alhozali found that pragmatic competence is essential for interpreting figurative language and cultural references, both of which are integral to comprehensive reading. This alignment underscores the critical role of pragmatics in bridging linguistic and cultural gaps for Saudi learners, who often have limited exposure to authentic English-language contexts.

An area where this study extends the findings of previous research is the reported improvement in students' confidence and strategic reading abilities. While studies such as Taguchi (2008) and Ishihara and Cohen (2010) have documented the cognitive benefits of pragmatic instruction, the current study highlights its affective impact as well. Participants' increased confidence in approaching complex texts suggests that pragmatic-focused instruction not only enhances comprehension but also mitigates the anxiety often associated with reading in a foreign language. This affective dimension represents a novel contribution to the literature, emphasizing the holistic benefits of pragmatic instruction.

While the findings align closely with much of the existing literature, certain areas of divergence warrant discussion. For instance, Bouton (1999) argued that pragmatic instruction is most effective when learners are immersed in environments where they can practice these skills in real-life interactions. In contrast, this study demonstrated significant gains in pragmatic competence and reading comprehension through classroom-based instruction alone. This divergence can be explained by the structured and targeted nature of the intervention, which compensated for the lack of immersion by providing students with ample opportunities to analyze and practice pragmatic elements within authentic texts.

Another point of divergence lies in the initial challenges reported by participants in adapting to pragmatic-focused instruction. While Kasper and Schmidt (1996) suggested that explicit instruction is the most effective way to develop pragmatic competence, this study found that students initially struggled to shift from traditional, grammar-focused methods to a context-driven approach (Omaggio

Hadley, 2001). This finding highlights the need for scaffolding and gradual progression in introducing pragmatic instruction, a consideration that future research and pedagogical practices should address.

This study's distinctive contribution lies in its comprehensive examination of the cognitive, cultural, and affective dimensions of pragmatic competence in reading comprehension. By combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies, the study provides a robust understanding of how pragmatic instruction enhances learners' interpretive skills and confidence. Additionally, the focus on Saudi EFL learners, who face unique linguistic and cultural challenges, fills a gap in the literature and offers practical implications for EFL instruction in similar contexts (Al-Seghayer, 2024).

The systematic integration of pragmatic instruction into reading activities, as implemented in this study, represents a novel pedagogical approach. Unlike previous studies that often focused on isolated pragmatic elements, this study adopted a holistic framework that addressed multiple aspects of pragmatics simultaneously. This comprehensive approach not only improved students' reading comprehension but also equipped them with transferable skills applicable to broader communicative contexts.

Conclusion and Implications

This study underscores the critical role of pragmatic competence in enhancing reading comprehension among Saudi EFL university students. The findings demonstrate that pragmatic-focused instruction significantly improves students' ability to interpret implied meanings, understand cultural references, and navigate complex texts with confidence. Quantitative data revealed that the experimental group, which received pragmatic instruction, outperformed the control group in reading comprehension posttests. Qualitative findings from focus group discussions further highlighted how pragmatic instruction positively influenced students' strategic reading abilities, cultural awareness, and confidence (Abe & 2018)). Together, these results reinforce the importance of integrating pragmatic elements into EFL curricula to support learners' holistic language development.

One of the most significant conclusions is that pragmatic-focused instruction equips learners with transferable skills that extend beyond reading comprehension. Participants in the experimental group reported an enhanced ability to analyze language in context, interpret nuanced meanings, and engage with culturally rich texts. This suggests that pragmatic competence fosters not only academic success but also broader communicative abilities essential for real-world language use. These findings contribute to the growing body of research advocating for the explicit inclusion of pragmatics in EFL education (e.g., Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Taguchi, 2008), while also emphasizing the need for structured, targeted interventions tailored to learners' linguistic and cultural contexts.

The implications of this study are particularly relevant for Saudi EFL settings, where traditional grammar-focused instruction often overlooks the importance of contextual and cultural dimensions of language. By demonstrating the efficacy of pragmatic-focused instruction, this study highlights the need for curriculum developers to design reading materials and activities that incorporate pragmatic elements, such as idiomatic expressions, figurative language, and cultural references. Moreover, EFL instructors should receive professional development training to effectively integrate pragmatics into their teaching practices, ensuring that learners are equipped with the skills necessary for both academic and real-world communication.

Beyond curriculum design, this study's findings have broader implications for EFL pedagogy worldwide. The positive affective impact of pragmatic instruction, particularly the increase in students' confidence and engagement, underscores the value of adopting holistic teaching approaches that address both cognitive and emotional aspects of learning. Future research should explore how pragmatic competence can be developed across other language skills, such as writing and speaking, and investigate the long-term effects of pragmatic instruction on learners' overall proficiency. By prioritizing pragmatic competence in language education, educators and policymakers can better prepare learners to navigate the complexities of language use in diverse contexts, ultimately fostering more effective and meaningful communication.

المستخلص

تعزيز الفهم السياقي: تأثير الكفاءة التداولية على استيعاب النصوص لدى طالبات اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية في الجامعات السعودية

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تتناول هذه الدراسة الكفاءة التداولية بوصفها عاملاً مؤثراً في استيعاب النصوص لدى طالبات اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية في الجامعات السعودية، مع التركيز على دور التفسير السياقي في استرجاع المعاني الضمنية، والإشارات الثقافية، والمؤشرات الاجتماعية التداولية. اعتمدت الدراسة على منهج بحثي متعدد الأساليب، اشتمل على اختبار قراءة قبلي وبعدي، إضافة إلى مجموعات نقاش مركزة. تم تقسيم الطالبات عشوائياً إلى مجموعة تجريبية مكونة من 42 طالبة، ومجموعة ضابطة تضم 38 طالبة. بينما تلقت المجموعة الضابطة تعليمًا تقليدياً في القراءة، خضعت المجموعة التجريبية لتدريس تداولي صريح من خلال أنشطة موجهة نحو فهم النصوص. أظهرت النتائج الكمية للاختبار تحسناً ذا دلالة إحصائية لدى طالبات المجموعة التجريبية في الكشف عن المعاني الضمنية والتنقل عبر الإشارات الثقافية، مما يؤكد فعالية التدريس التداولي. أما النتائج النوعية المستخلصة من مجموعات النقاش، فقد أبرزت تطور استراتيجيات التفسير، وزيادة الوعي الثقافي، وارتفاع مستوى ثقة المتعلمات. وتخلص الدراسة إلى ضرورة ربط تعليم القراءة بالعوامل السياقية والثقافية لاستخدام اللغة، كما تقدم رؤية تربوية لتطوير مناهج تعليمية شاملة، تؤكد أهمية دمج التداولية في تدريس مهارات الفهم العميق لمتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الكفاءة التداولية، استيعاب النصوص، التفسير السياقي، الوعي الثقافي.

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