

**UNIVERSITATEA “BABEȘ-BOLYAI” CLUJ NAPOCA
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**The pragmatic competence in the process of learning English as a foreign
language**

-summary-

**Coordonator științific:
Prof. univ. dr. ZDRENGHEA MIHAI**

**Doctorand:
BLEJDEA ELENA DANIELA (căsăt. POPOVICI)**

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KEY WORDS: competence (linguistic, communicative, pragmatic), performance, proficiency, pragmatic knowledge, pragmatic failure, second language acquisition, social distance, relative power, socio-cultural context, pragmatic awareness, communicative strategies, metapragmatic information, speech acts, hedges, face, face-threatening acts, illocutionary force, degree of imposition, implicatures.

SUMMARY:

The theme of the research is represented by the pragmatic competence in the process of learning English as a foreign language, with a particularization on the EFL textbooks in Romania. In a plurilingual and multicultural social environment defined by a collaborative and dynamic approach of all levels of social and professional interaction, foreign language learning occupies an increasing role becoming a central issue of questioning. Two major problems arise: primarily, what the process of learning a foreign language entails, and, more importantly, how can we define success in this process. Traditionally, success in learning a foreign language refers to lexico-grammatical proficiency. However, in the past years, with the rising attention given to the study of language and language use, one can observe a shift from language learning seen as information accumulation to it being seen as competence, knowledge of the norms of language use and knowledge of the possibilities of their implementation in actual communication. This observation brings into attention the question: Why competence and not proficiency? Because a successful speaker of a foreign language should be able to think in that language, to internalize to the possible extent the thinking mechanism of that language and produce intentional utterances, not just reproduce stereotypical phrases. This approach leads to the conclusion that successful communication must not only address linguistic forms but also their use in the appropriate context, acknowledging language as a reflection of the socio-cultural norms of the target language.

My thesis starts from the goal of analyzing the importance of achieving pragmatic competence in order to become communicatively successful, especially in what regards oral interaction, and the means which facilitate the development of pragmatic competence provided by the Romanian EFL textbooks. The main reasons for tackling this problematics are: the necessity of developing communication abilities in foreign languages and the lack of coherence

regarding the theoretical conceptualizations of language teaching/learning process. The directions of my research are the following:

1. What is the place of pragmatic competence in the frame of the communication competence? Can one speak of competence or of proficiency in language learning?
2. Is it genuinely possible to achieve pragmatic competence in learning a foreign language in the language classroom, and if so, what do learners need to acquire in order to be pragmatically proficient?
3. Which are the difficulties put by the functional use of the language, from the point of view of the negotiation of the meaning in specific contexts?
4. What is the place of the pragmatic competence in the Romanian national EFL curriculum and the EFL textbooks written by Romanian authors?
5. What could be the methods of alteration of the approaches in learning, in view of shifting the accent from the accumulation of knowledge to the development of the ability of continual manipulation of the language?

Pragmatic competence is underrepresented in linguistic theory. While the broader concept of language competence has been extensively tackled, pragmatic competence is subject to ambiguousness due to variation of integration and role in the frame of language competence, and also, variation in definition. The definition varies between its understanding as knowledge, ability, and proficiency; at this level, there is confusion between state, process and result. In linguistics, it has been mainly tackled in the context of applied linguistics in second language acquisition (SLA) and language teaching/learning theories. Pragmatic competence has emerged in the context of the communicative approach of language competence, with the delimitation of the term by Dell Hymes (1972) as a response to structuralist theories based on Chomsky's conceptualizations regarding Generative Grammar.

In the first chapter tackle the problematics of the term competence. This term has undergone extensive research but from a varied array of linguistic purposes. This divergence in object or perspective of study leads to ambiguity in clearly defining the concept. The variation in conceptualization stems from focalization on different facets of language in itself, which can be envisaged as state, process or product. From the perspective of language learning, language as product is easier to tackle as it is an observable and measurable instance of language use. This easiness of approach leads of the equation in teaching theories of language competence with

language performance. Another cause of conceptual variation stems from the meaning of the lexical item in itself, which can be understood as ability, mastery of ability, a descriptor of performance in terms of proficiency. All of these aspects require clarification in order to properly define communicative competence.

I start this process of clarification by establishing the conceptual framework of the language competence, starting from Chomsky's original formulation of the concept, termed as linguistic competence and ending with Hymes' communicative competence. Chomsky's definition of linguistic competence as being "primarily concerned with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogenous speech community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interests, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of language in actual performance"¹, delimited two primordial instances of language, competence and performance, described a set of universal rules governing language production, limiting thus the incomprehensibility and randomness which apparently defined language processes. However, the grammatical focus and the idealized definition of the speaker proved to be, in some regards, reductionist, allowing little focus on performance and use. Also, this approach is difficult to apply in the field of language learning, as the non-native speaker is not a perfect one being influenced by the knowledge of his native language, by social and cultural elements and by limitations in the acquisition of the target language.

As an objection to the conceptualization of linguistic competence Dell Hymes, attracted attention to "the distorting effect of using one term 'performance' for two distinct things: a theory of performance and a theory of language use"², and proposed the redefinition of the term as communicative competence. His objection was responded to by Chomsky in 1980 with the acknowledgement of the existence of 'pragmatic competence' as a complement to 'grammatical competence', accepting that language is used purposefully and in close relation with contextual variables and speaker's purposes.

Communicative competence, as Hymes proposed it, appeared as a pertinent idea for second language learning and the applications of the notion were explored by Canale and Swain (1980) and Bachman which elaborate models of communicative competence. Canale (1983)

¹ Chomsky N. (1965). *Aspects of the theory of syntax*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, P 3

² Hymes D. (1972). "On communicative competence". In Pride J. and Holmes J. (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics*. Middlesex, England: Penguin, p 272

proposed the division of communicative competence into grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. Furthermore, Bachman delineates communicative language ability, which can be described as encompassing both of knowledge the ability transposing that knowledge in context appropriate language performance, including pragmatic competence into the framework of language competence.

Teaching theories on the other hand equate competence with proficiency, a fundamental notion traditionally associated to measurement and testing in second/foreign language teaching and learning. Taylor (1988) pointed out the fact that” it is not surprising that competence has come to be firmly associated with proficiency, particularly in the domain of applied linguistics and its principal concern, language teaching and learning”, since the key aspect distinguishing competence from proficiency, consists in the latter’s measurable character.³ Modern teaching curricula denominate that proficiency as skill, establishing clear mastery descriptors allowing the assessment of the acquisition.

However, a closer analysis of the threefold system competence/performance/skill cannot but illustrate the idea of competence equated with knowledge. It is Coşeriu who makes a distinction between language as activity and language as type of knowledge, transposing the notion of linguistic competence into linguistic knowledge. His theory envisages language as dynamic and creative process of generating new knowledge based on a prior conceptual and functional knowledge. It is a creative process because it produces a new virtual knowledge which can constitute the basis for other potential language realizations. A certain language is both an activity (speaking English) and a type of knowledge (knowing English). He argues that we cannot understand language if we view it just as activity, as knowledge or as product, or if we do not consider all these perspectives as being equivalent.⁴

From this perspective the main issue is represented by the association of competence with activity, which allows by the assessment of its success of failure in accomplishment to measure the ability of an individual. The characteristic of competence, understood as ability of being virtual, in that that it is only observable by abstracting it from activity, leads to confusions between process and result. In foreign language teaching/learning, this confusion is reflected in

³ Taylor D.S. (1988). “The meaning and use of the term competence in linguistics and applied linguistics”. *Applied Linguistics*, 9

⁴ Coşeriu E. (2009). *Omul și limbajul lui. Studii de filozofie a limbajului, teorie a limbii și lingvistică generală*, Iași: E. Universitatii “Alexandru Ioan Cuza”, p 305

the tendency to equate competence to a set of skills allowing the performance of specific tasks in a certain domain. In learning curricula there are defined key competencies envisaged as the ability to perform a certain, precise task, accompanied by standards of performance, which represent an instrument of evaluation of the attainment of the competence. Analyzing this definition it appears that competence seems to rather refer to abilities and skills as they reflect in degrees of accomplishment of tasks. Linguistic competence, on the other hand, apart from the acquired elements, involves also innate ones, making this definition unsuitable or, at most, incomplete, as language competence in itself implies both knowledge and skill and also the motivation to use these two in order to accomplish a successful action. The clarification of the notion of competence ensues in the following rationalizations: competence encompasses both the process and to the result of an activity, it can be defined as knowledge or as ability of applying knowledge, it can be envisioned in its virtual or in its actual representation. It is also important to take into consideration that competence refers to a potentiality, being based on the ability to access certain knowledge in order to perform a certain activity, or to manifest a certain behavior. These observations underline the difficulty of observing and measuring competence outside its relation to its actual manifestation that is the activity itself.

From this stand point I must agree with Chomsky's more recent rationalizations on language competence, which envisages it as independent of performance, an 'internalized set of rules' allowing the speaker to distinguish ungrammatical realizations irrespective of his/her comprehending of the meaning of the utterance. Transposing this definition of competence as a faculty of the mind (in terms of cognitive processes) to the pragmatics of language I propose the expansion of the notion to Coşeriu's concept of 'linguistic knowledge'. Coşeriu makes a distinction between language as activity and language as type of knowledge. Language as both a production and reception/interpretation activity cannot be restricted to the process of formal and functional realization based on reiteration of pre-existing knowledge; it is a creative activity which uses this already accumulated knowledge, in order to say something new, producing a new virtual knowledge which can constitute the basis for other future communicative acts. Coşeriu argues, and I must subscribe to his conceptualizations, that language must be understood as a multifaceted construct, comprising knowledge, activity (speaking) and product (speech). He

underlines that language can be completely understood only if we attribute equal weight to each of these facets.⁵

In relation to the association of competence with the idea of knowledge, it is also important to note Chomsky's (1978) definition of pragmatic competence as the "knowledge of conditions and manner of appropriate use of the language, in conformity with various purposes"⁶, reflecting the shift from the definitions of both linguistic and pragmatic competences to the broader concept of 'knowledge of language'. Relevant for the approach of pragmatic competence in the field of second/foreign language learning is his statement of the importance of "distinguishing clearly between knowledge and ability to use that knowledge."⁷ Correlating these conceptualizations to Saussure's division of 'langage/ langue/ parole', I argue that competence deals with the interrelation between the universal innate knowledge of how to communicate, the competence to communicate in a specific language based both on universal knowledge and on acquired knowledge, and finally, the ability/ the skills implied by the actual use of a specific language. Consequently, second/foreign language learning processes cannot rely solely on accessing the general language knowledge, as their structure and mode of realization differs from the processes underlying first language acquisition. Thus second/foreign language approach must be based on a dialogic and interdependent relation between the universals in language and language knowledge acquired by learning. This argument is the foundation for the requirement of explicit teaching of pragmatic aspects of language.

The second chapter of my paper is meant to define the skills required of a learner in order to achieve pragmatic competence. In order to attain that objective I analyze the provisions of the Common European Framework of Reference of Languages (CEFRL) which is a tool widely used in the European Union, as it synthesizes the approaches in foreign language teaching and learning of the European system of education. Following that line of thought it is necessary to analyze the National EFL Curriculum in Romania.

At a first view, in the CEFRL, the approach adopted is an action –oriented one. It regards learners of a foreign language first and foremost as social members, specifically socially involved individuals aiming at achieving tasks in a certain array of situations. This shift of view in what concerns the learner requires the independent speaker linguistically competent not just

⁵ Coseriu, E, *Omul si limbajul lui*, op.cit. p 305

⁶ Chomsky N (1978) "Language and Unconscious Knowledge". Op.cit. p 224

⁷ Chomsky N (1978) "Language and Unconscious Knowledge". Op.cit., p 12

grammatically and lexically proficient. One can observe a change also, in the perspective on the linguistic activities which are no longer separate speech acts but are constituents of a broader social context, which can give them their full meaning. Therefore, it is highlighted the importance of the pragmatic situational level, giving the context of communication a central role as it determines the speaker's strategic communicative action in the attempt of attaining his/her communication purposes. It is, however, important to point to the fact that the CEFRL reduces pragmatic competence to discourse competence, that is, expertness in managing discourse, organization and consistency, recognition of text categories and structures, production of speech acts relying on predefined schemes of dialogical interface. Pragmatic features are included in its definition of sociolinguistic competence: awareness of social conventions (rules of politeness, power relations), formal linguistic encoding of specific essential conventions. In formulating the skills required to attain the level of the independent user (B1 B2) there are formulated some abilities which could represent assessment factors in what concerns pragmatic competence acquisition. The independent user should: "adopt a level of formality appropriate to the circumstances [...], have a good command of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms with awareness of connotative levels of meaning [...], use language flexibly and effectively for social purposes, including emotional, allusive and joking usage."⁸

The provisions of the National curriculum are centered on comprehension of the written/oral text content, good grammatical control, decoding and producing messages, being able to write functional texts, expressing a point a view. The Curriculum mentions also the ability for transfer and mediation; however this is viewed as the ability to translate, resume and paraphrase. One of the main aims of the Curriculum is that of the learner achieving the ability to use intentionally, and in a functionally appropriate manner, communication techniques in different communicative contexts. However, the skills aiming at this objective are somewhat reduced: writing functional texts for different communicative purposes by suiting the form and the language to the subject and to the reader, participating in conversations using a suitable language and respecting the socio-cultural norms required by the role and the relation with the interlocutors.

⁸ Verhelst N., Van Avermaet P., Takala S., Figueras N. and North B. (2009). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge University Press.

My opinion regarding the curricular problematics is that it is necessary a reformulation of the skills deriving from pragmatic competence. The speaker requirements defining a pragmatically successful communication should be: comprehension of interlocutors' intentions, identification of the speaker's attitudes and feelings, delimitation of social parameters (social distance, relative power, circumstances), discrimination of the illocutionary force of a speech act by assessment of the intensity of a speaker's meaning (suggestion, warning), appropriate reaction and response, and discourse modification according to context and socio-cultural conventions.

Chapter 3 is envisioned as to draw an outline of the elements intended to help the learner acquire pragmatic competence as designed by the Romanian curriculum and the textbooks available. The main question of this section is: What are the means by which textbooks can place in a central position the transactional speaking performances rather than the imitative and responsive ones? An important part of this research is constituted by the language presented in the textbooks as the input the learners get from them does not usually show authentic, real language use, but instead artificial and decontextualized conversations.

Textbooks represent the centre of the curriculum and the program of study in the majority of educational environments; nonetheless, it hardly supplies sufficient data for students which could facilitate pragmatic competence development. An analysis of these instances of communication from a pragmatic point of view could prove useful. Detailed analysis will focus on the usage of the metapragmatic information, explicit approach of the pragmatic aspects, and discussion of register, illocutionary force, politeness, appropriacy of usage.

In order to evaluate the level of reflection of transformations in foreign language teaching theory, I considered necessary to explore the Ministry of Education approved textbooks in Romania. As they were grouped in three main categories (textbooks elaborated by non-native speakers of English centered on the provisions of the Romanian EFL Curriculum, textbooks elaborated by native speakers following CEFRL provisions, and mixed textbooks), I chose to focus on the analysis of the textbooks that were elaborated by non-native authors, in order to evaluate the extent to which teacher level of pragmatic awareness influences the overall structure of the textbook, and their position relative to CEFRL and Curriculum provisions. The conclusions of this scrutiny regarded two main aspects: authenticity of texts and distribution and formulation of pragmatic awareness and assessment activities.

First, necessity of text authenticity is closely connected to the observation that teacher discourse and non-native classroom interaction cannot serve as comprehensible input, or the basis of explicit teaching, the role of compensating for this poor communicative environment falling onto the textbook and the instructional materials adjacent to it. There are, as seen in the detailed discussion in the last chapter, numerous arguments defining authentic text and the selection procedure to be followed in the design of a textbook. In spite all these explanations, I believe that the key aspects that ought to influence the selection of materials (texts and tasks) should be pragmatic and pedagogic. The pragmatic requirements should tackle learner's needs and communicative goals, socio-cultural and contextual variables, intended meaning, the illocutionary force of an utterance, the addressee, the effect on the interlocutor, taking into account not to approach authentic texts as schemata to be reproduced at the productive level. From the point of view of the pedagogical process, authentic materials must constitute the basis for metalinguistic and pragmatic scrutiny allowing student's understanding of efficient and appropriate communicative strategies.

The analysis of the textbooks from the textual point of view revealed the following aspects: (1) the main types of texts in the textbooks are monologic, interactional and functional, delimited into the subsequent genres: literary text, expositions and explanations, functional text, recount and narratives (fiction or informational), report, procedure, reference, electronic text, oral communication recordings; (2) in Romanian non-native EFL textbooks there is a preponderance of the literary and the expository texts, offering little evidence of actual communication in the target language, and almost no opportunity to encounter pragmatic competence in realization; (3) report texts, represented by newspaper or magazine articles and editorials, offer to some extent a broader range of communicative strategies, with the goal of providing design patterns for different types of essayistic productions; (4) functional texts are reduced and homogenous, representing mainly formal/informal letters, letter of application, advertisement, and report on complaints, as contrary to the native-authors textbooks which show a wider array of formal modalities; (5) the choice of topics and new vocabulary input underlines also the focus on academic and professional-life subjects of Romanian EFL textbooks.

In what concerns the types of activities proposed by the textbooks, I have identified two main types: pragmatic awareness tasks and pragmatic performance tasks, and I gave derived their analysis from the level of support of the formulated skills identified as representative of

pragmatic competence development. In all of the three groups of texts, pragmatic information represents a reduced portion of the total content, and is mainly connected to speech act performance, providing a reduced number of native-like communication samples, devoid of accurate contextual reference and explicit metapragmatic information. It is important to note the correlation between speech acts and grammatical issues, such as negatives, imperatives, gerunds and so on, focusing on linguistic performance rather than pragmatic performance. Speech acts are presented formally and in an enumerative manner, listing structures with little or absent metapragmatic information concerning variation depending on politeness strategies, register or illocutionary force. Speech act acquisition tasks are designed under the form of routines, rehearsal of formulaic expressions aiming at internalizing the structures without actual comprehension. The mixed and the native-authors EFL textbooks present a more efficient speech act treatment from the pragmatic point of view, addressing language use and transposition in actual communication.

From the perspective of the contextual awareness issues, there was a clear dissimilarity in approach between non-native author and native-author textbooks, as the first dealt with contextual variables majorly at an expounding level, while the second type of textbooks proposed awareness raising activities which transposed descriptive information of contextual variables into communication practice at reading comprehension, oral comprehension and written/oral production levels. Romanian EFL textbooks included largely assignments relating to recognition of speaker's/writer's attitude, and setting elements. In contrast *New Headway Intermediate* and *Prospects* covered a larger number of pragmatic awareness assignments included in reading or listening comprehension activities.

A pragmatic aspect broadly represented in the textbooks is register, especially in what concerns the production of functional and essayistic texts. Romanian EFL textbooks present formality-related information by distinguishing between spoken and written forms of English, and formal/informal written productions (such as letters, applications, formal complaints), underlining differences in linguistic elements, sentence structure, choice of lexical items and conventional formulae etc. As in the case of speech acts, formality issues are only listed or vaguely referred to, without any additional information which could exemplify suitable socio-cultural contexts of use.

Also explicit approach of communication strategies is another underrepresented aspect in the EFL textbooks, which often fall short of satisfactorily representing the choice of communicative strategies in the target culture. Politeness strategies are majorly tackled from the point of view of modals uses and functions, matters of formality, as a result of the focus on written production, the assignments and the texts comprising mostly essayistic or academic text.

In what concerns pragmatic references of cultural aspects they are reduced to presentation of some dialectal and regional differences in linguistic realization, as is the example of an activity concerning non-standard uses of English, the assignment entailing the identification of “incorrect use of tenses, double negations, lack of agreement between subject and verb, incorrect forms of verbs”⁹.

Production opportunities provided by the Romanian EFL textbooks favor the written medium, restricting interaction activities to point of view elicitation or expression in classroom/familial/academic -related contexts, and written production to formulating different types of essays, narratives or reports aimed at developing logical structuring and persuasive skills.

Romanian EFL textbooks present a distribution of metapragmatic information pages of approximately 20% of the overall content, which is insufficient in the endeavor of developing pragmatic competence and achieving successful communication. Also the range of types of metapragmatic information is reduced to designations of formality and politeness, while description of the contextual variables (social relationships between interlocutors, status differences, or other contextual factors) which may influence formal or polite language use are hardly ever incorporated.

As a final conclusion, derived from these observations of the deficiencies on pragmatic competence address, I consider constructive the delimitation of the further solutions of improvement: selection of authentic texts/tasks, favoring the dialogic ones; explicit treatment of pragmatic aspects in order to raise pragmatic awareness and help build pragmatic knowledge; provision of contextualized tasks both written and oral with a contrastive variation of context, social relation, register and communication purposes, favoring interactional tasks allowing oral exchange with attention given to the communicative purpose and the adaptation of the communication strategies to the context; increase of the number of pragmatic and cultural

⁹ Comișel E., Miloș D., Pîrvu I., (2007) *Limba engleza: [...] - Manual pentru clasa a XI-a L2*, op.cit., p 25

awareness raising activities such as identification of the intended meaning, evaluation of the illocutionary force of an utterance, identification of contextual parameters and socio-cultural markers in the texts; approach of the linguistic(grammar rules, lexical items) aspects from a pragmatic/communicative/interactional perspective; functional and communicative speech act treatment.

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