



DEVELOPING PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE THROUGH SPEECH ACT ANALYSIS OF FACEBOOK COMMENTARIES

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Abstract

The rapid growth of social media communication has created new opportunities for language learning, particularly in the development of pragmatic competence. Facebook comment sections represent authentic, dynamic discourse environments where users perform various speech acts such as expressing opinions, agreeing, disagreeing, criticizing, and supporting others. This study investigates how analyzing speech acts in Facebook commentaries can develop students' pragmatic competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. Using a quasi-experimental design, the study involved 22 intermediate university students who participated in a six-week instructional intervention focused on identifying and analyzing speech acts in Facebook comment threads. Data were collected through pre-test and post-test pragmatic awareness tasks and classroom observation. The findings indicate that students improved significantly in recognizing speech acts, interpreting pragmatic intentions, and understanding interactional meaning in digital discourse. The study concludes that Facebook comment analysis is an effective pedagogical tool for enhancing pragmatic competence in modern EFL classrooms.

Keywords: Pragmatic Competence, Speech Acts, Facebook Comments, Digital Discourse, Social Media Pragmatics, EFL

Introduction

Pragmatic competence refers to the ability to understand and produce language appropriately in context, taking into account speaker intention, social relationships, discourse conventions, and cultural norms (Kasper & Rose, 2002). It includes the interpretation of speech acts, implicatures, politeness strategies, indirect meanings, and interactional norms that govern real-life communication.

In contemporary second language acquisition (SLA) research, pragmatic competence is recognized as a core dimension of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980). However, despite its theoretical importance, numerous studies have shown that EFL learners often demonstrate grammatical proficiency while lacking pragmatic appropriateness, particularly in informal and interactional contexts such as digital communication (Taguchi, 2015).

Literature Review

Research on pragmatics instruction has consistently emphasized the difficulty of developing pragmatic competence in classroom settings where exposure to authentic interaction is limited. Traditional instruction tends to focus on explicit grammar teaching and controlled practice, leaving pragmatic phenomena such as implicature, indirectness, and discourse negotiation underrepresented (Thomas, 1983).

In response, scholars have advocated for the integration of authentic materials and interaction-based approaches. Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) provides a foundation for understanding how utterances perform actions such as requesting, apologizing, agreeing, or criticizing. Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle further explains how meaning is inferred beyond literal interpretation through conversational maxims.

Politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) highlights how speakers manage face-threatening acts through strategies such as mitigation, indirectness, and hedging. These frameworks collectively demonstrate that pragmatic meaning is deeply contextual and socially negotiated. Recent studies in digital pragmatics have extended these theories to computer-mediated communication (CMC), emphasizing that social media platforms represent rich environments for authentic pragmatic behavior. Facebook comment sections, in particular, have been identified as spaces where users perform diverse speech acts, including evaluation, disagreement, sarcasm, solidarity building, and emotional expression.

Research Gap

Despite growing interest in digital discourse, several gaps remain in the literature. First, most pragmatic instruction studies focus on spoken classroom interaction or textbook dialogues, with limited attention to naturally occurring social media discourse. Second, although Facebook communication has been studied from discourse and sociolinguistic perspectives, fewer studies have explicitly linked Facebook comment analysis to pedagogical development of pragmatic competence. Third, there is a lack of empirical classroom-based research examining how structured speech act analysis in social media contexts influences learners' pragmatic awareness.

To address these gaps, this study investigates how analyzing speech acts in Facebook commentaries can enhance university students' pragmatic competence through an instructional intervention.

The objectives are:

1. To examine students' ability to identify speech acts in Facebook comment discourse;
2. To evaluate the effectiveness of Facebook-based pragmatic tasks;
3. To explore pedagogical implications of integrating social media discourse into EFL reading instruction.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a **quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test design** with qualitative classroom observation.

Participants

The participants were **22 intermediate-level (B1–B2) university students** enrolled in an English language communication course. The learners were aged 18–22 and had at least 5 years of English study experience.



Instructional Procedure

A **six-week intervention** was conducted focusing on speech act analysis in Facebook comment sections. Each lesson included:

- Analysis of authentic Facebook posts and comment threads
- Identification of speech acts (agreement, disagreement, criticism, praise, humor)
- Group discussion of pragmatic meaning
- Role-play reconstruction of comment interactions
- Reflection tasks on online communication behavior

Sample Facebook Comment Dataset

Facebook Post: “Online learning is better than traditional classroom learning.”

Comments:

1. “I completely disagree. Nothing replaces real classroom interaction.”
2. “Well, it depends on the subject actually.”
3. “Totally agree online learning gives flexibility.”
4. “Are you serious? Online classes are boring.”
5. “Good point, but exams are harder online.”

Speech Act Classification Table

Comment	Speech Act Type	Pragmatic Function
1	Disagreement	Direct opposition
2	Hedging opinion	Partial agreement
3	Agreement	Supportive stance
4	Challenge / Criticism	Emotional reaction
5	Mixed evaluation	Balanced opinion

Data Collection Instruments

1. **Pragmatic Competence Test**
 - Identification of speech acts in social media texts
 - Interpretation of implied meanings
2. **Observation Checklist**
 - Student participation
 - Accuracy in speech act identification
 - Depth of pragmatic interpretation

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically.

Results

Pre-test and Post-test Results

Test Stage Mean Score (out of 30) Pragmatic Awareness Level

Pre-test	13.8	Limited recognition of speech acts in online discourse
Post-test	23.5	Improved identification and interpretation of speech acts

Classroom Observation Findings

The intervention led to several improvements:



- Better recognition of disagreement and agreement strategies
- Increased awareness of informal language use
- Improved ability to interpret tone (sarcasm, humor, criticism)
- Enhanced engagement in group discussions

Example of Student Progress

Pre-instruction response:

- “He is just saying he doesn’t like it.”

Post-instruction response:

- “The commenter is expressing disagreement using a direct speech act with emotional tone.”

Discussion

The findings suggest that analyzing speech acts in Facebook commentaries significantly enhances students’ pragmatic competence.

Facebook comments provide authentic, spontaneous, and interactional language use, making them ideal for pragmatic analysis. Students are exposed to real communicative intentions, including disagreement, sarcasm, and indirect evaluation.

Speech act analysis helps learners understand not only what is said but what is done through language in digital communication.

However, challenges include informal language, slang, and lack of standard grammar, which may require teacher scaffolding.

Pedagogical Implications

Teachers should:

- Integrate social media discourse into reading and pragmatics lessons
- Teach speech act classification explicitly
- Use authentic Facebook comment threads for analysis
- Encourage critical reflection on online communication

Teacher training should include digital pragmatics and social media literacy.

Conclusion

This study examined the effectiveness of using Facebook commentaries for developing students’ pragmatic competence through speech act analysis. The results show significant improvement in learners’ ability to identify and interpret speech acts in digital discourse.

The study concludes that Facebook comment sections are valuable authentic resources for teaching pragmatics in EFL contexts. Future research should explore larger datasets and different social media platforms.

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