

# **DEVELOPING PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE OF INDONESIAN EFL LEARNERS THROUGH TEACHING SPEECH ACTS OF ORAL AND WRITTEN COMPLAINTS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The lack of pragmatic competence could result in unexpected effects on the speakers; for example, the speakers are considered as rude and aggressive people. Accordingly, developing pragmatic competence for EFL learners should be a great concern. This article is aimed to fill in the needs of pragmatic teaching by providing examples of teaching practices that could be used to develop EFL learners' pragmatic competence. There are two tasks that have been designed by drawing on discourse processing framework proposed by Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) to achieve the production of both written and spoken discourses. The first task is on speaking, particularly on the speech act of oral complaints. The second task is on writing a letter of complaint. This article suggests that developing pragmatic awareness through the speech act of oral and written complaints is desirable.

**Keywords:** *pragmatic competence; pragmatic awareness; speech acts; complaints; Indonesian EFL learners*

## **INTRODUCTION**

A relatively recent research in Indonesian EFL learners' complaining behaviors shows that status levels and social distance between interlocutors led different frequencies and strategies of impoliteness, such as bald-on record, negative and positive impoliteness (Wijayanto, Prasetyarini & Hikmat, 2017). Furthermore,

the researchers argue that the frequent use of impolite complaints was influenced by several factors, such as the low level of learners' understanding about the speech acts, their perceptions on the social distance and status level of interlocutors, intensity of social situations in the Oral Discourse Completion Tasks (ODCTs), their pragmatic competence, and the nature of research instrument. In other words, socio-cultural knowledge plays an important role in influencing people to use language for communication appropriately.

The above-mentioned idea is confirmed by the concept of discourse processing framework proposed by Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000), asserting that speakers not only need linguistic knowledge, for example, grammar, syntax, and phonology but also knowledge of sociocultural rules, knowledge of presupposition and context, and discourse knowledge. Celce-Murcia and Olshtain further add that the inability to fulfil the aforementioned knowledge could lead to wrong production of spoken discourse (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000). In the same token, the production of written discourse is also influenced by the language knowledge, discourse knowledge of writing conventions, prior knowledge and writing experience (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000). Referring to Celce-Murcia and Olshtain's (2000) discourse processing framework, pragmatic competence results from such processes as the top-down processing of prior knowledge and experience; discourse knowledge; sociocultural knowledge; and assessment of context, purpose, and interaction. Thus, pragmatic competence here plays important role in interpreting and producing discourse.

By obtaining pragmatic competence, EFL learners can communicate effectively and culturally in appropriate ways. Conversely, the lack of pragmatic competence could result in unexpected effects on the speakers; for example, the speakers are considered as rude and aggressive people. Accordingly, developing pragmatic competence for EFL learners should be a great concern. Firstly, research studies on pragmatic area show that Indonesian teachers of English and learners lack pragmatic competence so that they need to be given many opportunities to develop their pragmatic competence (Aridah, 2001). Secondly, the acquisition of

pragmatic competence takes much time. According to Olsthain and Blum-Kulka (1985):

“If there is no formal instruction of pragmatics, learners may take an extended period of time—typically over 10 years—to acquire native-like pragmatic ability, even in second language setting where learners are exposed to the target language on a daily basis” (as cited in Ishihara & Cohen, 2010, p. 201).

Finally, the empirical research conducted by Wijayanto et al. (2017) suggest that without obtaining pragmatic instruction, the EFL learners tend to adopt impolite complaints. Therefore, EFL instruction needs to incorporate pragmatic competence in its curriculum. It is because if learners fail to meet pragmatic competence may lead to unsuccessful communication. Therefore, this article is aimed to fill the needs of pragmatic teaching by providing examples of teaching practices that could potentially develop learners' pragmatic competence. There are two tasks that have been designed by drawing on discourse processing framework proposed by Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) to achieve the production of both written and spoken discourses. The first task is on speaking, particularly on the speech act of oral complaints. The second task is on writing a letter of complaint.

## TEACHING CONTEXTS

Before explaining both tasks, the target audience of these tasks needs to be explained. The target audience of this lesson is Indonesian senior high school students in year 12. Based on the result of the English proficiency test, the level of students' English proficiency is heterogeneous; some of them are already at the intermediate level, but the others are at the beginner level. The age of the students ranges from 17-19 years, and the class consists of around 40 to 50 students. In English class, the students learn four macro skills, including reading, speaking, writing and listening. They also learn speech acts, such as complaining, requesting, apologizing, and so forth. Based on the syllabus, the speech act of complaints is included in grade 12, therefore, this article focuses on spoken and written complaints. According to my experience in teaching English for senior high school students, they express the speech act of complaining directly to the point of the

complaints and there are no sets of strategy as exemplified by Murphy and Neu (1996) as cited in Hilliard (2017, p. 3), including (1) initiation and explanation of purpose, (2) a complaint, (3) justification, and (4) a request. Therefore, in these speaking tasks, these strategies are illuminated.

### ***Task 1: Speaking task***

This task is designed to achieve the purpose of producing a socially appropriate spoken discourse in the form of oral complaining in English. Since there are several differences in the norms both in first language (L1) and second/foreign language (L2), this task is aimed to promote learners' awareness about the differences by taking into accounts some components of discourse processing framework, such as the socio-cultural knowledge, discourse knowledge, assessment of context and intention. Additionally, pragmalinguistics aspect is another consideration which includes the knowledge of vocabulary, phrasal chunks and the grammar of complaining. In this task, there are several activities which I adapted from Hilliard (2017). The explanation of the speaking task is as follows.

#### ***Activity 1: Discussion of the speech act of complaining.***

In this activity, students discussed questions for complaining. The questions are adapted from Hillard (2017). The questions include (1) what is the complaints? what are some situations in which you might complain to someone? (2) what do people say to express a complaint your first language? how is it different from what people say to express complaint in English? (3) is it common to complain about bad service in your country? is it common to complain to a parent, a boss, or a teacher? why or why not? (4) would you complain differently to a friend, a server, and a teacher? why or why not?

#### ***Activity 2: Developing pragma-linguistics through vocabulary***

In this activity, students will review and practice the grammar, vocabulary, and phrasal chunk of complaining. This activity is following the discourse processing framework from the bottom-up processing for student linguistic knowledge, particularly about complaints, is activated. Students are introduced with the examples of grammar, vocabulary, and phrasal chunks of oral complaining. The table of useful language for the complaints speech act is attached in Appendix 1.

### ***Activity 3: Role play and discussion***

In this task students have role-play based on a variety of context and social setting, including the situation that varies their social status and that of the interlocutor, for example, the same status, a higher status, and lower status. After having role play, the teacher may lead a discussion of the students' word choice, complaint style, and reaction to their partner. The scenario of the role play can be seen in appendix 2.

### ***Rationales of the Speaking Task***

The rationale for designing a speaking task by employing the framework of discourse processing is clear. Firstly, to achieve appropriate discourse students need to be exposed to the sociocultural knowledge, the context and the intention of the speaker. When people communicate with people from different countries, there will be different sociocultural norms of the language. For example, in complaining, Javanese learners of English frequently use rhetorical questions without incorporating hedges to mitigate them (Pratiwi, 2013). Japanese learners of English rarely employ softener to mitigate their complaints (Rimer & Iwa, 2002 as cited in Wijayanto et al. 2017). By discussing questions in the activity 1, students become aware of the different way in expressing complaints in L1 and L2; thus, students can complain appropriately and misunderstanding could be prevented.

Activity 2 is designed to provide students with formulaic competence as it is one of the components of communicative competence developed by Celce-Murcia (2007). This component including the knowledge of microlevel language including the phrasal chunks of L2 that cannot be translated in L1. Referring to discourse processing framework (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000), language knowledge is needed because this knowledge leads to production of spoken discourse from the bottom-up activation as the companion of top-down processing. Additionally, having pragmalinguistics competence could help students to express complaints politely. Conversely, incapability of selecting appropriate pragmalinguistic forms cause many Korean EFL learners of English to produce aggressive complaints (Murphy & Neu, 1996 as cited in Wijayanto et al., 2017, p. 2). Furthermore, gaining the expertise of realisation strategies of speech act, a range of functions and

some target culture-specific is as one of the principles in developing pragmatic awareness (Limberg, 2015).

Activity 3 in this speaking task is undertaken to make students be familiar with a variety of situation and context of complaining. By practicing many different scenarios of complaining students could reach the approximate native-speaker pragmatic competence although the ultimate purpose of developing pragmatic awareness is not native-like pragmatic competence. This activity is also aimed to train students to express complaints spontaneously. In other words, the fluency of expressing complaints is the targeted goal of this activity.

### ***Task 2: Writing a letter of complaints***

This writing task I adapted from my teaching practice in senior high school in Indonesia. This task is aimed to raise students' critical thinking and awareness about social problems in society. The outcome of this task is the ability to write a complaint letter for the newspaper or social media platforms like Facebook or Twitter. This writing task is based on the genre-text writing process, including several stages: building knowledge of the texts, modelling of the text, joint construction of the text, and independent construction of the text (Setyowati & Widiati, 2014). Generally, genre-based writing is used to teach writing text such as narrative, descriptive, recount, exposition. However, it is also possible to be implemented in the functional text, such as a complaint letter.

In this task, there are several activities that follow the stages of genre-based writing. In the first of building knowledge of the text, students discuss some social issues. Since the topic of this lesson is writing a complaint letter, students are led to observe some disappointing experiences in receiving public services. For example, the problem of the uncertainty of the public transport schedule. Another issue that can be discussed is the problem of establishing cement in Kendeng Mountain, Central Java-Indonesia. The establishment of this factory could result in some environmental problems. By discussing this problem, students could write a complaint letter and submit to the newspaper to ask for the response from the government.

In the stage of modelling of the text, students are exposed to a different variety of complaint letter, and they compare the complaining strategies, which are used in the text. They could also identify the social distance and the level of status of the addressee and these influences the different style of the complaint letter, whether there is a difference between oral and written complaint. In the stage of joint construction of the text, students and teacher work together to write a complaint letter. The teacher begins this stage with brainstorming, outlining, drafting, editing and revising. The participation of the students in this activity is encouraged. In the last stage, students are instructed to write a complaint letter based on the topics that have been discussed in the first stage and teacher promote students to submit the letter in the newspaper or the social media platforms belongs to the government.

The writing task that I have developed reflects the written text production framework (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000), where the interactive strategy of bottom-up and top-down occur. The genre-based writing also follows the written discourse framework. The stage of building knowledge of the text is in line with the top-down process of Celce-Murcia and Olshtain's (2000) discourse processing framework. The objective of employing building knowledge is salient. When students have been familiar with the knowledge of the field or the content, they will have the inspiration to write. However, only the knowledge of subject matter is not enough, if there is no model or genre of the writing. Therefore, modelling of the text needs to be undertaken to understand the writing convention. Furthermore, the process joint construction enables student and teachers to identify the intention of the writer and the target audience. Therefore, when students write a complaint letter, they could use the appropriate language because writing complaint letter does not necessarily use rude language allowed.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, even though the focus of this article is on the developing of pragmatic awareness, the discourse competences could also be improved. This is because pragmatic awareness is part of the discourse competence. According to the model of communicative competence proposed by Celce-Murcia (2007), discourse

competence is the centre of the other competencies, including linguistic competence, interactional competence, sociocultural competence, and formulaic competence. Regarding the tasks, several activities both in speaking and writing tasks reflect the principles of processing discourse framework which is adapted to language skills. The interaction of top-down and bottom-up process is also implemented in both tasks aimed to achieve production of spoken and written discourse. The employment of genre-based writing in task 2 also supports the discourse processing framework proposed by Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000).

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