Article

Improving Pragmatic Competence of ESL Students: Anecdotes of Filipino Language Teachers

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the strategies, challenges, and adaptabilities of Filipino language teachers in improving the pragmatic competence of ESL students. Using purposive sampling, there were five teachers who participated in the Key Informants Interview and another five for the Focus Group Discussion. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings of the study revealed that teachers enhanced the pragmatic competence of ESL students by imposing the English Only Policy, Integrating Differentiated Tasks, Translating of Words to English, and Addressing Linguistic Diversity. Teachers strategized to effectively address the distinct linguistic background of the students by incorporating localized perspectives, allowing students to use their mother tongue, contextualizing lessons by connecting students' experiences, and by encouraging students to express themselves in the English language. Expressing thoughts in English, fearing of judgement and inferiority, and upbringing and community influence were the challenges they faced in applying pragmatic competence instruction for ESL students. In order to navigate

pedagogical challenges, the language teachers practised the giving of rewards, encouraged students to constantly learn, positioned oneself as a parent, and gave everyone the chance to speak.

KEYWORDS: *pragmatic competence, Filipino teachers' strategies, ESL students, cultural linguistic backgrounds, adaptabilities*

Introduction

Second language speakers like Filipinos can appreciate the value of learning English when it is used in a meaningful manner. That is why, as English language teachers, their main goal for teaching pragmatics is to raise learners' awareness about the choices they can make when interacting in the target language. However, Filipino language teachers had trouble in employing pragmatic competence to English as Second Language (ESL) students because textbooks for language learning do not always include information about pragmatic ability. This might be partly due to the lack of some valid strategies for assessing pragmatic competence. Thus, teachers develop their own strategies on improving learners' ability to select, organize and use English pragmatic features in the real-life context.

Indeed, pragmatic competence played a crucial role in the acquisition of speaking skills among non-native speakers of the English language. Results of the study conducted by Yan (2022) among Chinese students suggest that teachers should continuously enrich students' pragmatic competence in a practical setting for them to be able to better communicate with others.

In Filipino ESL context, the study of Budeng and Merza (2023) revealed that Filipino ESL learners' level of pragmatic comprehension is high while their pragmatic production is slightly off. The results imply that there is still a need to improve Filipino learners' pragmatic competence as a crucial part of their communicative competence. In line with this, Troia and Emam (2023) concluded that pragmatic competence was the best predictor of literacy proficiency of both male and female students. Moreover, the need to use authentic materials in language learning can significantly improve pragmatic competence as supported by the findings of Kosimov (2023). This was done by engaging students with the use of TV shows, movies, and news broadcasts. Notwithstanding, students observed nonverbal preference of pragmatic transfer when invoking the presence of God, a case which was observed among Saudi Arabian EFL students (Almusallam, 2023). Pragmatic competence is always associated with cultural and contextual factors (Chong-yuan, 2021; Saleem et al., 2021). This means that the speaker must always relate the delivery of the language based on their cultural perspectives.

Although, there were research conducted on how pragmatic competence changed students' abilities in delivering the language, but there is dearth of study on how Filipino teachers shared this approach to their students (Zhaiykbay, 2019; Mood et al., 2022). Hence, the gap of the study.

Though students proved to have grammatical competence, they still have problems with their pragmatic competence (Tursunovich, 2023). Despite this, Filipino language teachers are in unique position to draw a clear picture of how ESL students gain from the application of pragmatic competence. The timeliness and relevance of this study in language teaching motivated the

researchers to explore and conduct a study that would help improve the pragmatic competence of ESL students.

Statement of the Problem

Improving the pragmatic competence of ESL students is its pinnacle of urgency. The performance of students can be observed of how they delivered and applied the language in their surroundings. By looking into this aspect, the researchers wanted to navigate teachers' strategies, adaptability, as well as the challenges they have been facing. Specifically, this study answers the following questions:

1. What pedagogical strategies are employed by English language teachers to enhance the pragmatic competence of ESL students?
2. How do English language teachers adapt their strategies to effectively address the distinct cultural linguistic backgrounds of ESL students?
3. What challenges do English language teachers encounter in the application of pragmatic competence instruction for ESL students?
4. How do English language teachers adeptly navigate these pedagogical challenges and optimize pragmatic competence development among ESL students?

Theoretical Lens/Literature Review

This study was situated within the context of Pragmatic Competence among the ESL learners. The findings of Zhanysbekova et al. (2024) revealed that this approach significantly improved the understanding of the students in the utilization of appropriate language in different situations. Tenis (2024) highlighted the used of speech acts and implicatures (Asghar et al., 2024; Kentmen et al., 2023), conversational management, and cultural norms in the language curricula in order to address the challenges faced by teachers and students.

More importantly, the dedication of a language teacher plays a significant role in cultivating this skill among the students (Asma & Fatma, 2024). Through explicit instruction and reflective teaching (Fathi et al., 2024), they would be able to introduce different strategies such as the cultural immersion and authentic language use in improving the pragmatic skills (Mokoro, 2024). In addition, Tang (2024) stated that it may help in the development of communicative competence since it could cultivate pragmatic awareness and cross-cultural competence.

Furthermore, the acquisition of pragmatic competence led them to overcome their difficulties in using the English language (Mami et al., 2024; Xabibullayevna, 2024). For Samatova (2024), this can be further improved through the humor approach of the teacher and technology-based instructions specifically for ESL/EFL learners (Hui et al., 2024). Through post-hoc analysis, Alsmari (2024) found out that this can be further improved through multimodal approaches to develop students' ability to interpret pragmatic implicatures.

Correspondingly, Almehmadi (2024) that social media aided the development of pragmatic competence. Tagochi and Barón (2024) reiterated that students adapted to different linguistic

resources. Hence, it motivated them to further improve their receptive and productive skills (Munir & Yavuz, 2024).

Methodology

This study employed qualitative phenomenology. Qualitative research underscores the essence of lived experiences, words, pictures, and documents on the occurrence of the phenomenon (Aspers & Corte, 2019). This provided an idea that not all methodologies needed numerical data to give meaning to the world. In the like manner, this provided an idea that qualitative can intersect with the quantitative especially for the confirmatory purposes. Phenomenology seeks to understand the occurrence of phenomena. Here, the researchers explored a phenomenon known from informants' experiences working (Van Manen, 2023). The data were analyzed by identifying the meaning of the phenomenon (Norlyk & Harder, 2010; Ravn, 2023).

Correspondingly, this paper is qualitative since there were no statistical tools used in the data analysis. It applied the interview approach in gathering the information from the participants. Likewise, phenomenology is best suited approach since it uncovered the application of pragmatic competence among the ESL students in the secondary level and explored the challenges that English language teachers encountered in the application of pragmatic competence instruction for ESL students. Using the thematic analysis, researchers drew meanings from the responses of the informants. The generation of initial codes was done and followed with the naming of themes.

Sources of Data

This study used primary sources of data. There were ten (10) informants who participated in the conduct of the study. Five (5) informants were interviewed through in-depth interviews (IDI), while the other five (5) were under the focused group discussion (FGD) approach. This approach is suited to the selection since it limits the number of individuals who have first-hand experiences of the phenomenon. The responses of the informants were the main sources of the data. A series of questions were asked to each of the informants to better give justice to the occurrence of the phenomenon.

Sampling Technique

The sampling technique was used in the proper selection of the informants. In this study, the researchers applied the purposive sampling. Specifically, the researchers used criterion-based sampling. Indeed, the criteria is the basis for the selection to trim down the number of informants. The following were the criteria for the selection of informants: a public-school teacher; handling high school English classes (either Senior or Junior High School); assigned to Schools Division Office of Cotabato; has been teaching for at least 5 years and employing pragmatic competence strategies in teaching English curriculum. There were (10) informants involved in this study.

Results and Discussions

Strategies employed by English Language teachers to enhance the pragmatic competence of ESL students

The first research question determines the strategies employed by English language teachers to enhance the pragmatic competence of ESL students.

Imposing the English Only Policy.

In the class, the teacher strictly implemented the English Only Policy (EOP). This means that every student must forcibly speak in the English language. It underscores that English is the only medium of instruction and the only language to be spoken inside their classrooms. The teacher believes that this would enhance the capabilities of the students to interact and express themselves in the English language. However, in the middle of the implementation of this language policy the teacher faced a detrimental problem. There are students who still opt to use their own language when communicating inside the class. This can be associated with the fact that English is not the first language of the students.

During the interview, the informant shared her thoughts on the imposition of the EOP in her class. She categorically stated that:

> *"I actually implemented the English Only Policy (EOP) in my English classes for grades 9 and 10. All of my English subjects were included, so students were obligated to communicate solely in English from the beginning of the English class."* (Informant 1)

With this approach, every student has been aware of their classmates who spoke their mother tongue in the class. As reiterated during the interview, she sometimes imposed punishments to students who refused to follow this policy.

> *"As soon as the class started, I imposed a strategy that we call a 'hell paper.' It feels like hell because they have to write their names on it as rule breaker. If someone speaks in English, I do not interfere. They monitor each other. Also, I must be very aware if someone speaks in vernacular, so that the last person listed on the paper receives the punishment. I deduct 5 points from that person."* (Informant 1)

The implementation of English Only Policy in Philippine classrooms has impacted the capabilities of the students to express themselves (Zeng & Li, 2023). In the contexts of World Englishes and its applications in English Language Teaching (Tupas, 2022), the bodies of knowledge should be taught first in the language where students could immediately relate it into their experiences. This mindset of teachers has been discouraged by language experts since it disparaged students' capabilities to become proficient in language development. Similarly, this has been known as

"colonized mindset" of English teachers who have taught that there is a standard English spoken in a particular setting (Chen et al., 2023).

Integrating Differentiated Tasks.

In the parlance of teaching, it is necessary that teachers have to apply different teaching strategies. To make classes more meaningful and the students' participation gain more momentum, teachers often exposed students in meaningful activities. For example, teachers have used role-playing where every student is organized based on their place and ethnolinguistic background. This grouping gives them the realizations of how their communities and personal experiences be useful in enhancing their pragmatic competence.

During the course of the interview, the informant expands this idea by saying that:

> *"Yes, I have implemented differentiated task. So, I organize it by barangay, especially in role-playing, because they might feel more comfortable expressing themselves with their groups in the same barangay. They hesitated to participate, especially with their pronunciation since I enforce the English Only Policy (EOP). It seems like they do not want to interact if they are not confident. Unlike if they are from the same community."* (Informant 1)

As to the narratives of Informants 2 and 3, they vouched for the importance of different authentic activities.

> *"Drama and role-playing, debate, brainstorming, films and TV programs, songs, newscasting, and storytelling."* (Informant 2)

> *"Strategies include drama and role-playing, debates, brainstorming, films and TV programs, songs, peer interviews, and storytelling."* (Informant 3)

In addition, one of the informants revealed that she exposed students to materials which depicted native speakerism. She integrates this in order to help students to have the grasp of how native speakers of the English language express themselves. In this regard, they could be able to mimic the way the language is used in different situations.

> *"I also exposed them to films and short videos, especially those featuring native English speakers, to help them appreciate pronunciations and meanings. I also focused on authentic inputs, such as talk shows with exchanges of dialogues that reflect real-life conversations. Additionally, I emphasized communication functions in lessons, like how to request, apologize, or excuse oneself properly in English."* (Informant 2)

To confirm this, the participant of the Focus Group Discussion recounted that:

> *"In terms of speaking, some students prepared for debates. The honor students excel in debates, showcasing their speaking skills. On the other hand, those who do not excel in speaking activities may feel hesitant to participate with the more proficient speakers. So, their role is different from those who excel."* (Participant 5)

To support this finding, Mamanazarovna (2023) confirmed that differentiated instruction has played a crucial role in learning. Through this approach, the pragmatic competence of the students is further enhanced. The teachers did not limit themselves to one approach but considered the diverse learning needs and preferences which would enable learners to make meanings in different cultural perspectives (Dzakula, 2023). More importantly, teachers know well their students which helped them to address challenges and gaps in understanding the use of language in the social contexts.

Translating of Words to English

In simulating scenarios, students are given tasks to analyze and apply it based on their cultural norms. By allowing students to perform activities which would improve their pragmatic competence, the teacher helped them through translation. This strategy lessens the problem of the students to widen their vocabulary as well as their ways of connecting the core of the lessons into their cultural perspectives. More importantly, this strategy makes students multilingual. It means that they could express themselves in two or three languages making them unique and at par with the monolinguals.

In line with this, an informant integrated this approach in enhancing the pragmatic competence of the students. She explained during the interview that:

> *"For instance, our learners are diverse, including Manobo, Teduray, Ilonggo, and Cebuano speakers. I often translate into the mother tongue to ensure my learners understand the ideas presented in a given topic. After that, I encourage learners to express themselves in their own language. In grade 8, for example, with Darwin, I have two or three learners who can speak fluently in English, so I allow them to translate from Manobo to English with the assistance of that particular student."* (Informant 3)

For the Informant 5,

> *"For the students to understand, for instance, in the Indigenous Peoples' (IP) context, instead of saying 'spectacular view,' I explain it in Ilonggo language to ensure they understand the terms."* (Informant 5)

During the Focus Group Discussion, a participant narrated that:

> *"In my subject, I focus more on oral communication. I let them speak regularly. They often request to translate because they struggle with their grammar. They really prefer to use Filipino since they find it challenging to speak in straight English, so, I allow them to use Filipino language so that they can express themselves better."* (Participant 3)

Exposure of students to different languages strengthens and widens their cultural and linguistic knowledge (Erton, 2023). As they code-switch and code-mix, the students can immediately adapt to their interlocutor's language which is a great advantage for them (Sejdiu et al., 2023). On the one hand, translation removes barriers and ensures that meanings are transferred from one person to another increasing the higher level of intelligibility (Saputra, 2023).

Addressing Linguistic Diversity.

This caters for diversity in the class to have a grasp of the contexts of the lesson. The teacher tries to simplify complex thoughts that are too difficult for the students to comprehend. As well, this implies that the teacher considers linguistic diversity and puts respect in the highest bar of consideration. Similarly, this explains that in the Philippines, different languages sometimes pose a major threat to comprehensibility. Indeed, in this regard, translation opens the doors to opportunities for the exchange of thoughts and ideas.

This strategy was even used during the translation of words. The teacher considers diverse students in the class. In fact, the Ilonggo language is the most comprehensible language among the students.

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The teacher explained further that in her class, she uplifts students coming from diverse linguistic communities. She elaborated the importance of respect in order to avoid bullying.

> *"I also address the issue of bullying; I discourage laughter to language used by their classmates. Sometimes, I prompt students to share what certain words mean in their own dialects. Learning should be enjoyable. I informed everyone that they are here in my class to learn and respect one's differences."* (Informant 4)

The Philippines is home to hundreds of different languages (Tenorio, 2022). With the implementation of MTB-MLE in instruction, teachers have been able to consider the linguistic identities of their students, as mentioned by Dagalea at al. (2022). Thus, even in the most complex situations, teachers have been able to address diversity. Because of this, students could have the sense of cultural and linguistic sensitivity. Corollary to this, teachers who address linguistic diversity promote inclusivity in the class. Each student is regarded as special regardless of the language spoken (Henghono, 2023).

English language teachers' adaptive strategies to effectively address the distinct cultural linguistic backgrounds of ESL students

The second research question determines the themes on the adaptive strategies that effectively address the distinct linguistic background of ESL students. They did it by incorporating localized perspectives, allowing students to use their mother tongue, contextualizing lessons by connecting students' experiences, and by encouraging students to express themselves in the English language.

Incorporating Localized Perspectives.

It is important to note that among ESL learners, they could easily learn things anchored from their cultural perspectives. In the teaching of English, teachers made it certain to acknowledge them. By doing this, they are showing respect as well as interest in listening to someone's story. To effectively do this, the teacher made it sure that the lesson plan contains localized knowledge which entails values of their rich cultural heritage.

An informant echoed that:

> *"I always make sure that whenever a student talks about their culture, their opinions are acknowledged. I acknowledge them even if their grammar is incorrect as long as I understand their thought. In this instance, activities I mentioned earlier may applied here, activities that you can incorporate in the lesson planning like in role playing, I grouped them by community."* (Informant 1)

In addition, the teacher assigned students to write down an essay to indicate their personal experiences. These activities stunned students on the beauty of the topic which enabled them to feel its essence. Students have struggles in life which made them feel inferior.

> *"I require them to write their own speeches. The last one I assigned was a persuasive speech, and I found out in their outputs about their experiences on their cultures and bullying. Since there was a topic about bullying in the book, I anchored my lesson there. Some students cried because of their tribes, and they struggle to tell their own stories".* (Informant 1)

More so, the teacher even made it sure that every student in the class needs to deal with other students belonging to different ethnolinguistic groups. This entails that students have a fruitful and meaningful interactions among themselves regardless of the linguistic diversity.

> *For me, it's crucial to consider the diverse cultures of my learners, especially when they are unfamiliar with each other. Initially, I let them stay with their respective tribes, like Ilonggo, Teduray, and Muslims. I observe their interactions and then allow them to switch to different groupings. This helps them become aware of and engage with the cultures they belong to. Sometimes students overlook this unless explicitly addressed. Once we discuss it, they internalize and learn to respect each other's cultures."* (Informant 4)

Furthermore, she added that:

> *"Firstly, I use pictures as part of the discovery approach. By posting pictures, students may not critically think at first, but through internalization, they come to understand the images. I also ask them to provide examples, bringing pictures of their own cultures to class."* (Informant 4)

It is also important to note that teachers contextualized their lessons in English. Examples have connections with their lives and identities. Students are given the chance to examine their own culture which is rooted to their lived experiences. From the statement of the informant, it reveals that she instilled the value of students through reading the history of the place. She answered that:

> *"I contextualize my lessons by connecting examples to their own experiences. For instance, instead of using foreign legends or myths, I choose examples that have a direct connection to their lives. For example, I researched how Malibatuan was established, and how it was led by Lumad people. This helps them realize that they are part of the native people who founded Barangay Malibatuan. Moreover, you need to rephrase or tailor questions with their daily experiences or cultural context to help them form meaningful sentences as responses."* (Informant 5)

The participant confirmed this by saying that:

> *"As part of our lessons, especially during classroom observations, there's a specific task to integrate content across the curriculum. I see this as an opportunity to incorporate cultural elements. I might select texts from local sources, even from different regions in the Philippines, to integrate the rich cultural diversity of our fellow Filipinos into the lessons. This way, students can better appreciate it."* (Participant 1)

In the same vein, teachers found that there are students who have difficulties in comprehension. To respond to this predicament, the teacher asked the student to perform a scene depicting home. The role of the teacher shows that she served as the role model in capacitating every learner to have the confidence in making a difference in the class. Along with this, the teacher has to be mindful of the cultural perspectives of the learners and incorporate it in making the lesson. Above all, Germain-Rutherford and Karamifar (2022) indicated that contextualizing the lesson based on the cultural and experiential perspectives of the students fosters sensitivity and cultural awareness (Sabaté-Dalmau, 2022).

Allowing students to use their First Language.

Language can be best appreciated when students are allowed to speak in their natural language. A first tongue is known as the Filipino language spoken by the learners in expressing their thoughts and ideas. Initially, it is anchored in a Tagalog-based language widely spoken and understood in the country. In fact, when students are forced to speak in English this may result to a bigger

challenge in boosting their confidence to speak. As a national language, it played an important factor especially in translations.

> *"Given that English is our second language, I encourage them to speak English in the classroom. No penalties or fines, regardless of grammar. Through constant practice, they become more comfortable and they find learning enjoyable. During recitations, if they struggle with English, they can initially express themselves in Filipino, and I'll translate to help them understand."* (Informant 4)

The first language strengthens the students' identities. It is used as a vehicle in exploring the vastness of learning development. The pragmatic competence of the students can be harnessed when students understand the value of the lesson in their own language (Nightingle & Safont, 2019). In the Philippines, aside from the mother tongue of the students, Filipino is the national language (De Los Reyes, 2019). It incorporates different languages of the major ethnolinguistic groups. Although the majority of the terms are taken from the Tagalog language, students can easily adjust to learning since it is widely used on social media, television, and on the internet. In the teaching of English and in strengthening their pragmatic competence, students integrate nuances that underscore cultural and linguistic landscapes (Safont, 2022).

Encouraging students to express themselves in the English language.

Even in the midst of its complexities and is often viewed as difficult by many of the Filipino learners, teachers still encouraged students to express themselves in this language. Regardless of how they frame their sentences, teachers motivated them to give voice to their unheard and underrepresented voices. It cannot be denied that some students faced bullying because words are not properly pronounced in the target language, still teachers are optimistic that students have the capacity to develop their pragmatic competence.

During the performance tasks, the teacher encourages students to use the target language in giving life to the scenes that they have to act out. For example, in the experience of Informant 2 she validated this by saying that:

> *"Sometimes, for performance tasks, I allow role-playing in their own home setting while using the English language. I ask them to depict a conversation with their mom, and then I compare it to a video showing a similar scenario, for example, in America where they don't address their parents directly as mama or papa. I assess how they communicate and express themselves"*. (Informant 2)

Pragmatics enhanced the abilities of the students to use the language in different social situations. The practical application of the language is the target of pragmatics as confirmed by Morallo (2023). In this manner, speakers of the language learned to give a deeper meaning of how language works in different encourages to fathom its fluidity. Having the confidence is one of the factors which pragmatic competence tried to develop wherein every individual may feel comfortable as

they navigate the language in an effective social interaction. Thoughts are conveyed naturally within the cultural norms (Gatil, 2021).

Challenges encountered by English language teachers in applying pragmatic competence instruction for ESL students

English language teachers faced various challenges in applying pragmatic competence instruction for ESL students. Expressing thoughts in English, fearing of judgement and inferiority, and upbringing and community influence are the main concerns shared.

Expressing thoughts in English.

Although teachers allowed students to express in their mother tongue and in Filipino language, it is also a must for them to engage into using the English language. As a universal language, these students would eventually explore the greatness of opportunities. With the strategies employed by language teachers, they still face the perennial problem in language acquisition. However, there could be a culprit behind this issue. By examining the response of Informant 1, she further pointed out the imposition of the English Only Policy (EOP).

> *"Expressing their thoughts in English is indeed a common challenge for them. Like me, I also experience English-only policy (EOP) challenges. Sometimes, a student would say, 'Excuse me, Ma'am,' or resort to sign language when unable to express themselves. They may stutter with 'the, is,' so you just have to understand them. Expressing thoughts is often their main challenge. They grasp the idea but struggle when it comes to storytelling. Even if they can deliver a speech, they may not do well in casual conversations."* (Informant 1)

In the same manner, there are students who have negative views of learning English. Hence, it affected in improving their pragmatic competence.

> *"They tend to have a negative attitude towards the English language or subject. I often hear feedback like, 'Ma'am, we can't express ourselves in English, Ma'am, we don't know English.' That's the challenge for the teacher. My remedy is to allow them to recite in the vernacular, and let other students translate. Then follow up the answer of those who cannot speak in English."* (Informant 3)

This has been common among the non-native speakers of the English language. Knowing that the Philippines is very particular in the utilization of the English language, this has brought a negative concept to those who could hardly do it. In fact, some students could express well in their native language as long as the teacher is open to allowing students to explain the concept in their own language. It should be noted that teachers have to consider that they are not teaching the students to become native speakers, but to have the comprehension of the bodies of knowledge they are teaching.

Fearing of Judgment and Inferiority.

In communities having the presence of indigenous people, students who belong to IP groups often fall victims of bullying. The majority of the students look at them differently, especially in their delivery of the language. This leads to the lack of IP students' participation in class activities. Many of the IP learners have been ridiculed for how they articulated the language. Linguistically, these indigenous students seem to be not exposed to wider linguistic communities and even on other forms of media.

As stated in the interview:

> *"There are instances, especially with Indigenous Peoples who are in remote areas, where they feel shy to participate. Encouraging them to join and share their culture can be challenging because they fear about judgment, thinking that their culture might be perceived as different and they could be ridiculed."* (Informant 2)

Conversely, Participant 4 of the FGD stated that:

> *Actually, they are all treated fairly—whether they are Ilonggo, Bisaya, or Lumad, there's no difference. It's like we're sensitive to their cultures. We don't discuss words that go against or may hurt them. They are still encouraged same with other students. But to some students, we inform them that it's natural. Some kids may face teasing, so before explaining their culture, I inform their classmates that it's okay, that it's not something different. It's just natural for them. Yes, there's an overview and orientation beforehand."* (Participant 4)

Classes should be free from the presence of bullying and other forms of disrespect. Teachers need to provide students a safe haven where they could be able to explore their infinite talents and skills. Having the feeling of judgment and inferiority has devastated some students' will to try and explore the possibilities. Meanwhile, a classroom should always be the source of inspiration for every learner to navigate and improve their pragmatic competence (Langga & Alico, 2020; Docena et al., 2023).

Upbringing and Community Influence.

Learning always begins at home. The background of the parents helps in honing students to have the interest in enhancing their pragmatic competence. When parents talked with them in a language fused with English, then students could easily understand different underpinning concepts. They themselves will use and improve what they have learned from the teachings of their parents. However, in the case of the students who were under the tutelage of the informants, the educational backgrounds as well as the interventions that the parents could have provided to their children at home, would be useful in honing the pragmatic competence of the learners. Moreover, the socio-economic status of parents sometimes could be the one of the culprits. Conversely, the very foundation of learning especially in the elementary days has been blamed by teachers in the secondary level.

In the interview conducted, the teacher exclaimed that:

> *"Perhaps, during their elementary days and maybe with their parents, there was lack of reinforcement. They might not have practiced enough, and there could be other factors, such as coming from poor family status who lack the necessary support. In contrast, those who are well-off have access to gadgets and exposure to computers. For instance, among the four students here who grew up in well-off families, the family's cultural factor plays a role. For example, Manobo students may unavoidably face deprivation, saying, 'We really don't know about that, Ma'am."* (Informant 3)

Furthermore, aside from the family, the effect of using mobile phones has affected students' focus towards learning, as mentioned in the narrative of the informant. Overreliance on gadgets may lead to poor spelling.

> *"I believe that because of the pandemic and sadly, there are parents who are passive in supporting their students. On the other hand, there are also parents, with all due respect, who might struggle to transfer learning to their children. Ideally, there should be a partnership between parents and the school. However, some parents face challenges due to poverty. Sometimes, during meetings, we heard from them that parents themselves are also struggling, especially with the overreliance of students on cellphones, to the point that even simple spelling becomes a challenge for them."* (Informant 5)

School and home partnership has been widely studied and found to have a significant impact on students' academic achievement. Parents serve as the first teachers of the students at home (Chavez et al., 2023). They have honed their children to have the values and skills crucial for their readiness as they enter the new portal of learning. Its absence has resulted in students' poor performance across subject areas. Henceforth, intervention and a strong partnership between home and school are highly encouraged (Claravall & Protacio, 2023).

English language teachers' strategies in navigating pedagogical challenges in optimizing pragmatic competence development among ESL students

The fourth research question aims to discuss the strategies of English language teachers in navigating pedagogical challenges in optimizing pragmatic competence development among ESL students. Teachers have shown their ingenuity in realizing these in their respective classes. Some teachers practised the giving of rewards, encouraged students to constantly learn, positioned themselves as parents, and gave everyone the chance to speak.

Giving of Rewards.

This theme suggested that teachers gave rewards to students to strive more in their students. As they develop their pragmatic competence, teachers need to push them to use the language in the class showing different situations. The giving of rewards serves as a motivation which would strengthen students' participation in the class. When teachers faced a lot of challenges, they need to think of a strategy which would lessen their problems in handling students. The usage of the target language in the class is the main objective of the teacher to make every one of them ready for the next chapter of learning. Although teachers have limited resources, they still express selfless love towards their profession by giving the students rewards.

From the point of view of the informant, she revealed how she provided rewards to her students. She said that:

> *"Perhaps, ma'am, one of my strategies is giving awards, giving addition and deduction of points. For example, if you can't answer, deduct 5 points for every unanswered question or task. It's effective; I've been doing this since I'm in Malibatuan, and I find it very effective. I feel it's effective because they try to listen and actively participate."* (Participant 1)

To support this, another informant shared that:

> *"Yes, especially when we implement what we call rewards. When you give a reward to a student, they become eager to participate because there's a reward, especially if you them incentives for their recess time or if you add points to their score. That motivates them to participate."* (Informant 3)

The giving of rewards is an extrinsic motivation for students. Teachers give students something in return for their class participation. However, its impact is not sustainable as indicated by previous studies, but it explores teachers' abilities to think of alternatives which have lessened their problems with students. This means that learning can either be both extrinsic and intrinsic. Likewise, the giving of rewards actively engages the students in the learning process. This strategy can positively influence students' behaviour that encourage them to participate and excel in developing pragmatic competence, as conformed by Hilliker et al. (2021).

Encouraging Students to Constantly Learn.

Learning is an endless process. Though, students face a lot of difficulties in expressing themselves in the English language in order for them to improve their pragmatic competence, teachers have been consistent in encouraging them to learn. The encouragement that teachers could provide to students will develop a strong foundation that emphasizes a continuous learning even in the most challenging times. Having this, creates a mindset among teachers and students to value progress over perfection. Unequivocally, this promotes resilience, and encourage students to embrace challenges, and to become committed to ongoing language development even outside the comfort of their classrooms.

In the interview, the informant confirmed that:

> *"Constant encouragement and perhaps being resilient on how you integrate the lesson, since English is one of the subjects, they find challenging. For them, it's challenging because they already have this assumption that it's difficult. Encouragement and interesting teaching strategies that can capture their attention are essential. For example, when I encourage them to speak and express their ideas using the vernacular; they feel motivated to participate. But when it comes to strict use of English and complete sentences, there's no leniency. As a teacher, you needed to adjust to their level."* (Informant 2)

The FGD confirmed this, as one participant expressed:

> *"Since I'm handling Grade 11, we focus more on oral communication. It's essential to encourage them to participate; they should not refrain from sharing their thoughts. It should be necessary even if they find it challenging to speak. Later on, they may able to share, of course, considering that their grades depend on their scores."* (Participant 4)

This conforms to the findings of Moris (2023) that teachers' resiliency is highly anticipated. Challenges have been the biggest issues in the teaching of the English language among the second language speakers. Along the way, these teachers realized the true essence of teaching to students who have difficulties in acquiring the skill. By incorporating different strategies, this shows the abundance of their ideas that incorporate progress even in the smallest pace (Aguilar Moreno, 2023).

Positioning Oneself as a Parent.

Undeniably, teachers have multiple roles at school. Aside from helping students to have a grasp of the bodies of knowledge, they put themselves in the shoes of their students' shoes. This means that they try to conform to the important aspect of being a teacher, which is to become the second parents of their students. They provide pieces of advice as well as develop the values of the students to be ready to respond to the needs of the society. Teachers always treasure every student regardless of their background and capacity. Having a connection with the students is integral to developing pragmatic competence. Teachers as parents know well their students' needs.

As the informant narrated her experiences being a teacher, she emphasized the value of being a parent to her students.

> *"I position myself as their second mother. I offer encouragement regardless of gender because when they feel that way, they will be motivated to participate. They believe they are loved and cared for. In that way, I feel grateful for the wisdom to be an instrument for these children, inspiring them instead of scaring them. For me, it is very effective because, first and foremost, it lets them feel they belong and fosters a sense of connection. I believe teaching is my passion. We have a mission, a mission to guide our students, and everything we do is in the name of God."* (Informant 4)

For Richards (2023), adopting a parental role signifies a nurturing approach to teaching. In order to establish a supportive and caring relationship with students, teachers can address emotional barriers, instill a sense of security, and create a conducive atmosphere for effective language learning and pragmatic skill development. Above all, teachers who understand the situation of their students make learning easy and they too listen to how students face their life's challenges (Guo et al., 2023).

Summary

This qualitative study, employing phenomenology, explored the strategies, challenges, and adaptations of Filipino English language teachers in improving the pragmatic competence of students. Using the purposive sampling, there were five teachers who participated in the Key Informants Interview and another five for the Focus Group Discussion. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings of the study revealed that teachers enhanced the pragmatic competence of ESL students by imposing the English Only Policy, Integrating Differentiated Task, Translating of Words to English, and Addressing Linguistic Diversity. Teachers strategized to effectively address the distinct linguistic background of the students by incorporating localized perspectives, allowing students to use their mother tongue, contextualizing lessons by connecting students' experiences, and by encouraging students to express themselves in the English language. Expressing thoughts in English, fearing of judgement and inferiority, and upbringing and community were the challenges that the teachers faced in applying pragmatic competence instruction for ESL students. In order to navigate pedagogical challenges, they practiced the giving of rewards, encouraging students to constantly learn, positioning themselves as second parents, and giving everyone the chance to speak.

Conclusion

Developing the pragmatic competence of the ESL students, teachers utilized approaches which respond to the needs in enhancing the pragmatic competence of ESL learners. Further, these approaches acknowledge linguistic diversity and individual differences of the students. Teachers promoted a balance and holistic English language learning experiences which resulted in cultural awareness and strengthened appreciation of their identities. Conversely, teachers have faced challenges along the way. However, they have been creative in adapting to their instructional approaches which promoted inclusive participation that collectively contributed to a dynamic and effective language learning environment.

Recommendations

Based on the foregoing findings and conclusion, the researchers recommend that the application of English Only Policy in classrooms is discouraged. This has been found to be disparaging on students' quest to learn the concepts of the bodies of knowledge. Teachers are motivated to emphasize in their teaching the application of English language and to continue to be cognizant in

integrating the cultural norms of the students to strengthen their pragmatic competence. Moreover, a strong connection between schools and homes may be intensified to facilitate learning.

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