Kurdish EFL University Students' Perception of Computer-mediated Pragmatics Learning

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Abstract

Pragmatics learning is as vital as learning the vocabulary and the grammar of the target language. It is concerned with the appropriate use of language to achieve different daily communicative goals. The present qualitative study, therefore, sheds light on how Kurdish EFL university students view their pragmatics learning experience, particularly via computer-mediated communication. Fifty-three students responded to a survey of eight items, seeking both, their perception of receiving pragmatic instruction via Zoom platform, and the content of the activities they pursued as well. The collected data was analyzed following Boyatzis's (1998) thematic analysis; an analysis designed to encode qualitative data. The qualitative analysis revealed a positive perception of learning pragmatics in general, and learning it via online-mediated communication in particular. It also revealed a positive attitude toward the pragmatic activities that were carried out. Finally, the study recommended that educators should incorporate computer-mediated

communication to help Kurdish university students develop their pragmatic competence.

التعلم التداولي الالكتروني من وجهة نظر الطلبة الكورد الجامعيين المتعلمين للغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية
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الملخص
لا يقل التعلم التداولي أهمية عن تعلم المفردات والقواعد في اللغة المستهدفة. إذ يتعلق بالاستعمال الملائم للغة لتحقيق أهداف تواصلية يومية مختلفة. لذا، تسلط هذه الدراسة النوعية الضوء على كيفية رؤية الطلبة الكورد الجامعيين لتجربتهم في التعلم التداولي، لاسيما تعلمهم الكترونيًا عن بعد. اجاب ثلاثة وخمسون طالبًا وطالبة على استبانة مكونة من ثمانية بنود، يبحث كل منها في تصورهم لتلقي التعليم التداولي عبر منصة (زووم)، ومحتوى الأنشطة التي مارسوها أيضًا. تم تحليل البيانات المجمعة وفقًا لتحليل بوياتزيز (1998) ذي الطابع الثيماتي؛ اذ يعد تحليلا مصمما لترميز البيانات النوعية. كشف التحليل النوعي عن تصور إيجابي للتعلم التداولي بشكل عام، وتعلمه عبر التواصل عبر الإنترنت بشكل خاص. كما كشف عن موقف إيجابي تجاه الأنشطة التداولية التي تمت. وختامًا، توصي الدراسة بوجوب تضمين التعليم الالكتروني لمساعدة الطلبة الكورد الجامعيين على تطوير كفاءتهم التداولية.
الكلمات المفتاحية: *التداولية، التعلم الالكتروني، الطلبة الكرد الجامعيين*

1. Introduction

Incorporating technology in both teaching and learning is nowadays crucially important in EFL classroom. It makes the activities more engaging, interesting, and eventually more successful. Technology, and employing it for communication in educational and non-educational settings, is advancing rapidly (Gillis & Krull, 2020). Thus, new educational techniques and novel technological tools have arisen. Hilton *et al.* (2020) stated that there is an increasing utilization of technology and its new tools in educational environments, leading to enhanced student learning outcomes. For instance, educational innovation, particularly computer-assisted language learning, provides both teachers and students with opportunities to engage in learning and teaching beyond traditional classroom environments. Baxter

and Hainey (2019) argued that students have to make use of the integration of technology in learning by receiving enhanced linguistic input. Sastranegara *et al.* (2020) contended that the presence of e-learning exemplifies one of the functions fulfilled by information technology in the educational domain. E-learning entails a form of education that revolutionizes the type of the relationship that holds between educators and learners through the utilization of technology, communication, and information resources. E-learning refers to the method of acquiring knowledge via technology, such as the internet, computers, audio, or video recordings. It can also be described as a digital learning process. Typically, online education involves utilizing web browsers to facilitate learning. One common implementation of e-learning is through web-based platforms like Zoom platform, Google Meet, Video Conference and the like, which provide online media for learning.

Pragmatics, in its turn, is not exception of being taught via online-mediated platforms. Several studies have shown the benefits of such platforms in learning L2 pragmatics (Belz, 2008; Taguchi, 2015, among many others). To begin with, meaningful and genuine engagement can be fostered by employing online resources (Belz, 2008), which are complemented by a potentially more motivating and vibrant educational setting (Taguchi, 2015). According to Erben *et al.* (2008), "learners feel motivated when teachers incorporate aspects of technology to scaffold learning through the use of contextual cues such as images, icons and audio-visual elements" (p. 17). Furthermore, the stresses arising from the potentially face-threatening nature of some speech acts, for example, are reduced in simulated scenarios, enabling a relaxed and low-pressure learning environment (Sykes *et al*., 2008). Recent research has demonstrated many of these benefits through the utilization of various online technologies aimed at providing instruction in the pragmatics of the target language.

2. Literature Review

The contemporary advancements in educational technology have prompted numerous universities to adopt online learning, heavily relying on the use of the Internet and computers for instructional and learning activities. Al-zabun (2015) maintained that online learning involves "modern technologies to deliver students' learning content effectively with positive characteristics" (p. 70). Such characteristics can encompass saving effort, time, and economic resources, while also fostering and enhancing student learning. Hence, the rapidly evolving trends and advancements in technology compel universities to revise their educational program visions, ensuring they remain pertinent and up-to-date. This is due to the fact that "e-learning is becoming one of the teachings and learning standards in many universities" (Eljinini *et al*., 2012, p. 76). Thus, online learning can be used, side-by-side, with in-person learning in a process known nowadays as 'blended learning'. It is the strategic integration of face-to-face classroom interactions with enhanced online educational technology experiences (Kilfoil, 2015). Blended learning holds significant importance, especially in large classes where educators engage with students consistently (Gedik & Kiraz, 2012). It is, therefore, significant to make use of technology and implement as an assistive tool beside the normally adopted in-person instructional techniques.

For a significant period of time, language teachers primarily prioritized enhancing students' grammatical competence, employing teaching methodologies centered around memorization and repetition (Bachelor, 2015). Nonetheless, a shift in paradigm took place in the early 1980s, when second language educators realized that the primary aim of language instruction revolves around facilitating effective communication (Bachelor & Bachelor, 2016). In their study on successful communication, V.G. and Rajan (2012) discovered that non-native students' communication abilities are detrimentally impacted by a deficiency in pragmatic knowledge. Given that communication stands as the primary objective of learning a language, the research by V.G. and Rajan underscores the necessity of pragmatic instruction to facilitate effective communication in

the target language. Their findings imply that solely focusing on grammar-centered instruction is insufficient in achieving this goal. According to Betancourt (2012), pragmatics is a field of study that concentrates on linguistic acts within particular contexts. Within the domain of foreign language education, pragmatic instruction aims to enhance a student's capacity to employ linguistically appropriate strategies in various social contexts (V.G. & Rajan, 2012). Teachers frequently prioritize the utilization of speech acts across diverse contexts.

As a sub-field of linguistics, pragmatics has been viewed differently by different scholars. Crystal (1985), for instance, defined it as the study of "language from the perspective of users, particularly their choices, the restrictions they face while using language in different social communication, and the impact their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication" (p. 240). It is crucially important to be aware of those restrictions and conventions on the part of the target language learners. This ability is termed 'pragmatic competence', which refers to "the knowledge of the pragmatic conventions for performing acceptable language functions" (Bachman, 1990, p. 90). The familiarity with such language functions can be reflected in the performance appropriate linguistic acts or, more precisely, 'speech acts', which were defined by Hymes (1972) as the minimal unit of communication that has rules with regard to both, the place and the time at which they may be used, and of what their particular aspects are culturally named acts, such as complaining, apologizing, advising, and so on. Thus, pragmatic competence refers to the capacity to effectively carry out various speech acts across diverse social and academic settings.

Consequently, the gap the present study attempts to bridge, is to make use of an already received instruction on pragmatics by Kurdish EFL university students via an online platform, i.e. Zoom, and examine their opinions toward this particular experience. Contrary to experimental studies, which statistically deal with students' achievement over a period of time, the type of investigation that the present study is conducting is

qualitative and less frequently researched. It is, thus, a post-experimental analysis of data within the field of pragmatics that focuses on students' opinions in terms of their learning experience, as the following sections will detail.

Methodology

The methodology of the present study is qualitative in nature. Creswell (2014) believed that qualitative research methodology is a unique method of academic investigation compared to quantitative approaches. They involve textual and visual data, follow distinct phases in data analysis, and utilize various designs, even though the underlying processes remain consistent (Mahariyanti & Suyanto, 2019). The following subsections will detail the methodology which was adopted in the present study in terms of the participants, the instrument, the research questions, and the procedure for analyzing the data.

3.1 Sample of the Study

Sample size in qualitative studies is often smaller than it is in quantitative ones. The focus is on depth rather than breadth, aiming for in-depth understanding rather than generalizability to a larger population. Instead of seeking statistical generalizability to a larger population as in quantitative research, qualitative research focuses on theoretical generalizability. The findings in such kind of research will be applicable to similar theoretical frameworks or contexts.

The present study included fourth-year Kurdish students from the English Language Department at the College of Basic Education, University of Duhok. The number of the participants was 53 who actually responded to the study survey. Thirty-five of the participants were females and 18 males. Their age ranged between 20 and 25. They formed a group who were instructed using technologically-mediated communication via Zoom platform during the spread of COVID-19 pandemic. That year witnessed a lockdown all over the world, and students had to attend classes remotely. Permission from the department was taken, and the survey was administered to the participants to elicit the data of the present study. It is worth mentioning that the students' identities were kept confidential. The participants

were also informed that their data will be used for scientific purposes only.

3.2 Instrument

A survey consisting of eight items was adapted from Liu (2007), and administered to the participants of the present study (see the appendix). The survey was qualitative in nature, comprising open-ended questions. The participants were requested to provide their real responses, reflecting their own perspectives on learning pragmatics. The items of the survey were varied. The aspects the participants were asked to provide their opinions on, regarding their particular experience of learning pragmatics in general and via Zoom platform, were different too. The items asked the participants how they felt about learning pragmatics by and large, and remotely in particular and the differences between the two ways; others were about their feeling toward the activities they pursued, and whether they were effective or not. In addition, they were required to describe the activities that their instructor did that resulted in their success and/or failure in pragmatics. Finally, they were required to describe their overall experience with regard to this project. The responses to the eight items of the survey will be discussed in detail in section 4.

3.2.1 Validity

Face validity was employed in the present study to guarantee that the survey items were measuring what they were intended to measure from the participants' perspectives related to the study of pragmatics, A pilot test of the same survey items was administered to 12 students at the same level of the original sample of the study. Although this selected group of students received the same instruction the main sample of the study received, their responses were not included in the main data analysis of the present study.

The pilot test aimed at examining the appropriacy of each item of the survey, and whether the allocated time for each one is sufficient or not. Accordingly, the required amendments were made. The number of items was ten before the survey was

piloted to the selected group. After the pilot study, it was decided that the items were rather long and they need longer time to be answered. They were, consequently, shortened to include eight items only. The responses of the pilot test were rated by the researcher, and they indicated that the pilot study participants really benefited from the experiment.

3.2.2 Reliability

As far as the reliability of the present study's instrument is concerned, the researcher explained the purpose of the survey, and the procedure of answering it. Following this, the researcher administered the survey to all the participants at the same time, and gave them the same time to provide their responses. In addition, the participants were informed to ask for clarifications if needed; yet, they were not allowed to use artificial intelligence or dictionaries while responding to the survey, and just reflect on their own experiment in studying pragmatics. This ensured minimizing potential biases or variations in participants' understanding of the questions.

3.3 Research Questions

The present study attempts to provide answers to the following questions:

1. How do Kurdish EFL university students feel about learning pragmatics?
2. How do Kurdish EFL university students feel about learning pragmatics via technology-mediated communication?
3. How do Kurdish EFL university students feel about the activities they carried out in pragmatics?

3.4 Data Analysis

Being qualitative, the present study does not examine the actual performance of students with regard to their achievement empirically and/or statistically, but rather, it is an attempt to seek the participants' attitudes toward the learning process of pragmatics. Thus, the collected data was analyzed following Boyatzis's (1998) thematic analysis; an analysis designed to encode qualitative data. The pattern that is basically found in information is referred to as a 'theme'. The raw information collected from Kurdish EFL university students regarding their

attitudes or perception toward learning pragmatics in general, and learning it via computer-mediated communication in particular, were analyzed thematically. This has to do with the potential reaction toward the learning process being either positive or negative. This was achieved according to the five steps proposed by the model of the study: reducing the information, identifying the themes within the information, comparing them, creating a code, and determining their reliability.

3.4.1 Results and Discussion

In order to have an in-depth understanding of students' perceptions of learning pragmatics, the present section details the results of the collected data through a qualitative analysis. Due to the nature of the survey items, i.e., open-ended questions, the responses of the participants differ from one participant into another for all of the eight questions. Thus, the paper is not after employing a scale or a criterion to encode and evaluate the participants' responses as it is the case with quantitative data. Instead, the paper aims at understanding the participants' attitudes or perception towards the pragmatic learning process. Following this particular procedure, the results will be more manageable. Consequently, the three research questions that were raised so far in section 3.3, will be orderly answered and discussed in the following lines. It is worth mentioning that the three questions that the present study addresses reflect all of the eight items of the survey, and as shown in the table below:

Table 1. Research questions and relevant survey items

Research Question	Item No.
1	1, 3, 8
2	2, 3, 4, 8
3	5, 6, 7, 8

To begin with, the research question 1 was about Kurdish EFL university students' attitudes toward learning pragmatics by and large. Forty-six students out of 53 (86%) expressed positive

attitudes towards learning pragmatics. They stated that pragmatics was both, useful and indispensable for their English language learning. For instance, one student reported that "I didn't have any information about pragmatics before, but now we got some information that will help us in our life and in many aspects of life. For example, now we know how to use speech acts, such as how to request and how to apologize in a more polite way because in the learning process earlier we didn't know things like these". Another one acknowledged that "learning pragmatics was very interesting and useful and we understood how to request and apologize. And we will benefit from it in the future".

The majority of students indicated that pragmatics learning enhanced their English communication skills, and they felt they had gained a deeper understanding of pragmatics through this learning process. Thirty-one (58%) of the 53 students believed that integrating pragmatics into their English curriculum was a valuable component of their learning experience. They added that pragmatics offered them chances to use everyday speech acts, and they started to be aware of the appropriate performance of different types of speech acts that are frequently used in everyday interaction. The majority of students affirmed that their English communication skills improved as a result of their emphasis on learning pragmatics. One student maintained that "pragmatics really helped me in communication with my friends".

Furthermore, more than fifty percent of the students maintained that they could implement their learning outcomes in real-life scenarios. They held the view that learning pragmatics, unlike instruction primarily grammar-focused, was particularly practical for English language learning. A student, for example, stated: "pragmatics is really important for English learners to have this because the skills that are used in daily subjects, for example learning how to ask for something is one of the daily uses of language. So, it is important to know how and when we need to use".

Contrary to what have been mentioned before, seven students (13%) reported that learning pragmatics was not that important and useful in the overall language learning process. One of them claimed that "English in general is important but I don't see that learning it that useful because students of university already know these ones. They're kind of basics".

In sum, students' attitudes towards learning pragmatics were positive. They argued that through this experience, they did not only become proficient in using language appropriately, but also deepened their understanding and knowledge of employing communicative strategies relevant to different contexts. This finding goes in line with Yorio's (1986) study which found out that students preferred courses and activities that place special emphasis on communicative competence, although it was hard for them to shift from traditional teaching techniques to the new ones.

Provided that language cannot be isolated from the context in which it is used, the finding above confirms the essential role that pragmatics plays in the target language, side by side with the formal aspects of language, such as vocabulary and grammar. It is evident that it is not actually sufficient to focus on those formal aspects, but on the pragmatic ones as well; they need further emphasis and appropriate implementation in any effective foreign language teaching program. Therefore, the participants of the present study responded positively to pragmatics learning.

With regard to research question 2, 45 out of the 53 participants (84%) reported that learning pragmatics via this particular medium, i.e., online mediated communication, contributed to their learning process. They were able to engage in the outlined activities through online connectivity. The majority of students perceived that this project enhanced their communication skills, as well as expanded the range of vocabulary they already had. Moreover, over half of the participants expressed that they found learning pragmatics through computer-mediated communication to be advantageous for their understanding of pragmatics. These participants confirmed that utilizing online communication for learning pragmatics offered a less stressful

and comfortable means of expression. They appreciated the flexibility to complete exercises at their own pace and, if necessary, to have additional time to practice the designated activities with their peers.

One participant reported: "personally, learning pragmatics online is more beneficial to me than face to face because I can prepare my subject better, and because I am a shy person, I feel more comfortable with it. And I have more time for my other daily activities". Another student maintained: "I feel good and it's easy for me, and I feel comfortable because sitting at home and learning pragmatics is more interesting, especially the time, since it is suitable for learning". A third one confirmed: "it was really successful to learn through online classes. While explaining pragmatics online, we also had to bring real examples and practice them". Last but not least, a student expressed: "it was more successful than I thought because I learned a lot of things learning pragmatics online".

In contrast, three students (5%) expressed skepticism regarding the efficacy of this online medium for learning English in general, and pragmatics in particular. They indicated that the project failed to meet their expectations, and they felt uncomfortable engaging in the activities either individually or with their peers. One said: "I feel that it is not a successful learning process because of some reasons: first, the quality of internet connection is bad; second, students do not focus well, some of them just sleep during the lecture time, I am one of them but sometimes not always". Furthermore, two students partially support learning pragmatics remotely, as they believed that learning would be better if it was not for some the disadvantages of technology, such as internet unexpected break down. One affirmed: "I think online classes are beneficial; but a negative point about online classes, poor internet, no connectivity sometimes".

In general, students expressed satisfaction with learning pragmatics through computer-mediated communication. They highlighted that this experience not only helped them grasp the usage of appropriate vocabulary and speech acts in English, but

also enhanced their understanding of various communicative strategies. Moreover, they believed that online learning is more comfortable than in-person communication. This lends support to Al-Rifaee's (2018) study, which indicated that online learning is an "exciting and inspiring learning environment for both teachers and students, as the determinants of time and space are eliminated". It also allows students to learn in a way that mirrors their daily life.

This particular finding explains the assumption that online learning, especially with regards to pragmatics is particularly vital. It also justifies shifting to distance when face-to-face instruction is not possible, as it was the case during the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, this exceptional condition did not hinder the entire learning process. Teachers and students can benefit from online learning regardless of time and place constraints. Thus, the participants of the present study perceived online learning positively.

With respect to research question 3 concerning the Kurdish EFL university students' perception of the activities they carried out in pragmatics, the vast majority of students, 47 out of 53 (88%), believed that the provided content contributed to a better understanding of pragmatics. In contrast to the material found in traditional textbooks, they deemed that this medium of instruction was more practical and beneficial for everyday communication. One student stated: "I really feel good about the activities in pragmatics; they were really of benefit for us and we all the students have got many information about the subject concerning these activities. They provided us with opportunities to be more active". Another added: "they are very effective. They bring the real-life situations and we used to do them in a specific time. Those situations were familiar to me because I've been through them in my life". Whereas one maintained: "the activities were engaging and fun-to-do. For example, the instructor used audio-visual and the like activities". One more response was: "the activities made the class authentic and enjoyable, like telling students to complete the situations according to the material that tell them to play the role".

On the other hand, two students believed that the content needed certain improvements as some of the activities were demanding and confusing for them. Therefore, they suggested that the activities needed to be modified so as to take into account different levels of students in English. Nevertheless, they came to understand the significance of pragmatics through the learning endeavor they pursued, viewing it as challenging, yet worthwhile. Moreover, it enabled them to apply what they have learned to real-life scenarios.

In summary, the participants of the present study perceived the content of pragmatics they received positively. This finding was similar to Liu's (2007), in which Taiwanese students showed a positive attitude towards the pragmatic material they have received. Similarly, the participants of the present study emphasized that the computer-mediated communication experience helped them remarkably in understanding and using pragmatics. In addition, the instructional material, with its emphasis on pragmatics, greatly contributed to their acquisition of both new English terminology and pragmatic aspects.

The findings above affirm the positive role of the pragmatically-oriented instructional material. Although such material can be found under different names in grammar books, like functional language or language functions, they are not as sufficiently represented as expected. Students do not even recognize them as pragmatic activities, but rather as grammatical ones. Being explicitly instructed under 'pragmatic activities', they proved that they are absolutely impactful. Consequently, the participants of the present study perceived them positively.

4. Conclusion

In light of the Kurdish EFL university students' responses to the present study's survey reflected in the aforementioned findings, the study came up with a number of conclusions. Firstly, it is concluded that learning pragmatics by and large was perceived positively by Kurdish EFL students. The majority of them expressed a complete satisfaction over their experience of receiving pragmatic instruction. Secondly, most of students held positive views regarding computer-mediated pragmatics

learning, and they developed significant awareness of specific linguistic structures and the appropriate use of language in various situations. Computer-mediated communication provided learners with the chance to engage in online targeted communicative activities, enabling them to practice the pragmatic elements or characteristics of the target language. The majority of students affirmed that receiving instruction on pragmatics through online platforms aided them in acquiring greater knowledge of pragmatic forms and specific features in the target language. Thirdly, in contrast to traditional English reading or writing textbooks, the content of this pragmatic instruction was deemed more practical and beneficial in enhancing everyday communication. Students expressed positive attitudes toward the pragmatic content they received.

In summary, the conclusions highlight the positive impact of integrating pragmatics into the curriculum, the positive responses to the learning materials, the practical nature of the learning content, the supportive learning environment, the diversity of learning materials, and the utilization of alternative channels of pragmatics learning. Thus, the educators should incorporate technology-mediated communication to assist Kurdish EFL learners in developing competence in English-language pragmatics. This approach can enhance their ability to understand and produce appropriate communicative actions.

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Appendix
Students' Perception Survey
Name: ……………………… **Gender: Male (   ) Female (   )**
Age (   )   Email:
Native language: Group: online (   ) face-to-face (   )

 1. How do you feel about learning pragmatics? Please provide examples to explain.
2. How do you feel about learning on-line? Please provide examples to explain.
3. What differences did you experience in learning pragmatics in the traditional classrooms and in an on-line environment?
4. How successful would you say you learn pragmatics through this particular connection? Please provide examples to explain.
5. What did your instructor do that resulted in the success in your pragmatics learning?
6. What did your instructor do that resulted in the failure in your pragmatics learning?
7. How do you feel about the classroom activities? Please provide examples to explain.
8. Overall, what do you have to say regarding this project?