

# Task-Based Approach as an Effective Tool in Developing Pragmatic Competence

LEO D. RAYON, JR.

<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8415-416X>

[rayon.leo91@gmail.com](mailto:rayon.leo91@gmail.com)

Compostela Valley State College

Compostela Valley, Philippines

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## ABSTRACT

The challenge of realizing the value of pragmatic competence development in the current curriculum has been a long struggle in most language classes across the globe. This struggle initiated few researches from scholars on language learning who specifically explored the role classroom approaches in pragmatic development, but still less attention is given to these approaches. The study aimed to find out the relative effectiveness of task-based approach in developing the pragmatic competence of college students. It employed the experimental type of research called pretest-post-test non-equivalent group design. The respondents were the first year college students enrolled in a writing subject. The data were collected using a researcher-made pragmatic competence test anchored on Bowers, Huisinh, and LoGiudice's Pragmatic Tasks Framework (2005). Results showed that the experimental group after being taught with task-based approach improved their pragmatic task competence in making inferences, sequencing, decoding implied meaning, supplying appropriate maxims, considering politeness, summarizing, and providing solutions to language problems. It can be posited that tasks as center of language teaching would develop and enhance the language learners' pragmatic competence. The study recommends the use of task-based approach to innovate language instruction and enhance students' potentials in pragmatic development.

**Keywords** — Linguistics, pragmatic competence, pragmatics, task-based approach, task, experimental design, Compostela Valley, Philippines

## INTRODUCTION

The study of pragmatics explores the ability of language users to match utterances with contexts in which they are appropriate. Stalnaker (1972) defined pragmatics as the study of linguistic acts and settings in which they are performed. Pragmatic competence is defined by Csizer and Edwards (2001) as the knowledge of social, cultural, and discourse conventions that has to be followed in various situations. The development of pragmatics aims to facilitate the learners' sense of being able to find socially appropriate language for the situations they encounter. This also encompasses speech acts, conversational structures, conversational implicatures, conversational management, discourse organization, and sociolinguistic aspects of language use such as choice of address forms. These areas of language and language use have not been given attention in language teaching curricula, leading learners to ask if teachers could teach them the secret rules of English. Pragmatic rules for language use are often subconscious, and even native speakers of English are often unaware of pragmatic rules until these rules are broken (Bardovi-Harlig & Taylor, 2003).

The results of a study conducted by Fletcher (1983) revealed that Native Americans, Alaskans, and American-Indians have difficulties in their own native language. These include semantic and pragmatic implicatures of junctures, interpretations, structures, and speech acts. Also, various researches in pragmatic competence has repeatedly proven that even proficient speakers of English often lack necessary pragmatic competence; that is, they are not aware of the social, cultural, and discourse conventions that have to be followed and considered in various situations (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999).

Curriculum designers, language learning advocates, teachers, and instructors have been inspired to seek innovations in evaluating and developing pragmatic competence. Many language teaching approaches, methods, and programs have been developed to find innovative ways for pragmatic competence development. Relatively, less attention is given to how these teaching programs can contribute to the pragmatic development of the learners. Overtly, classroom-based instructions and approaches have been seen greatly by language advocates as a facilitating tool in pragmatic development. Martinez-Flor (2005) indicated that instruction and instructional methods have significant effects on pragmatic competence

acquisition. Thus, language learning advocates have formulated and developed a method which sets task as the central component of language learning called as Task-Based Approach.

TBA is an innovative approach of teaching a second language which seeks to engage learners in an internationally authentic language use by having them perform a series of tasks (Ellis, 2003). It aims to both acquire new linguistic knowledge and process existing knowledge. Skehan (1996) also asserted that TBA could be a preferable alternative method and innovation in communicative language teaching. Viewing the development of pragmatics, Ellis (2007) claimed the importance of task as a primary focus on pragmatic meaning by setting learners to perform a series of tasks.

In the Philippines, the challenge of pragmatic competence development has not been given focus by most educational institutions and language teachers. Since the current global linguistic era demands more of what has been offered by Philippine universities, the conventions of English as a second language is not anymore bound to communicative proficiency only. What the current curriculum offers failed to holistically address the needs of learners specifically the competency in pragmatics. Most of Philippine educational institutions and language teachers have disregarded the importance of integrating pragmatic competence enhancement. As a result, students may come up with decreasing pragmatic awareness which is significant in dealing with real life linguistic situations. The Philippine educational system should realize the importance of integrating pragmatic competence development because this development is what the learners need in dealing life outside the four walls of the classroom. The current demands of the workforce and in the broad range of professions are applicability and practicality rather than of consolidated framing of theories.

In view of the foregoing gaps and premises mentioned above, this research was conducted to serve as a pilot study in realizing the value of pragmatic competence in the Philippine curriculum and the role of task-based approach in pragmatic development. Also, this study was conducted to primarily assess the effectiveness of task-based approach in developing pragmatic competence and to facilitate insights for language teaching and learning.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

This study aimed to assess the relative effectiveness of task-based approach in developing pragmatic competence. Primarily, it was focused to determine

the pragmatic competence level of the experimental and control groups using a researcher-made pragmatic competence test. Further, this research was set to identify if there is a significant difference in the levels of pragmatic competence between the experimental and control groups in the pretest and post-test and in the overall mean gain scores of the two groups after being treated with task-based approach and traditional approach of language teaching, respectively.

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

This study involved two sections of college students enrolled in a general education writing subject in a state university in Davao City, Philippines. They were classified as experimental and control groups. The researcher determined the control and experimental groups through a toss coin. The groups were chosen since they shared common factors such as field of discipline, year level, college unit, class schedule, and the subject teacher. Also, the researcher made a deeper comparison of the two groups pretest to compare if they have the same level of pragmatic competence before the conduct of the research. The results were comparable. The researcher also established an informed consent and briefing among the respondents in conducting the research. The experimental group was taught using task-based approach of language teaching, while the control group was taught with traditional approach of language teaching.

### Instruments

***Lesson Designs for the Experimental Group.*** These lesson designs are task-based and were used in teaching the subject course. The lessons in the experimental group were structured in the following phases of tasks: pre-task, task phase, post-task, and practice. These phases were the mechanism or set up in employing task-based approach to the experimental group. The lesson designs were based on the course syllabus utilized by the general education writing subject in the state university.

***Lesson Designs for the Control Group.*** These lesson designs follow the traditional approach of language teaching and were used in teaching the subject course to the control group. The lessons were structured and limited to class discussion, lecture, seatwork/individual work, oral recitation, administering quizzes and exams, and writing weekly journals. The lesson designs of the two groups contained the same topics and lessons.

***Researcher-Made Pragmatic Competence Test.*** A 50-item pragmatic competence test was used in the administration of pretest to determine and compare if the experimental and control groups have the same level of pragmatic competence before the conduct of the research. The same test was used in the post-test to determine the effectiveness of task-based approach in developing and enhancing the pragmatic competence of the respondents. The test was based on Bowers, Huisingsh, and LoGiudice's Pragmatic Tasks Framework (2005) specifically the tasks of making inferences, sequencing, decoding implied meanings, supplying appropriate maxims, considering politeness, summarizing, and providing solutions to language problems.

Originally, the pragmatic competence test was composed of 80 items of pragmatic tasks problems. To test the reliability and validity of the test, it was subjected for pilot testing. The test was administered to a class of first year students of the same college and class schedule. The pilot test revealed that nine task items in the instrument were too easy and 21 items were too difficult, hence, they were all discarded in the final test of pragmatic competence. Also, two expert validators checked each item of the test based on presentation/relevance, topic organization, applicability, and clarity and comprehensibility. The test was then certified as reliable and valid.

### **Data Gathering**

The participants were classified as experimental and control groups. Administration of pretest was conducted, and all scores were tabulated and recorded. The control group was taught using the traditional approach of language teaching while the experimental group was taught using with task-based approach of language teaching. All classroom activities were carefully monitored and accurately documented including attitudes and motivations manifested by both groups towards the approaches of language teaching.

After a 10-week period, a post-test was administered to both groups, and all scores were tabulated and recorded. The collected data of the study were then computed, analyzed, and interpreted.

### **Data Analysis**

The study utilized the experimental design type of research called the pretest-post-test non-equivalent group design to find any relative effect of task-based approach on the pragmatic competence of the respondents. The non-equivalent group design was utilized because of the unequal number of respondents in

the two groups. The experimental had 34 respondents while the control group had 38 respondents. Also, the design ensured that the interpretation of data specifically in the determination of significant differences in the level of pragmatic competence would not be affected by unequal respondents. Further, t-test was used to determine the significant difference between the pretest and post-test scores of the two groups. Also, mean gain scores were computed and the level of significance was tested at 0.05.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Pragmatic Competence Level of the Experimental and Control Groups in the Pretest

Table 1. Level of Pragmatic Competence of the Respondents before the Experiment Period

Scores	Experimental Group			Control Group		
	<i>f</i>	%	Level	<i>f</i>	%	Level
45-50	0	0.0	High	0	0.0	High
35-44	28	82.4	Above Average	26	68.4	Above Average
25-34	6	17.6	Average	12	31.6	Average
16-24	0	0.0	Below Average	0	0.0	Below Average
0-15	0	0.0	Poor	0	0.0	Poor
Total	34	100		38	100	

The findings above reveal that the students in the experimental group got an above average level (28 or 82.4%) in their pragmatic competence pretest which means that they have correctly answered most of the questions in the pragmatic competence test in terms of making inferences, logically sequencing a series of events, decoding implied meanings, supplying appropriate maxims, politeness, summarizing, and problems and solutions. There are six or 17.6% of the students got an average level in their pragmatic competence pretest which means that they have correctly answered some of the questions in the pragmatic competence test. The result also shows that all students in the experimental group passed

the pragmatic competence pretest since all respondents scored a minimum of 50% from the total number of test items. A majority of the students in the experimental group got an above average level in the pretest.

On the other hand, 26 (68.4%) of the students in the control group got an above average level in their pragmatic competence pretest which means that they have correctly answered most of the questions in the pragmatic competence. There are 12 (31.6%) of the students in control group got an average level in the pragmatic competence pretest which means that they have correctly answered some of the questions in the pragmatic competence test.

Similar to the experimental group, a majority of the students in the control group got an above average level in the pretest. The result only shows that both groups are comparable in their overall pragmatic competence level at the start of the experiment.

Table 2. Level of Pragmatic Competence of the Respondents after the Experiment Period

Scores	Experimental Group			Control Group		
	<i>f</i>	%	Level	<i>f</i>	%	Level
45-50	30	88.2	High	1	2.6	High
35-44	4	11.8	Above Average	30	78.9	Above Average
25-34	0	0.0	Average	7	18.4	Average
16-24	0	0.0	Below Average	0	0.0	Below Average
0-15	0	0.0	Poor	0	0.0	Poor
Total	34	100		38	100	

A majority of the students in the experimental group obtained high scores in the pragmatic competence post-test after employing task-based approach in language teaching. The significant improvement validated the effectiveness of the task-based approach since it enabled the learners to acquire new linguistic knowledge and processed their existing knowledge in language. Also, they were exposed to authentic language and materials since classroom interactions are student-centered (Ellis, 2003).

On the other hand, one (2.6%) of the students in the control group got a high level in the pragmatic competence post-test which means that the student has correctly answered almost all of the questions in the pragmatic competence test. Thirty or 78.9 % of the students in control group got an above average level in the pragmatic competence post-test which means that they have correctly answered most of the questions in the pragmatic competence test. Furthermore, there are only seven or 18.4 % of the students in the control group got an average level in the pragmatic competence post-test which means that they have correctly answered some of the questions in the pragmatic competence test.

A majority of the students in the control group have improved their level of pragmatic competence after being taught with traditional approach. This implies that there was a minimal increase of pragmatic level in the group; one student achieved a high level from being above average, five students improved their level from average to above average while still the rest in the group remain on the average level. In spite the minimal level increase, traditional approach is still practically not operational in teaching application of facts, in developing problem-solving skills or in changing attitudes. Also, it is characteristically confined to a structure-based course which requires a good deal of remedial re-teaching which, in turn, led to similarly less improvement.

The significant increase in the pragmatic competence level of the experimental group is greater than the increase of the pragmatic competence level of the control group as shown in Table 2. This is because task-based approach (TBA) enables learners to make far more rapid progress, use their second/foreign language in real-world circumstances with a reasonable efficiency even after quite short courses, and operate an effective meaning system (e.g. to express what they wanted to say and interpret what others have said in every classroom interaction) even though their grammar and lexicon were often far from perfect (Leaver & Willis, 2004). Moreover, task-based approach caters development and progress in decoding social, cultural, and discourse conventions that have to be followed in various situations (e.g. student-group interaction and exchange).

Nunan (2006) also asserted the possible effects of TBA in developing competencies. He noted that tasks, as the central component of TBA, allow learners to involve their selves in activities that require comprehension, production, and interaction in the target language while their attention is focused on the mobilization of their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning than to manipulate form. These tasks that require comprehension, production, and interaction reflect real-life

situations tasks. Lynch and Maclean (2000) supported this notion by saying that the first source of justifications for Task-Based Learning is what may be termed the “ecologic alone”: the belief that the best way to promote effective learning and competency development is by setting up classroom tasks that reflect as far as possible the real world tasks which the learners perform or would perform. In this view, tasks performance is seen as a rehearsal for interaction to come.

One factor which can be viewed that has contributory effects on the pragmatic competence level of the experimental group is their attitude towards the medium of TBA method which English language. The attitude towards the English language implies the students’ feelings, prejudice, or fears about the learning of English as a second language (Spolsky, 2000). Brown (1994) stated that those learners who show a positive attitude towards a language can get benefits from it while learning and those who have a negative attitude towards a language might lead to a decreased motivation and unsuccessful attainment of proficiency or competence due to decreased input and interaction.

In addition, Chan, Jung, Masaki, and Park (2007) asserted that students who have been learning a language via a variety of traditional approaches but are subsequently introduced to task-based language teaching, such students initially tend to have negative attitudes toward TBA, but when using and experiencing tasks using the target language, they may overcome their original judgments and react favorably towards TBA practices. They also suggested that attitudes affect various aspects of the approach. This notion is consistent to the experimental group wherein at the start of the administration of the treatment; the students have shown some negative attitude towards TBA since they are required to use their target language. However, as the instructor continued to engage the experimental group to TBA using the English language, they have started to show positive attitudes towards the approach since they eventually became familiar with how the different tasks work in the classroom. Ellis (2006) asserted that tasks reduce the cognitive or linguistic demands placed on the learner.

The positive attitude manifested by the experimental group can also be due to the instructor of the subject. Murad (2009) stated that if the instructor is accustomed and has shown enthusiastic reactions towards TBA, learners can receive adequate assistance in learning and in acquiring a competency. Thus, positive attitude towards the employment of TBA by the instructor to the experimental group have developed accordingly.

Since the instructor has incurred a positive attitude towards TBA, it led the experimental group to motivation. Relating to the second language learner’s overall goal orientation and attitude, Ellis (1985) defined motivation as the

persistence shown by the learner in striving for a goal. The motivation established by the experimental group in accomplishing each task presented is an apparent factor why competency in pragmatics was achieved in this study. Yashima (2002) noted that if the students are motivated, they will develop a complete self-confidence in their second language, resulting in a greater willingness to communicate and interact. Referring to Ellis' definition of motivation – learner's overall goal orientation and attitude, Willis (1996) also provided an assertion why accomplishing a task leads to motivation. She asserted that task is a goal-oriented activity with a real outcome which stirs learners to be motivated.

Table 3. Difference in the Pragmatic Competence Level between the Experimental and Control Groups in the Pretest

Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	Level	T-Value	P-Value
Experimental Group	38.06	4.315	Above Average	-2.192	0.052*
Control Group	35.92	3.915	Above Average		

Legend: \* = Significant Difference

The result shows that the experimental and control groups both have an above average pragmatic competence level in their pretest performance. The t-value of -2.192 with the corresponding p-value of 0.052 implies that there is no significant difference in pretest performance of the experimental and control groups before the treatment period. This condition is required to be met before the experiment to ensure that the respondents' level of pragmatic competence in the two groups are comparably the same (Murad, 2005).

Table 4. Difference in The Pragmatic Competence Level Between the Experimental and Control Groups in the Post-Test

Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	Level	T-Value	P-Value
Experimental Group	47.35	2.281	High	-12.662	0.000*
Control Group	38.26	3.710	Above Average		

Legend: \* = Significant Difference

The t-value -12.662 with the corresponding p-value of 0.000 shows that there is a significant difference in the pragmatic competence level between the experimental and control groups in the post-test. This implies that the experimental group performs better in the pragmatic competence test than the control group after conducting the experiment.

The findings are confirmed by the several studies conducted by Foster and Skehan (1996), Mehnert (1998), and Ortega (1999) who said that task planning produces a positive influence on the aspects of a learner's performance. Moreover, Beglar and Hunt (2002) pointed out that learners who participated in task-based projects found the experience to be rewarding, intrinsically motivating, and educationally beneficial. Thus, the final result was generally of a high level.

Table 5. Difference in the Overall Mean Gain Scores of the Experimental and Control Groups

Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	T-value	P-value
Experimental Group	9.29	3.546	-8.824	0.000*
Control Group	2.34	3.319		

*Legend: \* = Significant Difference*

The results indicate that the experimental group gained a higher mean gain score compared to the control group. Also, the t-value -8.824 with the corresponding p-value of 0.000 reveals that there is a significant difference in the overall mean gain scores between the experimental and control groups. Thus, the use of task-based approach has a significant effect on the pragmatic competence level of the experimental group. The findings of this study are consistent with the study of Murad (2009) on task-based approach which revealed that it enables teachers to improve their students' communicative skills, provide opportunities for native-like interactions, practice oral representations immediately after getting enough decoded educational, social, and cultural meaning.

The effectiveness of TBA was made possible through giving a clear guide and procedures on the different tasks accomplished. Furthermore, the effectiveness of the approach on the pragmatic competence proves the theory of Ellis (2003) that the use of TBA has a positive outcome for learners to process language pragmatically which can be evaluated in terms of correct or appropriate

propositional content, decoding social, cultural, and discourse conventions that have to be followed in various situations.

Another factor that contributed to the high-level performance in pragmatic competence post-test is the types of tasks that the experimental group has performed. These tasks usually contribute pragmatic awareness and development. These tasks as classified by Willis (1996) include the following: listing including brainstorming and fact-finding which help train students' comprehension and induction ability; ordering and sorting including sequencing, ranking, and classifying which foster comprehension, logic, and reasoning ability; comparing including matching, finding similarities and differences which enhances students' ability of differentiation; problem solving including analyzing real situations, reasoning, and decision-making which promotes students' reasoning and decision-making abilities; sharing experience including narrating, describing, exploring, and exploring attitudes, opinions, and reactions which help students share and exchange their knowledge and experience; and creative tasks including brainstorming, fact finding, ordering, and sorting, comparing, and many other activities which cultivates students' comprehensive problem-solving abilities as well as their reasoning and analyzing abilities. These types of tasks were comprehensively integrated into task-based approach which acted as the mechanisms in unconsciously developing the pragmatic awareness of the experimental group. Also, these tasks are aligned in evaluating, developing, and enhancing pragmatic competence.

Bowers, Huisinigh, and LoGiudice (2005) stated in their study that pragmatic competence could be assessed through making inferences, sequencing, summarizing, determining causes and effects, and problem and solution. Through these assessments, the learners' ability to think, to reason, to solve problems, to infer, to determine causes, to sequence, and to understand directions can be socially, culturally, and discursively determined.

Also, the different phases of TBA incurred a contributory factor in the pragmatic competence enhancement of the experimental group (Murad, 2005). In the employment of the approach in each lesson of the subject, the tasks were identified and divided into different phases – pre-task phase, task phase, post-task phase, and practice phase. These phases were carefully considered and were followed chronologically from the task-based lessons. The different phases of the approach made the students in the experimental group focused on the form of each task through doing a task design plan before performing it (Nunan, 2006).

Another contributory factor to support the findings of this study is mentioned by Ellis (2003). He emphasized the criteria features of each task accomplished. According to him, a task is a work plan which constitutes a plan for learning activity. This work plan takes the form of teaching materials. In the case of the experimental group treated with TBA, the results have matched the expectation intended by the plan. Hence, the approach paved the development and enhancement of the pragmatic competence of the respondents.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study concludes that the pragmatic competence level of the respondents improved after task-based approach was used. For this research, TBA has a positive outcome for the learners to process language pragmatically which was evaluated through appropriate propositional content, decoding social, cultural, and discourse conventions that have to be followed in various situations. The findings of this study give teachers/instructors teaching English courses the implications of the task-based approach to language pedagogy. Also, teachers may utilize this approach to innovate and enhance students' potentials, confidence, and competencies, particularly in pragmatic competence development.

Since task-based language teaching is an effective method in this study, more researches of this nature must be conducted in different school levels. Also, future researchers could determine and explore more pragmatic competence indicators to be applied on tasks. Through these tasks, students would be more motivated and enthusiastic in learning the English language which may lead to their language skills' improvement. Finally, future researchers could employ TBA on other areas in language teaching to help and guide teachers and students in discovering the other implications of TBA in language learning and in language skills development.

## **TRANSLATIONAL RESEARCH**

The outcome of this study on task-based approach and pragmatics could be translated into a module on pragmatic competence enhancement that centers on the roles of task as the primary mechanism of instruction and learning in a second language classroom. This module can also be a basis to initiate reform in general education English course syllabi and outlines and to acquire alternative methods of feedback for curriculum revision.

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