

## ENHANCING PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE OF STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITY OF LANGUAGES AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES, VNU

Vũ Thị Kim Liên\*

*University of Languages and International Studies - VNU*

### SUMMARY

In an attempt to help students improve their pragmatic competence, specifically argumentation skills, including giving opinions, showing agreements and disagreements, this action research was carried out. The action research project was carried out in 12 weeks with the subjects of 25 first-year students from Faculty of English Language Teacher Education, University of Languages and International Studies. Initial data showed that the majority of students had poor argumentation competence, in other words, they failed to produce effective opinions, agreements and disagreements. In addition, most of them often used the language functions which are of elementary level to express their opinions, agreements and disagreements. Therefore, the researcher implemented an action plan in which students were trained in terms of argumentation skills and language functions to express argumentation. The analysis of the pre-data and post-data showed that students made significance improvement in argumentation skills and language functions by the end of the projects.

**Keywords:** *Pragmatic competence; Opinion-giving skill, Language functions; agreement; disagreement*

### INTRODUCTION

In order to gain communicative competence, one should be both linguistically and pragmatically competent [1, p.22]. Pragmatic competence, in broad sense, is a combination of the linguistic and social aspects of the language in which people need to be competent, and realize success in communication. In fact, it is concluded that in order for one to become a proficient and successful L2 speaker, the mastery of both the social usage of a language and linguistic forms are of the similar significance [2, p.52]. However, L2 learners often develop grammatical competence in the absence of pragmatic competence. At the University of Languages and International Studies (ULIS) where the researcher is teaching, students are not aware of the role of pragmatics in communication and tend to focus only on the accuracy of language form and propositional meaning of the utterance but not on the appropriateness of language use and the speakers' intention underlying the utterance. As a result, the researcher decided to carry

out this research which aims at developing students' pragmatic competence, specifically opinions giving skill via the use of different classroom activities such as role-play, discussion, information gap and so on.

This action research project aims at using classroom speaking activities to improve students' pragmatic competence, specifically their ability in giving opinions, showing agreements and disagreements and support them with adequate details and examples. Moreover, their use of various expressions in giving opinions, showing agreements and disagreements are also of significance concern. The study also investigates the influence of these activities on students' pragmatic competence, specifically argumentation skills including giving opinions, showing agreement and disagreement as well as their reactions towards these activities.

For the purpose of this study, the following questions are addressed:

1. To what extent do classroom speaking activities influence students' opinion-giving competence?

\* Tel 0987388624, Email: vukimlien ulis@gmail.com

2. How do students respond to these changes of their opinion-giving competence?

#### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research was carried out at Division 1, Faculty of Language Teacher Education, University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam National University in Hanoi. The length of the research is 12 weeks long.

The participants of this study include 25 first-year students at Faculty of English Language Teacher Education, University of Languages and International Studies. These students are all in the same class with the major of English Linguistics. Their starting English level is rather equal because they have all taken the entrance exam with English scores ranging from 8.0 to 9.0.

The researcher then organized a 12-week long training session to equip students with argumentation skills and argumentation language expressions. The training included half of the time for lexical instruction. The lexical training focused partly on conversation strategies, teaching students fillers and hesitation devices, so that they could gain time when a difficulty in communication occurs. In addition, students were taught about language functions or pragma-linguistic markers which are the language or phrases that they will use when expressing their opinions, showing agreements or disagreements. The phrases are divided into different levels from elementary to advance and students are trained through each level gradually. The second training is for argumentation skills. The teaching of argumentation skills started with the definition of arguments, facts, and opinions. This activity helps them understand the structure of an argumentation. In addition, students were also guided on the problems that they often face when dealing with argumentation. Then, students were instructed

to formulate arguments and support them, paying a special attention to the ordering of supportive statements. A further unit introduced the notion of refutation or in other words, counter-argument, to the students, and how they can use it in argumentation. Finally, students had the opportunity to practice these skills in a problem-solving activity. Both lexical and argumentation skills training were alternated every week so that students could master both the skill and language for performing best in argumentation.

After that, post-data was collected to assess the results of the action research procedure. Data was collected by means of survey questionnaires, tests and classroom observations. Initial data collected at the beginning of the research showed that the majority of students had poor argumentation competence, in other words, they failed to produce effective opinions, agreements and disagreements. In addition, most of them often used the language functions which are of elementary level to express their opinions, agreements and disagreements. Therefore, the researcher implemented an action plan which was carried out in 12 weeks when students were trained in terms of argumentation skills and language functions to express argumentation.

The data collection instruments deployed in this study are questionnaire, tests and observations, these are helpful for an action research model [3, p.45].

The following activities were used to improve students' opinion giving skills [4, p.345].

**Information Gaps Activities:** it includes the participation of more than one student. The part of information that one student knows can be different from the other student' part of information. The combination of these parts forms the whole information. Those activities include describing pictures, completing and telling story.

Oral expression teachers may use this type of speaking activities in order to urge the EFL students' interaction in the classroom. This type of activities can attract the students' interests; since, it is presenting new information. Especially, if the topic being discussed is interesting for the EFL students [5, p.30].

**Surveys Activities:** it involves the students' participation in carrying out questionnaire about a specific topic. It requires the participation of more than one student; furthermore, it involves the students' movements inside the classroom.

Oral expression teachers may use this type of speaking activities to urge the EFL students to interact in classrooms. It is a unique activity; since, it requires the EFL students' movements inside the classroom in order to communicate with each other [6, p.110].

**Discussion Activities:** it involves the students' discussion about a specific topic. It also requires the participation of more than one student because they are going to exchange their points of views about the topic.

It is one of the most widely used speaking activities that oral expression teachers often make use of in teaching English language. The teacher introduces the topic then urges the EFL students to interact with each other by exchanging their point of view [7, p.40].

**Role-Play Activities:** it involves the students' participation to play roles according to different social situations. For instance, teachers may ask the students to play a role of guest at a party.

**Oral expression:** teachers may suggest social situations and ask the EFL students to play a particular role in those situations. This type of activities is also used in teaching speaking skill to the EFL students.

These are the speaking activities in which teachers may use oral expression in the classroom. In another way of classification,

Siham, suggests two approaches to enhance students' pragmatic competence [8, p. 25].

**Awareness raising activities:** are the activities that aim to raise the pragmatic awareness of the EFL students about the target language by using illustrations. Those illustrations can be presented through the similarities and differences between the pragmatic norms of the first and the target language. They add that "It is worthwhile to keep in mind that all languages have pragmatic systems, and with a little encouragement all learners will recognize that their L1 is also have "secret rules". Furthermore, the use of authentic language samples will be beneficial in presenting English language pragmatic norms."

**Oral expression:** teachers should use the speaking activities which can expose the pragmatic norms of English language. Through the use of the authentic language samples, and the comparison between the pragmatic norms of the EFL students' first language and the pragmatic norms of the target language, oral expression teachers try to develop the EFL students pragmatic competence.

**Interpretation or production activities:** are activities that come after the presentation of English language pragmatic norms. It arranges opportunities for the students to practice the pragmatic norms.

The other type of speaking activities in which teachers may use oral expression is the speaking activities which provides opportunities to EFL students to use the pragmatic norms in simulation for the native social situations. Generally, these are the speaking activities that teachers should use oral expression in order to develop the EFL students' pragmatic competency. The use of authentic language samples that present the pragmatic norms of the target language and provide the opportunities to apply that information can develop the EFL students' pragmatic competence [9, p.56].

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this part, the researcher provides a presentation and discussion of all the data which were collected in the action research, including the pre-data, post-data and data during the time when the action research was implemented. Initial data composes of the pre-questionnaire and pre-test, which aim to identify students' problems related to argumentation skills. Before the implementation of the research, the researcher asked the students to complete a questionnaire and take part in an oral test to examine their existing pragmatic competence. The analyzed data shows that, before the action research was implemented, the majority of students failed to perform appropriately with argumentation skills, and they seemed to use the language functions of low levels. During the process of the action research, the research also collected data via classroom observation to see how students reacted to the classroom activities designed to help them improve their argumentation competence as well as their performance in these class activities. Data shows that students were interested in the activities and showed high level of involvement in them. Gradual progress was witnessed from the beginning until the end of the research cycle. Finally, post-data as well as the comparison of pre-data with post-data shows how students have improved their argumentation competence. The positive results show that students have benefited from this action research project as by the end of the training course, more students were able to perform complicated argumentation skills and use more language functions of higher levels.

Initial data was collected via the use of oral pre-test. In the oral pre-test, students performed individually by talking with the researcher in an oral test which lasts about 5-10 minutes for each student. The oral test was recorded for later analysis. The researcher

introduced the situation to the students, stated clearly that, in this situation, students would have to defend their choices by giving opinion, support for the opinion, making counter claims and support for the counter claim. The designed script is changeable, which means the researcher was flexible in developing the conversation, basing on students' responses.

In the test, students were encouraged to develop the conversation as long as possible to make their opinion the most persuasive. Therefore, some students may use more than one turn to produce the functions. For examples, many students used 2 or 3 turns to make counter-claims, that's why the number of counter-claim is 33, more than the number of students. However, only 66% of students could make counter-claims and some still failed to do that. This means some students are competent and they can make more counter-claim but some failed to make any of that. Considering the claim, all students could clear out their opinion by making claims, which is quite easy to explain because this seems to be the easiest task for them. Only 14 students (56%) could make counter-arguments, which are the opposition of counter-claim to defend their opinion. The number of support for each type is even lower as many students did not know how to make support or they were not aware that they had to do so. Therefore, only 16, 11, and 8 support for claim, counter-claim and counter-argument were made respectively.

The researcher also analyzed the language functions analyzed by students to see whether they could use many of them and the level of expressions that they used. The results came up to a hypothesis which assumes that students have rather poor pragmatic competence, as at this stage, they only used a limited number of expressions. In addition, most of the language functions are of elementary or pre-intermediate level.

Final data shows that students' argumentation skills have been improved since the number of statements for each -type increased considerably. Specifically, 100% of the students could make claims, which means that they could give their own opinion. This number is similar to that in the oral pre-test. 92% of them could produce counter-claim, increasing 26% compared to the pre-test. The biggest improvement can be seen in support for counter arguments, which increased up to 42%. This means that students are more confident and capable of dealing with the skills which they considered difficult or impossible for them.

Not only the number of statements increased but the level of the language expressions used by students also showed great improvement. In other words, more students could use phrases of higher levels.

The results also show that most students had positive viewpoints towards their changes in argumentation competence. For example, the number of students who agreed with the statements showing that they feel more confident when talking to native speakers or taking part in real-life activities which need argumentation skills account for 44% and 32% respectively. Some students feel that their skill is good enough, but they still want to improve it, so that they can later take part in every social and academic activities which need argumentation skills.

## CONCLUSION

The research shows positive findings as the majority of students had significant progress after the training course. They now can fulfill different skills of making argumentation such as giving persuasive claim, making strong support, and counter-argument. In terms of language used, many of them can use the

expressions of higher level such as upper-intermediate or advanced, which are often more complex and require higher level of language competence. In addition, in making disagreement, they do not make direct and blunt statements as before. Instead, they know how to make use of the hedge to make them sound more polite and professional. Students also show positive attitude towards the results. Specifically, most of them agreed that the progress made thanks to this action research helped them a lot in becoming more confident in authentic communication and taking part in more formal argumentation.

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**TÓM TẮT**  
**PHÁT TRIỂN NĂNG LỰC NGỮ DỤNG CỦA SINH VIÊN**  
**TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC NGOẠI NGỮ, ĐẠI HỌC QUỐC GIA HÀ NỘI**

**Vũ Thị Kim Liên\***

*Trường Đại học Ngoại ngữ - ĐH Quốc gia Hà Nội*

Nghiên cứu này được tiến hành nhằm giúp sinh viên cải thiện năng lực ngữ dụng học, đặc biệt là kỹ năng tranh luận, bao gồm đưa ra ý kiến, thể hiện quan điểm đồng ý hoặc phản đối. Dự án nghiên cứu được tiến hành trong 12 tuần trên đối tượng là 25 sinh viên năm thứ nhất thuộc Khoa Sư phạm tiếng Anh, trường Đại học Ngoại ngữ, Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội. Các dữ liệu ban đầu cho thấy phần lớn học sinh có khả năng tranh luận kém, nói cách khác, họ không thể tạo ra quan điểm đồng ý hoặc phản đối hiệu quả. Hơn nữa, họ thường sử dụng các cụm từ ở mức độ sơ cấp để trình bày quan điểm đồng ý hoặc phản đối. Do đó, nghiên cứu này đã được tiến hành, trong đó sinh viên được đào tạo về các kỹ năng tranh luận và cụm từ để diễn tả tranh luận của mình. Kết quả phân tích dữ liệu trước và sau cho thấy rằng sinh viên đã có những tiến bộ đáng kể về kỹ năng tranh luận và các cụm từ khi dự án nghiên cứu kết thúc.

**Từ khoá:** *Năng lực ngữ dụng học; trình bày quan điểm; cụm từ chức năng ngôn ngữ; đồng ý; không đồng ý*

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\* Tel. 0987388624; Email [vukimlien.uls@gmail.com](mailto:vukimlien.uls@gmail.com)