

# AN EVALUATION OF PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE AND ITS TEACHING FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF FACULTY MEMBERS AND STUDENTS AT TERTIARY LEVEL<sup>1</sup>

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Ayşegül TAKKAÇ TULGAR\*

Oktay YAĞIZ\*\*

Turgay HAN\*\*\*

**ABSTRACT:** This study was designed with an aim to understand the perceptions and attitudes of faculty members and students in six EFL departments in Turkey regarding the value of pragmatic competence and its teaching in foreign language education. The data were collected through six open-ended questions for which both faculty members and student participants were required to provide written answers. For the analysis of the data, content analysis was adopted to reach detailed results and conclusions. The results revealed that the participants considered pragmatic competence as essential and they favoured its integration in foreign language education. They underlined the contributory nature of pragmatic instruction as it helps learners communicate effectively and successfully. Besides their positive ideas about pragmatic competence and its teaching, the participants counted some basic problems that hinder pragmatic development like the existing education system and other factors that it negatively influences. Based on the results, some pedagogical implications are suggested for the betterment of pragmatic development.

**Keywords:** EFL Learner, Faculty Member, Pragmatic Competence, Pragmatic Instruction, Tertiary Level.

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\* Yrd. Doç. Dr., Atatürk University/Kâzım Karabekir Faculty of Education /ELT Department, atakkac@atauni.edu.tr, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6401-969X>

\*\* Yrd. Doç. Dr., Atatürk University/Kâzım Karabekir Faculty of Education /ELT Department, yoktay@atauni.edu.tr, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7076-7774>

\*\*\* Yrd. Doç. Dr, Ordu University/Faculty of Letters/English Language and Literature Department, turgayhan@yahoo.com.tr, ORCID ID: [orcid.org/0000-0002-9196-0618](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9196-0618)

**ÖZ:** Bu çalışma, Türkiye’de altı devlet üniversitesinde İngiliz Dili Eğitimi bölümündeki akademisyenlerin ve öğrencilerin yabancı dil öğretiminde edimbilimsel yeteneğin öğretilmesine ilişkin algı ve tutumlarını incelemek üzere tasarlanmıştır. Veriler, katılımcıların yazılı olarak cevapladıkları altı açık uçlu soru ile toplanmıştır. Veri analizinde içerik analizi kullanılmıştır. Sonuçlar, katılımcıların edimbilimsel yeteneğin önemli olduğunu düşündüklerini ve bu yeteneğin dil öğretimine dahil edilmesini istediklerini göstermiştir. Katılımcılar, etkili ve başarılı iletişimi sağladığı için edimbilimsel yeteneğin katkısını vurgulamışlardır. Katılımcılar ayrıca, mevcut eğitim sistemi başta olmak üzere edimbilimsel yeteneğin gelişmesini engelleyen bazı temel sorunlardan bahsetmişlerdir. Bu sonuçlara dayanarak, edimbilimsel yeteneğin gelişmesinin iyileştirilmesi için bazı pedagojik önerilerde bulunulmuştur.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** İngilizce Öğrencisi, Akademisyen, Edimbilimsel Yetenek, Edimbilimsel Öğretim, Yükseköğretim.

## INTRODUCTION

There have been many suggestions, trials, alterations and subsequent shifts in foreign language teaching since the emergence of the field as a constantly developing and evolving discipline. In the beginning stages, the emphasis on language education was on the provision of grammatical aspects of target languages and this approach dominated the field until the last few decades. Starting with Chomsky’s (1965) introduction of the terms competence and performance, followed by Hymes’ (1972) study of ethnography of communication, Canale and Swain’s (1980) descriptions of communicative competence and Bachman’s (1990) particular reference to pragmatic competence, new insights emerged in the field regarding the significance of communicative nature of languages. Since then, the emphasis on language education has shifted from the linguistic features of the language to its communicative or pragmatic aspects. Therefore, the development of pragmatic competence has gained momentum as an essential component of foreign language education.

Pragmatic competence can be basically defined as the ability to use the language appropriately in different contexts with different interlocutors. In other words, it is the ability to use the language properly based on cultural, social, individual and contextual factors which can directly or indirectly have impacts on the linguistic choices of the speaker. In the past when the focus of language education was on grammar, the priority was to teach learners the structural characteristics of the target language. The idea was that a good knowledge



of grammar would enable learners to use the L2 effectively. However, with the shift towards more communicative aspects, it was realized that possessing only knowledge of grammar is not enough to deal with interactional situations. Besides knowing what to say, language users should also know how to say things in proper place and in proper time. It was also realized that there are different factors that can affect not only the process of communication but also its flow. For example, Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed that there are some sociopragmatic variables like the relative power which is about the social status of the interlocutors and social distance which is related to the level of familiarity of the speaker and hearer to each other.

Since pragmatics and pragmatic competence started to attract attention a few decades ago, the number of the studies investigating this issue from different angles has gained momentum. Most of these studies have been conducted with the aim to find out whether there are relationships between learners' pragmatic competence and different factors such as the effects of general L2 proficiency of language learners, instructional treatment, learning environment, learning strategies, length of residence in the target environment, motivation and feedback (For the purposes of this study, related literature concerning L2 proficiency, instruction and learning environment will be presented). Regarding the relationship between pragmatic competence and learners' L2 proficiency, Koike (1996) investigated the pragmatic development of learners of Spanish in a cross-sectional study. The participants were required to offer proper answers to the videotaped scenarios and the results pointed at the difference between the advanced-level group and the other groups. The results of the higher proficiency group were better than those of the other two groups as they possessed the necessary knowledge for better performance. Supporting this result, one can suggest that learners are to have the knowledge of previous stages in order to succeed in the following periods.

In 2000, Rose conducted a study to examine the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic abilities of elementary school students with different proficiency levels. The results revealed that the pragmalinguistic proficiency, which is the knowledge of the structural aspects of the language for appropriate communication, of the lower level group was higher than their sociopragmatic proficiency while the group with higher L2 proficiency had better scores for sociopragmatic aspects. In addition, the higher proficiency group showed more pragmatic improvement compared to the other group. A recently conducted study by Allami and Naeimi (2011) also produced similar results. The researchers studied with thirty Persian learners of English with the aim to investigate the semantic formulas based of the criterion of L2 proficiency. The results revealed a positive correlation between the levels of L2 proficiency and

effective pragmatic transfers. Those participants with better proficiency levels were more successful in transferring their already existing socio-cultural and sociopragmatic knowledge into L2 production. Another study focusing on the influence of L2 proficiency on apology strategies was conducted by Rastegara and Yasami (2014). The researchers worked with sixteen students with diverse proficiency levels and evaluated their apology production based on a DCT. The results revealed that the participants with higher proficiency levels were more capable of adopting different apology strategies for better production.

Another point of investigation is the effects of instruction on pragmatic development. Silva (2003) carried out an experimental study to assess the effectiveness of explicit instruction on pragmatic development. The participants were provided with instructional treatment for sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge on refusals. The results showed that the treatment positively contributed to the pragmatic development of the participants. In a comparatively recent study, Takimoto (2008) investigated the effects of deductive and inductive approaches to teach pragmatic competence. Sixty Japanese learners of English were divided into four groups; one deductive instruction group, two inductive instruction groups with different activities and a control group. The results showed that, though there were some differences between the deductive and inductive groups, those groups receiving a certain type of treatment performed better than the control group. In 2011, van Compernelle conducted a case study to evaluate the sociopragmatic development of a US learner of French. The participant was provided with one-hour concept-based instruction and the results pointed at the positive impact of treatment as it activated the cognitive functioning of the participant. The contributory nature of instruction on pragmatic development was also exposed in another experimental study by Rajabi and Farahian (2013). The experimental group was provided with a ten-session awareness-raising treatment on pragmatics. This study also showed that instruction promotes pragmatic awareness and pragmatic development, which further advances pragmatic comprehension and production.

Learning environment is another variable, the effects of which on pragmatic competence have been a matter of discussion. Though some studies propose that there are not differences between ESL and EFL environments in terms of pragmatic development, some others claim that ESL settings offer better chances for exposure to and practice in target language. For example, Cohen (1997) referred to his own experience as a language learner in an EFL context and maintained that his level of pragmatic competence was not at the desired level. He further commented that the main reason for this could be his



learning the language in an EFL setting and added that the focus on language education is generally on the linguistic aspects of L2 conveyed in a traditional way. Conducting a replication of the study belonging to Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998), Schauer (2006) studied with three groups of students in order to evaluate their abilities to notice the infelicities in the given scenarios. Yielding similar results with the original study, the results of the study by Schauer (2006) revealed that ESL participants were more successful in identifying pragmatic problems compared to those in the EFL setting who considered grammatical mistakes as more serious.

The review of relevant literature shows that pragmatic competence has taken its unique place among the topics of discussion in language education. Many studies have been based on experimental design in order to assess the effectiveness of various factors on pragmatic competence. However, there is a scarcity as to the studies investigating the perceptions of teachers as well as students concerning pragmatic competence in general and its teaching in particular. Therefore, this study was designed to place emphasis on the ideas and thoughts of both faculty members and students at tertiary level. Besides, a qualitative research design was adopted in order to obtain a detailed understanding of the views of the two important parties of the education process.

## METHODOLOGY

This study was based on a qualitative research design in order to gain an in-depth insight into the faculty members' and students' views, perceptions and attitudes towards pragmatic competence and its teaching in foreign language education. The participants were 554 students studying at different grades and 50 faculty members with different academic degrees and teaching experiences at six state universities in Turkey.

The data were collected through six open-ended questions designed by the researcher, at the end of an experts' discussion and a thorough examination of the related literature. The participants were required to provide written answers to these questions. After the data were collected, the researcher worked on the written answers with two raters. Content analysis was adopted in order to obtain a clearer framework displaying the details in the available data. The identified codes were combined into relevant categories and then were again united into broader themes.

## RESULTS

The analysis of the qualitative data obtained from the written comments of the faculty members and students resulted in ample examples pointing at the

issue of pragmatics education from different perspectives. One of the ideas that was common both for the faculty members and the student participants was the significance of pragmatic competence in language learning. Almost all the participants considered pragmatic ability as the essence of general foreign language competence. They emphasized that pragmatic competence should be an integral part of L2 development maintaining that only mastering the linguistic aspects of the L2 is not enough for pragmatic development. The presentation of the below table can be much helpful to display the codes identified out of participant comments.

**Table 1:** Theme for the Importance of Pragmatic Competence

Theme 1: The Importance of Pragmatic Competence	
Category 1: Teaching pragmatic competence	Integral part of language competence Essence of language competence and communication
Category 2: Understanding language	Making meaning Making inferences
Category 3: Language use	Language beyond grammar Conveying messages

Table 1 shows the codes and broader categories based on the written comments of both faculty members and student participants. The provision of some example comments can be much more illustrating as for the significance of pragmatic competence in foreign language education. The following comment from a student participant, who also referred to the developing nature of languages, reflects the notion that pragmatic competence should be a central component in language education:

*“Pragmatic competence is an essential part of language competence. Language is a living, developing and changing concept. Therefore, if we don’t improve our pragmatic competence, we have to stick only to linguistic rules of the language and cannot develop our general language ability.”*

As to the significance of pragmatic competence in language education, one of the faculty members stated that the communicative side of foreign languages has been mostly neglected either because it is difficult to learn or because it is difficult to teach. Naming these communicative aspects as invisible, the participant put forward the below comment and suggested the importance of the integration of pragmatic competence into foreign language education:

*“It is a common perception that the essence of teaching and learning a foreign language involves far more than targeting surface grammatical or lexical systems. The other aspects of language have been referred as invisible since they are often more difficult to teach and acquire. As pragmatic competence is defined as the ability to communicate effectively and involves knowledge beyond the*



*level of grammar, it should be widely regarded as an integral part of learning and teaching a language."*

On the other hand, however much the participants regarded the contributory and essential nature of pragmatic competence in foreign language education, they also referred to some common challenges that hinder the process of pragmatic instruction and its development. These challenges were divided into three groups: *external factors* which are mostly out of the control of faculty members and students such as the existing education system, the examination style, learning the language in an EFL setting, lack of authentic materials, crowded classes as well as the cultural and linguistic differences between L1 and L2; *student-related factors* like their proficiency levels, their indifference towards learning a foreign language and their lack of awareness of the importance of foreign language learning and *faculty-related factors* such as educators' general language proficiency, their teaching skills and attitudes towards teaching different aspects of L2. Table 2 shows the challenges experienced in the process of pragmatics teaching.

**Table 2:** Theme for the Challenges in Teaching Pragmatic Competence

Theme 2: Challenges in Teaching Pragmatic Competence	
Category 1: External Factors	Education system Examination style Crowded classes English as a foreign language Cultural and linguistic differences between L1 and L2 Lack of authentic materials
Category 2: Student-related Factors	Students proficiency levels Students' indifference Lack of student awareness Students' perceptions
Category 3: Faculty-related Factors	Instructors' proficiency levels Instructors' attitudes

Of these challenges, the existing education system and the related examination style were important factors that were frequently posed as excuses by the participants. The faculty members and student participants generally commented that the education system hinders the development of pragmatic abilities as it still emphasizes the teaching of linguistic aspects of the target language and the developing vocabulary knowledge but neglects the communicative side of the foreign language. They claim that this system inevitably affects the way classes are conducted, the materials are designed and the exam questions are prepared, which forms a frame for the students' and teachers' perceptions of foreign language education. One of the faculty members proposed a comprehensive comment which combines the negative

effects of the education system on different aspects in the process in a single statement and concluded his ideas by suggesting an alteration in the system if the aim is to improve the existing state:

*“It seems to be very common that language teaching in many courses do not go beyond the teaching of linguistic components. Language teaching materials are designed for teaching these components, teachers are trained to teach these components, students are accustomed to this type of language education and also the language assessment is based only on linguistic competence. In general standardized tests, the basic criterion is linguistic competence in the target language. Therefore, many students and teachers tend to think linguistic competence as the ultimate goal of foreign language courses, and pragmatic competence as secondary or complementary. Unless an education system which also puts emphasis on pragmatic competence is established, the problems seem to be far from solution.”*

Sharing a similar perspective with the above participant, one of the students referred to the education system and the examination style as the main obstacles in the development of pragmatic abilities. The participant added that limited exposure to the target forms only presented in textbooks also has a negative impact on the pragmatic development of students:

*“A person who wants to learn a language should be exposed to the language and engaged in situations to use the language... Unfortunately, the education system and the examination style forced us to memorize only the grammatical rules of the target language. We only encountered some practice through the dialogues in the textbooks. We had to develop our language competence in a limited time with limited opportunities.”*

In addition to the education system, there is also the student and teacher-side of the issue. In other words, though the existing system may seem to be the most important challenge in the development of pragmatic competence in Turkey, teachers and students can sometimes be as responsible as the education system for being obstacles in the process. The following statement can be considered as a sincere comment belonging to a student participant who could accept that students and teachers can also negatively influence pragmatic development. Shouldering the blame but not denying the impact of the education system, the participant maintained as follows:

*“We are the type of students who study only for exams and our teachers are not much different from us. They teach for exams. The main reason for this is the education system. However, we, as students, are mostly lazy and resist the teachers who want to teach us. In this vicious circle, the learning environment becomes unproductive.”*





Besides the challenges in the development of pragmatic competence, the participants also referred to the contributory nature of learning pragmatics in their general L2 development. The general agreement was that learning pragmatic competence helps students improve their general L2 proficiency, raise their awareness considering different usages of the foreign language in different contexts and improve their communicative skills as well as making the education process more productive and enjoyable. Table 3 presents the contributions of teaching pragmatics in foreign language education.

**Table 3:** Theme for the Contributions of Teaching Pragmatics

Theme 3: Contributions of Teaching Pragmatics	
Category 1: Contributions on the learner side	Improving L2 proficiency Raising awareness Improving communicative skills
Category 2: Contributions on the application side	More enjoyable and productive learning process Identifying problematic areas

Taking the contributions of pragmatic development for students into account, one of the faculty members explained that with the help of pragmatic development, students can become more aware of the importance of expanding their communicative skills as possessing only linguistic knowledge is not enough to maintain effective interaction. He posed the following inclusive comment regarding the contributory nature of pragmatic development:

*“...They (students) become more aware that pragmatic competence is an essential component of effective language use and their linguistic knowledge cannot be enough for communication in English unless they get pragmatic knowledge. This awareness, thus, contributes to their motivation towards their learning of pragmatic knowledge and eventually to their proficiency in English.”*

The responses of student participants revealed that target language development occupied a large place in the minds of learners. A student participant appreciated the contributions of pragmatic development not only for their general language knowledge but also for their personal development. He used the term “chicken translation” (an expression used to refer to word-to-word translations which end up with wrong and funny meanings) in order to express that pragmatic competence saves their language production from being chicken translations. He put the following statement forward placing emphasis on the development of language skills as well as the increase in confidence as a result of pragmatic competence:

*“I think that the more you develop your pragmatic competence, the better your language skills become in general. With pragmatic competence, your language skill becomes much more than ‘chicken translation’. This increases your confidence to use the language more appropriately.”*

This section presented examples from participant comments as regards the place of pragmatic competence in and its contributions to foreign language education in addition to the challenges that are experienced in the process of pragmatic development. The following section involves some discussion of the findings in relation to the existing literature accompanied with some pedagogical suggestions.

## DISCUSSION

The examination of the data obtained from the student participants and faculty members resulted in some common points that are emphasized in their written statements. One of the most frequent comments was the necessity of pragmatic knowledge and competence for effective and healthy communication. The participants emphasized that possessing only linguistic knowledge is not enough to master the target language; instead, they should improve their abilities to use the target language in various contexts with different people. The need for pragmatic skills to establish and maintain sound interactions is also referred to in relevant literature (Ishihara and Cohen, 2010; Padilla Cruz, 2013). Therefore, as the importance of pragmatic competence is realized, most of the participants expressed that pragmatics should be an integral part of foreign language education. This is mainly because of the recognition that without pragmatic knowledge and abilities, foreign language learning cannot go beyond memorization of some grammar rules and a bunch of vocabulary items which cannot be utilized in the act of communication. Regarding the value of pragmatic instruction, Kasper and Schmidt (1996) maintain that the question should not be whether to include pragmatic knowledge in language education; instead, it should be about what can be done to yield the best results in teaching pragmatics. Either conducted in EFL or in ESL contexts, most of the studies point at the contributory nature of pragmatic instruction in the development of general language proficiency. For example, in a recently conducted study in an EFL setting, Farshi and Baghbani (2015) worked with three groups of students (one group receiving explicit instruction, one group receiving implicit instruction and a control group with no instruction) in order to assess the effectiveness of instruction on oral accuracy. The researchers noted that the oral productions of the treatment groups, though the performances of the explicit group were better than those of the implicit one, were better than those of the control group. Conducted in an ESL context, another study also underlined the benefits of instruction on the development of sociopragmatic skills. Investigating the efficiency of different classroom activities on sociopragmatic development, Holmes and Riddiford (2011) stated that students obtained benefits from classroom instruction and improved their pragmatic skills. The results of the

present study are in line with those of the above-mentioned studies as the participants in this study also maintained that instruction is not only essential but also helpful for the development of pragmatic abilities.

If pragmatic instruction helps the expansion of pragmatic knowledge and skills, then it is of great importance to include pragmatics as an indispensable component in foreign language education. Course and material designers should pay attention to the integration of pragmatic characteristics into language curriculum and materials. Based on the comments of the participants in the present study, it can be concluded that the existing system of foreign language education in Turkey is not designed comprehensively enough to cover the pragmatic aspects of target language. Instead, the available materials generally present linguistic information and thus pragmatic knowledge is displayed in limited amounts. Referring to a similar problem, McConachy and Hata (2013) also maintain that textbooks usually include stereotypical representations of basic pragmatic features but they are not comprehensive enough to equip learners with the necessary knowledge to produce L2 appropriately. Therefore, these observations and studies call for further development and alterations in the design and content of language materials as they are the most commonly used tools in language education.

The existing education system in Turkey, as the data obtained in this study demonstrates, is referred to as one of the main challenges for the development of pragmatic skills. Even if there has been a growing realization of the importance of the communicative aspects of foreign languages and subsequent shifts have started in theory from the focus on grammar to a focus on pragmatic aspects, the necessary adjustments in language pedagogy have not been successfully accomplished yet. The participant comments show that a similar system of language teaching is still adopted and this is what hinders the pragmatic development of learners. Based on classes conducted with a focus on grammar, existing foreign language education inevitably trains learners who are good at linguistic features of the target language and repertoire of vocabulary but who end up with the inability to use the target language for communicative purposes. A similar problem is also posed by Park (2012) referring to the situation in language education in Korea. The researcher maintains that since there is a focus on the development of linguistic and reading skills, pragmatic abilities of learners cannot reach the desired levels. Based on participant comments and careful observation, it can be commented that such a system of foreign language education forces teachers and learners to continue education in a vicious circle. In this vicious circle, students become used to the traditional style of foreign language education in which teacher is the leader who directs the whole process. In this case, learners may develop the idea that they are not

responsible for their own education; instead, the teacher should do everything to teach them. For the teachers, on the other hand, they may think that since the existing system and the examination style do not require a comprehensive development of pragmatic competence, they can keep on conducting their lessons in the way they are used to. They may feel more comfortable in such a system because their field knowledge and teaching abilities are not challenged and they do not have to spend any effort for further development.

Based on these results, some pedagogical implications can be suggested for the improvement of what is going on in real classrooms. One foremost suggestion can be to raise teachers' awareness of the importance of pragmatic competence in foreign language education. As they are the leading figures in the education process, they can affect their students and help them change their perspectives concerning their pragmatic skills. In order to accomplish this, frequent and regular seminars, national and international if possible, can be organized to increase the significance of pragmatic framework in foreign language education. Besides, chances for teachers to interact with their colleagues working in different countries can be created. In this way, teachers all over the world can be aware of different cases and advance their repertoire of teaching strategies. They can feel more confident in their knowledge and abilities to teach and the positive result of the new understanding will naturally be reflected in manners teachers conduct their classes. Seeing their teachers' enthusiasm and competence to help them learn new things, students will also become more motivated and willing to engage themselves more in their foreign language studies.

Regarding what can be done in the classroom setting, the adoption of different techniques and strategies can also be suggested. For example, based on his observation of a participant from his previous studies, Taguchi (2014) concluded that the participant accomplished further development as he utilized some different strategies on his own. The researcher maintained that teachers can equip their learners with the ability to use different learning strategies they can use to develop their knowledge and abilities on their own. From this study, it can be inferred that, with the help of different strategies, learners can continue their foreign language education even outside the classroom and they can become autonomous learners who can direct their own learning. As underlined by Holec (1981), autonomy provides learners with the chance to take charge of their learning process and it gives control over what to learn and how to learn (Benson, 2001). This is particularly important for language learners since they engage themselves in a long journey of language education. In language classes, awareness-raising activities can also be used as suggested by Padilla Cruz (2015). These activities can help learners empower their understanding and perspectives to analyse the target language on their



own. Equipping learners with different learning strategies and increasing their awareness can give learners the feeling that the ultimate purpose of foreign language education is to train them as competent learners and in this way they can begin to be better aware of their responsibilities as autonomous learners.

Taking these points into consideration, the first thing to do to create a fruitful foreign language learning environment in Turkey seems to make radical changes in the existing system for teaching and learning pragmatic competence. Of course some positive steps have been made for this purpose, but most of them have not been put into practice appropriately. What should be kept in mind first is that it is essential to help learners develop their pragmatic competence as the lack of necessary pragmatic skills results in pragmatic failures. The best solution is to place as much emphasis on teaching pragmatics as teaching linguistic aspects of the target language with these points in mind, teachers and material designers can integrate pragmatic features into foreign language curriculum.

## CONCLUSION

The results of this qualitative study revealed that faculty members and students generally consider pragmatic competence as an essential part of general foreign language development. The findings also showed that both parties appreciate its contributory nature on the betterment of L2 proficiency. Both the students and the academics participating in this study emphasized the significance of integrating pragmatics into foreign language education since it raises learners' awareness of the potential areas needing proper attention and it helps learners communicate more effectively using appropriate language. Besides, it increases learners' self-confidence and motivation in the process. The participants also referred to some problematic cases which block the development of pragmatic skills such as the existing education system, the examination style, learning the language in an EFL setting and class size. They noted inadequate teacher and student qualifications as an issue that undeniably prevents development of pragmatic dimension in foreign language education. In general, student participants were observed to put the blame on instructors and the system and instructors put the blame on learners and the system. The system followed in language education seems to be the major source creating challenges in the process with a traditional focus placing little emphasis on pragmatic development. What can be done in the first step to decrease the negative impacts of these challenges is to increase awareness pertaining to the significance of pragmatic competence in foreign language education; and, this can be done with drastic alterations in the existing language education system, which is expected to change the perceptions, attitudes, applications and experiences of instructors and learners automatically.

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