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Developing EFL Learners' Pragmatic Competence through a Blended Learning Model: A Quasi-Experimental Study

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Abstract

In the era of globalization, EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers have nominated to weld EFL instruction and aspects of intercultural competence together. Howbeit, the literature on the topic promulgates that procuring pragmatic competence remains a high-priority quest for EFL learners worldwide. This paper delineates the use of a blended learning model to teach pragmatic competence in an EFL context. This quasi-experimental study sought to probe into the potential of a blended learning model on participants' levels of pragmatic competence. 62 students from a junior high school participated in the study. 32 participants belonged to the control group and 30 participants belonged to the experimental group. The main findings demonstrated that the three-week blended learning model resulted in a statistically significant impact on participants' levels of pragmatic competence; that is, the experimental group participants (M=16.40; SD=2.54) remarkably outperformed the control group participants (M=11.87; SD=3.49) on the posttest. This implies that foreign language teachers are highly encouraged to attach much importance to amalgamating classroom teaching and the use of interactive websites (blended learning) as a way to develop the pragmatic competence of language learners.

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Keywords: Blended learning, ICT, Foreign Language Teaching, Pragmatics, Pragmatic Competence

Introduction

Over the past few decades, the field of language teaching and learning has undergone a paradigm shift at the level of teaching methods and approaches as well as beliefs about what constitutes language competence. This has taken place to align with the world changes brought about by globalization. Besides, recent sophisticated technology has invaded the educational arena, evincing a great potential to upgrade the quality of the teaching and learning of languages. Being able to communicate successfully and effectively in different cultural contexts is deemed to be the ultimate goal for language learners, language course designers, and teachers alike. To this end, researchers have long been investigating the constituents of the competence that allows language learners to attain this objective. After the development of the famous model of communicative competence by Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983), many other advocates for a communicative view of language (Savignon, 1983; Widdowson, 1983) proposed their model accounting for the necessary components of which this competence is grounded. Among these theoreticians is Bachman (1990) who conceives of pragmatic competence as a crucial construct of communicative competence.

In the literature, pragmatic competence can be defined as "the ability to communicate your intended message with all its nuances in any socio-cultural context and to interpret the message of your interlocutor as it was intended" (Fraser, 2010, p. 15). However, teaching this aspect of language in the traditional classroom usually fails because the time allotted to classroom activities is not sufficient for the effective development of pragmatic competence (Jeon & Kaya, 2006). As an alternative solution to the inadequacy of classroom allotted time to thoroughly cover and lead pragmatic activities, ICT tools offer new and powerful platforms for this purpose.

Modern technology has positively influenced various fields. A plethora of theoretical studies have been conducted to investigate the potential benefits it may accrue to its users, and language learners are no exception (Taylor & Todd, 1995; Venkatesh & Davis, 2000; Rogers, 2003). ICT tools have pushed the teaching and learning of foreign languages to the next level. One instance wherein it proves to be powerful is online exchanges, of which educators and practitioners made a virtue of developing intercultural pragmatic competence of learners by raising their cultural awareness (Kramsch and Thorne, 2002; Abrams, 2002).

In his seminal work, Cohen (2016) suggests that using internet tools to teach pragmatics would be very fruitful because today's advancement in terms

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of online platforms and multimedia computer programs enables users to interact with the computer through, for example, interactive software applications or websites. This way of language learning finds an echo in studies on ICT in an area referred to as 'Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) as opposed to Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) in which communication occurs between two or more users through the use of electronic devices (Thomas, Reinders, & Warschauer, 2013). In this regard, interactive websites represent an interesting tool whose usefulness in the area of pragmatics is promisingly high.

With that in mind, the rationale of this study was to investigate the feasibility of a blended learning model as an alternative method to teach pragmatics, thus informing a new way for learners to develop their pragmatic competence. Thereof, the choice of blended learning (classroom teaching followed by the use of an interactive website) as a tool to develop learner's pragmatic competence is justified based on, first, the fact that the nature of pragmatics entails interaction as a necessary condition for learning to take place, and second, there are no time-related restrictions on learners when using ICT tools (interactive website).

2. Review of the Literature

2.1. Defining Pragmatic competence

Teachers and educators, in the field of foreign language teaching and learning, have shifted their focus towards developing learners' communicative competence, of which pragmatic competence is a very crucial component (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Kasper & Roever, 2005). The latter consists of two terms which are pragmatics and competence".

The origin of the term 'pragmatics' dates back to 1938 (Morris, 1938). As an emerging discipline, it was referred to as "the study of the relationship between signs and their interpreters" (Verschueren, 2009, p. 2). Set up as an interdisciplinary branch in linguistics, scholars attempted to attribute definitions to it to make clear its concerns; and the most common definition of pragmatics in the literature is that it is the study of "meaning in use or meaning in context" (Jenney, 1995, p. 1). Hence, meanings and contexts wherein they take place are the central interest of pragmaticists (people who study pragmatics) (Grundy, 2000). Speakers frequently mean much more than their words say. For example, I might say: "It's hot in here!", but what I mean is: "Please, open the window!" (Jenney, 1995).

The second word 'competence' has its roots in the early 1960s when Chomsky alluded "linguistic competence" (Tienson, 1983). In his book Aspect of the Theory of Syntax (1965), Chomsky made a distinction between linguistic competence and linguistic performance. The former indicates the unconscious knowledge of rules governing the language whereas the latter

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denotes the manifestation of this knowledge in the actual speech production. The term competence was further elaborated by other scholars, like Crystal (2008), who defined it as speakers' knowledge of their language, the system of rules which they have mastered so that they can produce and understand an indefinite number of sentences, and to recognize grammatical mistakes and ambiguities (p.92). From the definition given by Chomsky and the one provided by Crystal, it is fairly obvious that competence refers to the ability of the speaker to produce and grasp sentences and utterances, even those that he/she has never heard before. This also involves the speaker's capacity to judge language production (sentences and utterances) based on its grammatical correctness.

Succinctly, pragmatic competence is a significant facet of effective second-language interactions (Bachman, 1990; Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972; Savignon, 1997). Being pragmatically competent means being able to interact successfully with the native speakers of the target language in any socio-cultural context. However, in a context where the target language is used as a second or foreign language, the instruction of pragmatics usually occurs in formal settings such as classrooms employing authentic materials or imitating real-life situations, which equips the learner with the "ability to analyze language in a conscious manner." (as cited in Holmes & Brown, 2007, p 524).

2.2. The Teaching and Learning of Second-Language Pragmatics

The bulk of studies in the past three decades showed that the instruction of the pragmatic aspect of the second language is more powerful than mere exposure to the target language (Bouton 1994a, 1994b; Kasper, 1997, 2001; Bardovi-Harlig,2001; Rose, 2005; Félix-Brasdefer, 2006; Jeon & Kaya,2006; AlcónSoler, 2008; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). However, "given the complexities of pragmatics that involves the connections among forms, functions, and contexts, one would naturally wonder whether pragmatic competence is indeed teachable" (Taguchi, 2013).

Earlier studies focused on the nature of learning, that is, whether pragmatic learning is a cognitive or a socio-cognitive process (Zsuzsanna Ittzes, 2014). Some pragmaticists perceived pragmatic learning as a cognitive and individual activity focusing on the impact of raising learners' consciousness, noticing, and output. (Jeon & Kaya, 2006). Other pragmaticists (Ohta, 2005; Atkinson, Churchill, Nishino, & Okada, 2007; Alcon Soler, 2008; LoCastro, 2011) viewed pragmatic learning as a socio-cognitive activity. Within this framework, learning takes place when learners interact with each other or with other things like ICT tools. Developing analytic skills as part of pragmatic learning has also received wide attention and interest on the part of researchers and educators viewing these skills as

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necessary for learners to "analyze language and strategies for learning and using speech act" (Zsuzsanna Ittzes, 2014, p. 57). In the same line of thought, Cohen (2005) maintains that because native speakers carry out different speech acts (e.g., requesting) on varying occasions even for the same pragmatic goal, developing analytic skills would be much better than learning formulaic and one-size-fits-all utterances.

Interestingly, scholars went further and put forward theories and models accounting for the acquisition of pragmatic competence. Noticing hypothesis by Schmidt (1993, 1995, 2010) asserting that if learning to take place, instruction must make the pragmatic features noticeable to students. With the same purpose as the previous model, Sharwood-Smith (1993), in his Consciousness Raising Model (later renamed Input enhancement), reasons that input converts to intake when the former becomes salient to the learner. In his cognitively-motivated assumption, Output hypothesis, Swain (1985, 1995, 1997, 1998, 2005) posits that the learner's output is considered as both the ultimate goal and aiding device to acquisition. In her cognitively oriented model, the Two-Dimensional Model of second-language proficiency development, Bialystok (1993) argues that the learning of L1 pragmatic competence by children is distinct from adults learning a second language. Children are usually involved in the process of analysis as their main task of acquiring pragmatic competence, whereas adults are meant to get involved in the process of developing the "control strategies to attend to the intended interpretations in contexts and to select the forms from the range of possibilities that satisfy the social and contextual needs of the communicative situation" (Norouzian & Esmali, 2016 (p. 54).

2.3. The Role of ICT in the Teaching and Learning of Pragmatics in EFL Context

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has changed the face of education worldwide. Because of the fact that today's students are oftentimes labeled as "digital natives", people born and brought up during the era of digital technology, who are heavy ICT tools users in all their walks of life, technological advancement has taken place faster and revolutionary than could have been imagined a few decades ago (facer et al. 2003). The enormous number of studies that have been conducted and the books that have been published in this regard show critical appraisal of the merits of using the internet as a tool for instructional offerings in the area of language learning based on fostering student autonomy (Cohen and Ishihara, 2005). Such innovative technologies offer solutions, especially to many of the challenges regarding second-language pragmatic learning (Taguchi & Sykes, 2013).

Technology has become the perfect complement to the teaching and learning of languages and paved the way for teachers to facilitate meaningful

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learning, i.e., enabling learners to build deep and interlinked knowledge that is applicable in the real world (Ertmer, 2010; Lai, 2008; Law, 2008; Thomas & Knezek, 2008). For so doing, especially in the area of pragmatics, researchers attempted to develop new ways in the digital environment to assist teachers in the instruction of the pragmatic aspect of language and also aid language learners in successfully improving their pragmatic competence. One such way is to "employ web-based strategy instruction: to enhance learners' development and use of language learner strategies, to provide guidance in complex pragmatic language use that is difficult to "pick up," and to facilitate learning through web-based materials" (Cohen, 2016). According to Jeon & Kaya (2006), the teaching of pragmatics in the classroom usually does not reach its ultimate goal because the time allotted to pragmatics-related activities is most of the time not sufficient to develop students' pragmatic competence. "One of the best qualities of web-based learning is that technology allows learners to work independently with their initiative and proceed at their own pace using as much or as little electronic resources as they need" (Cohen and Ishihara, 2005).

Given the fact that pragmatics learning, by its very nature, necessitates interaction between interlocutors in an organized context, "contemporary multimedia technologies are becoming more interactive and responsive to learners" (Thomas, Reinders, and Warschauer, 2013). In effect, the websites of today are so sophisticated that they enable users to interact with the machine through digitally designed interactive activities, hence interactive websites. In addition, in such an environment, the teacher can diversify pragmatic activities according to the learning styles of the students. Students usually come to the classroom with varying learning styles which represents a challenge to the teacher, especially when the class is highly heterogeneous in this regard. At best, the teacher can cater only to specific students' learning styles to the exclusion of others because of time constraints as well as the number of students (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). As a viable alternative, the instructor can resort to the use of technology either as a complementary tool to the usual classroom teaching or as a superseding tool that the learners can use on their own to foster their autonomy (Gonzalez & Louis, 2008).

2.4. Blended Learning

In the literature, the term blended learning originated in the business world in connection with corporate training (Sharma and Barrett, 2007). After a while, it was employed in higher education (MacDonald, 2006) and afterward it emerged in language teaching and learning. The term became a buzzword in ELT coinciding with the publication of Sharma and Barrett's book Blended Learning in 2007. With reference to ELT blends, Sharma (2007) suggests that "for blended learning to be effective the two-component parts

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should be integrated with the technology complementing and not replacing the efforts of the teacher".

To achieve a 'principled approach to blended learning Sharma and Barrett (2007, p. 13 –14) suggest four guiding principles. Firstly, they advise you to 'separate the role of the teacher and the role of technology as the roles are not interchangeable, but they are complementary. Secondly, 'teach in a principled way' using means that best suit the learners' needs, i.e., pedagogically driven. Thirdly, 'use technology to complement and enhance F2F teaching' means that the two modes should complement each other, which seems to suggest that face-to-face is exclusively the lead mode. Lastly, 'It's not so much the program, more what you do with it' (Jones, 1986). To illustrate this final statement three examples of how to use a CD-ROM are given, from an individual using it alone at home, to follow up practice in self-study or at home after a class, to actually using it in class as part of a presentation.

In turn, Dudeney and Hockly (2007, p. 138–139) refer to a blended learning course where 75 percent is delivered online and 25 percent face-to-face in their list of three possible course designs for online learning in language learning environments. A 100 percent online language learning course, where the course is not unlike a coursebook online. A blended language learning course, where 75 percent is delivered online and 25 percent face-to-face. A face-to-face language learning course with additional online materials, where online tools are used to support and extend face-to-face lessons.

2.5. The Theoretical Framework

To gain in-depth insights into the research problem being investigated, two theories serve as the theoretical framework of this study. First, Speech act theory was adopted since it is regarded as the backbone of pragmatics, like Searle, Kiefer, and Bierwisch (1980) assert, "Speech act theory, together with the study of indexical expressions, make up most, or perhaps all, of the domain of pragmatics". This conclusion was drawn by the aforementioned scholars as a reaction to Stalnaker's (1972) assumption that there is an inextricable connection between speech acts and pragmatics: "Pragmatics is the study of linguistic acts and the contexts in which they are performed". Hence, relying on speech acts as the key measure for pragmatic competence of language learners is highly endorsed in the literature. Second, politeness theory, developed by Brown and Levinson (1987), was embraced in the study for the reason that there is a logical link between requesting and politeness. By the same token, Leech (1983) confirms that the directive group into which the speech act of requesting falls is pre-eminently associated with 'negative politenesses'. Within the same theory, Brown and Levinson (1987) propose three facets of interpersonal interactions that are universally linked to

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politeness:1) the social distance between the interlocutors, 2) the degree of imposition of the act to be carried out, 3) the power relationship between the interlocutors. Thereof, this quasi-experimental study purported to investigate whether the blended learning model was undertaken can develop the pragmatic competence of EFL language learners.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Hypotheses

Following an extensive survey of the literature on ICT and pragmatic competence, as well as each construct in isolation (Snow & Goldfield, 1983; Elley, 1989; Strickland & Taylor, 1989; Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Klesius & Griffith, 1996; Lawless & Pellegrino, 2007; Lai, 2008; Law, 2008; Thomas & Knezek, 2008; Ertmer, 2010; Thomas, Reinders, and Warschauer, 2013; Cohen, 2016, to mention but a few). The researchers hypothesized that blended learning can play the same powerful and effective role in the field of language teaching and learning if applied in the right way. Therefore, two research hypotheses stem from the relevant literature:

1) Blended learning (face-to-face and interactive websites) does help EFL learners develop their pragmatic competence.
2) Students improve their production, perception, and comprehension of speech act with varying degrees of competence (via the Blended Learning).

3.2. Research Questions

This study sought to address the following questions:

1) Does the use of blended learning (face-to-face and an interactive website) help EFL learners develop their pragmatic competence?
2) Are the students able to perceive, comprehend, and carry out the speech act under study appropriately after subsequent to the use of the blended learning model?

3.3. Population and Sampling

This study opted for a quasi-experimental design. The participants of the experiment belonged to a junior high school in Ifrane Directorate, Morocco. The participants were third-year students. They were beginners, and their first language was Moroccan Arabic and the English language as their second foreign language. The study utilized non-random assignments to recruit two in-tact classes of the same level. The first sample or class (the experimental group) contained 30 students and the second sample or class encompassed 32 students. Thus, both samples had approximately the same characteristics as far as language proficiency, gender, race, and socioeconomic situation are concerned. Hence, a comparison between these two samples was

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conducted. The researchers designated these students to constitute the population of the study for the reason that the students were not previously introduced to the speech act 'making the request' under study.

3.4. Data Collection Procedures

The researcher embarked upon collecting data immediately after the website was fully designed and the pragmatics contents were befittingly included drawing upon relevant literature on the speech act of request and refined by virtue of a native speaker's guidance. As far as the treatment for this study is concerned, it was the teaching of the speech act of requests in the classroom followed by students' exposure to interactive website contents at home (the website contained pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic activities needed for making requests in varying contexts).

Concerning the pretest for the experimental group, it was administered to 30 students according to the number of students in the class. The time allotted to the test was one hour, which is an adequate amount of time. As for the pretest for the control group, it was given out to 32 students. The test was allotted the same amount of time as that of the experimental group. Before choosing the two classes from among six classes in middle school, the researchers made sure that the language level of the students do not vary to a great degree, which means that the classes chosen were almost homogeneous.

After having the pretest sheets of paper collected, the researchers gave the experimental group students the treatment. Whereas the experimental group was taught the speech act of request through both classroom teaching and exposure to the interactive website contents, the control group was taught the same lesson but only in the classroom. After three weeks, the experimental group and control group sat for the posttest within a time frame of one hour, similar to the pretest.

3.5. Research Instruments and Scoring Criteria

This study used multiple-choice (MC) and discourse completion tests (DCT) as the main data collection methods. The former was adopted to elicit the students' perception and comprehension of different forms of requests in varying contexts, while the latter was utilized to trigger their responses (written output) in form of requests vis-à-vis brief situational descriptions together with a short dialogue with an empty slot.

Once the pretest-posttest sheets of paper were collected from the experimental and control groups, the correction on the part of the researcher had to take place. As mentioned earlier, the test consists of three parts, each occupying an entire page: 1) perception, 2) comprehension, and 3) production. In order that all the pieces of paper to be corrected in a standardized way, the researcher established the criteria for each part of the test. It is important to

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note that the production part of the pretest-posttest was corrected in accordance with what was judged to be correct and appropriate in the literature, and, equally important, through the guidance of a native speaker of English. The first pragmatic dimension that the test starts with is perception. This latter is measured by providing the subjects with five sets of multiple choices and asking them to identify the most polite request strategy. Since all the five sets of multiple choices are gauging the extent to which the subjects can identify the most polite request strategy, each correct answer in each set is scored 1. In the aggregate, all answers being correct means the subject will receive 5/20 for this part of the test. See table 2.1 for more details.

Table 3.1. Perception scoring.

Questions	Question type	Question name	Score out of 20	Total
Q1	MC	Politeness	1/20	5/20
Q2	MC	Politeness	1/20	
Q3	MC	Politeness	1/20	
Q4	MC	Politeness	1/20	
Q5	MC	Politeness	1/20	

MC = multiple choice

The second dimension being measured is comprehension. This part is organized in such a way that the subjects are given five multiple-choice situations along with their description and asked to identify the appropriate request strategy for each. 1 score is assigned to each correct answer out of a total of 20, that is, the whole part takes 5 scores out of 20. To assess the subject's grasp of the use of various request strategies in different socio-cultural contexts, situations including the variables discussed earlier have been included. See figure table 2.2 for more information.

Table 2.3. Comprehension scoring.

Situations	Question type	Question name	Score out of 20	Total
S1	MC	PR	1/20	5/20
S2	MC	SD	1/20	
S3	MC	DI	1/20	
S4	MC	CIR	1/20	
S5	MC	NCIR	1/20	

PR = power relationship, SD = social distance, DI = degree of imposition, CIR = conventionally indirect requests, NCIR = non-conventionally indirect requests.

Last but not least, the production ability is assessed as the last dimension. Because of the fact that it adopts a different data collection method, which is discourse completion entailing the capacity to fill in blanks with proper request strategies, it is deemed to be the most difficult aspect of pragmatic competence on the part of the test-takers, and, hence, given the

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largest score in the whole test. Each question is scored 2 out of 20, and the entire part accounts for 10 out of 20 in total. It is worth mentioning that the first and the second situation measure the production ability of the same strategy, which is CIR, because of its wide use in everyday conversations. See figure 2.3 to know the ins and outs of this part of the test. Lastly, the subjects, of course, are not given which strategy to employ in what context since it is part of the examination.

Table 3.4. Production scoring.

Situations	Question type	Question name	Score out of 20	Total
S1	DC	CIR	2/20	10/20
S2	DC	CIR	2/20	
S3	DC	PR	2/20	
S4	DC	DI	2/20	
S5	DC	SD	2/20	

3.8. Findings

3.8.1. The Results of the Control Group's Pre- and Posttests Data Analysis

As has been mentioned earlier, the pretest, which measures three sub-competencies (perception, comprehension, and production), was administered to the students of the control group 21 days before they sat for the posttest. Again, perception and comprehension are scored out of 5, whereas the production is scored out of 10 which gives a total score of 20 out of 20. The control group comprised 32 students with approximately the same characteristics. To gain a comprehensive and clear picture of the students' performance before and after being taught the speech act of request in the classroom, see table 3.2.

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Outcome	Pretest (n=32)		Posttest (n=32)		95% CI for Mean Difference	Sig. (2-tailed	t	df
	M	SD	M	SD				
Perception	2.28	1.44	3.18	1.17	0.30, 1.50	0.004	3.06	31
Comprehension	2.03	1.33	3.37	0.75	0.80, 1.88	0.001	5.08	31
Production	1.68	2.38	5.31	3.07	2.33, 4.91	0.001	5.74	31
Total score	6.00	3.86	11.87	3.49	4.25, 7.49	0.001	7.38	31

* $p < .05$

Table 3.2. Control Group's Descriptive Statistics and Paired Samples T-Test Results for Perception, Comprehension, Production, and Total Score

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare the control group's pre-and post-test total scores. There was a significant difference in the total scores for pretest (M=6.00, SD=3.86) and posttest (M=11.87, SD=3.49); t(31)=7.38, p = 0.001. These results indicated that the students' level of pragmatics increased after being taught (the speech act of request) through the blended learning model. Regarding the posttest, there is an improvement in their pragmatic level (see figure 3.2). However, it is clear from the mean of both pre-and posttest that their improvement was not so high, that is, the given mean is not what is expected from the students to allow them to carry out the speech act of request effectively appropriately. Besides, the standard deviation shows that the scores are dispersed and not all of them revolve nearly around the mean

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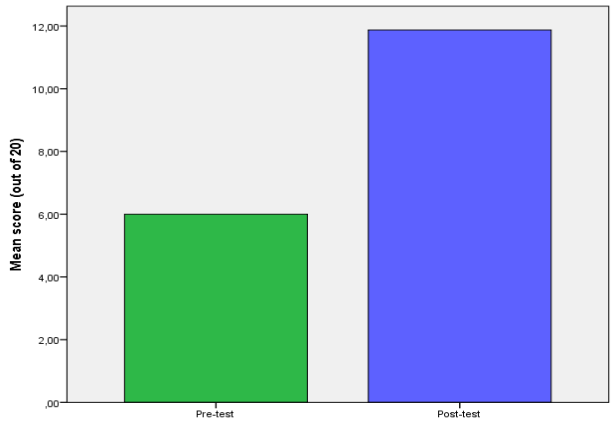

Figure 3.2. Control Group's Mean Score before and after the Intervention

Going a little deeper, the components that constitute the pre-and post-tests were also analyzed separately through a paired-samples t-test. For perception, there was a significant difference in the scores for pretest (M=2.28, SD=1.44) and posttest (M=3.18, SD=1.17); t(31)=3.06, p = 0.004. These results suggest that the student's level of perception of politeness in requesting does increase after being taught (the speech act of request) in the classroom. Specifically, the student's competence in perceiving politeness in requests increases when taught in the classroom. Concerning comprehension, there was a significant difference in the scores for pretest (M=2.03, SD=1.33) and posttest (M=3.37, SD=0.75); t(31)=5.08, p = 0.001. These results suggest that the student's level of comprehension of different strategies in requesting does increase after being taught (the speech act of request) through the traditional classroom. Regarding production, there was a significant difference in the scores for pretest (M=1.68, SD=2.38) and posttest (M=5.31, SD=3.07); t(31)=5.74, p = 0.001. To sum it all up, it is obvious that the student's level in the three sub-competencies does increase, however, such level does not live up to the expectation i.e. excelling in pragmatics. (figure 3.3 shows the degree of improvement in the three sub-competencies in pre-and post-test).

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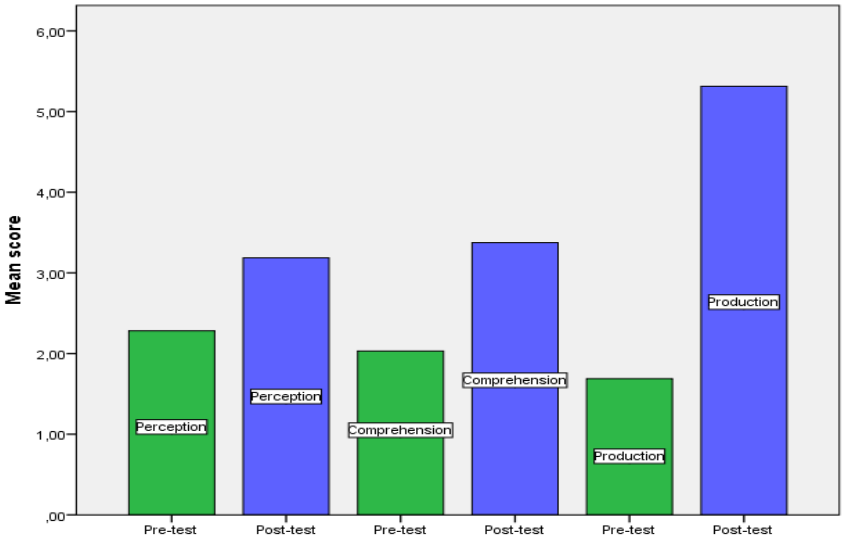

Figure 3.3. Control Group's Mean Score for the Three Sub-Competencies before and after the intervention

3.8.2. The Results of the Experimental Group's Pre- and Posttests Data Analysis

Perception and comprehension are scored out of 5, while the production is scored out of 10. This gives a total score of 20 out of 20. The control group comprises 30 students with approximately the same characteristics. To have a complete idea about the students' performance before and after being taught the speech act of request through the blended learning model, see table 3.3.

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Outcome	Pretest (n=32)		Posttest (n=32)		95% CI for Mean Difference	Sig. (2-tailed	t	df
	M	SD	M	SD				
Perception	2.26	1.22	4.13	0.50	0.42, 1.31	0.001	3.97	29
Comprehension	2.66	1.02	4.73	0.44	1.63, 2.49	0.001	9.90	29
Production	1.33	2.05	7.53	2.44	5.23, 7.16	0.001	13.10	29
Total score	7.26	2.99	16.40	2.54	8.10, 10.16	0.001	18.10	29

* $p < .05$

Table 3.3. Experimental Group's Descriptive Statistics and Paired Samples T-Test Results for Perception, Comprehension, Production, and Total Score

There was a significant difference in the total scores of the pretest (M=7.26, SD=2.99) and posttest (M=16.40, SD=2.54); t (29) =18.10, p = 0.001. These results suggested that the students' level in pragmatics did greatly increase after being taught (the speech act of request) through blended learning. Specifically, the results indicated that when students were taught pragmatics through interactive websites, their pragmatic competence remarkably developed. To say it in other words, the post-test demonstrates a very higher improvement in their pragmatic level (see figure 3.4). From this, one can say that teaching the speech act of request through the interactive website can increase the students' level tremendously. The standard deviation shows that the scores do not differ a lot from the mean value for the group, that is, the scores are close to the mean. Simply put, the majority of students get higher scores in the posttest which revolves around 16. This, in turn, signifies that students are better able to produce the speech act of request appropriately and effectively.

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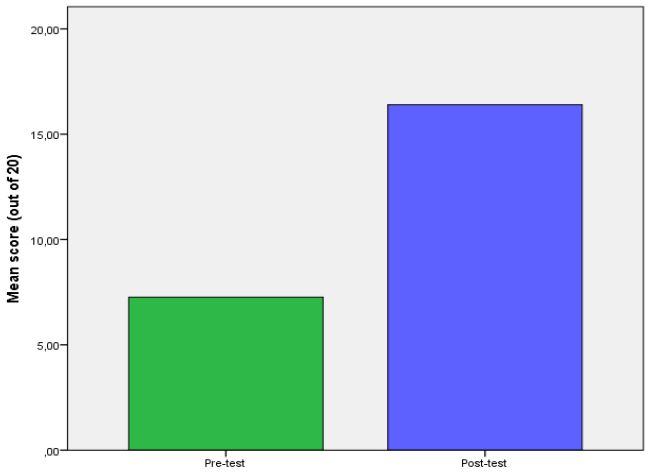

Figure 3.4. Experimental Group's Mean Score before and after the Intervention

Perception, comprehension, and perception were all analyzed separately utilizing a paired-samples t-test. As for perception, there was a significant difference in the scores for pretest (M=3.26, SD=1.22) and posttest (M=4.13, SD=0.50); t(29)=3.97, p = 0.001. The results suggested that the students' level of perception of politeness in requesting did increase after being taught (the speech act of request) through the interactive website. Specifically, the student's competence in perceiving politeness in requests greatly increased when taught online. Concerning comprehension, there was a significant difference in the scores for pretest (M=2.26, SD=1.02) and posttest (M=4.73, SD=0.44); t(29)=9.90, p = 0.001. The results demonstrated that the student's level of comprehension of different strategies in requesting greatly increases after being taught (the speech act of request) through the interactive website. Regarding production, there was a significant difference in the scores for pretest (M=1.33, SD=2.05) and posttest (M=7.53, SD=2.44); t(29)=13.10, p = 0.001. All in all, the student's level in the three sub-competencies did highly increase, which means the blended learning program had the potential of developing students' pragmatic competence (Figure 3.5 demonstrates the degree of improvement in the three sub-competencies in pre-and post-test).

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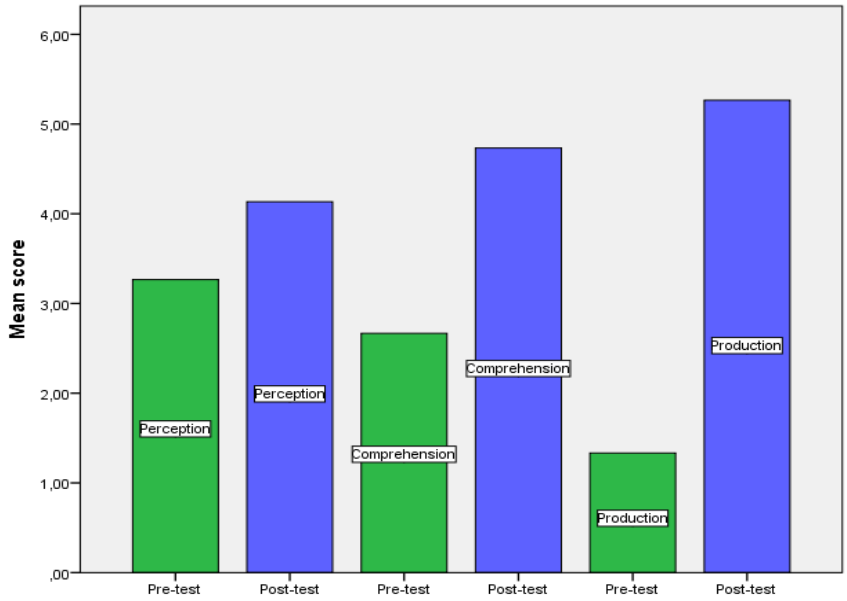

Figure 3.5. Experimental Group's Mean Score for the Three Sub-Competencies before and after the Intervention

3.8.3. The Results of the Control Group versus the Experimental Group's Posttests Data Analysis

To compare the control and experimental group on the outcome of the post-test, which is crucial to answering the second research question, an independent samples t-test was utilized. Figure3.6. serves as a piece of evidence.

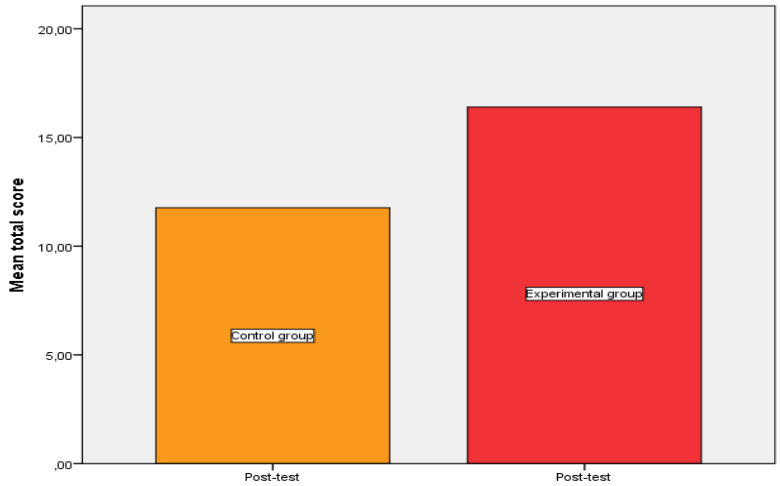

Figure 3.6. Control Group versus Experimental Group on the Mean Total Score Results

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Otherwise stated, the independent samples t-test, which was conducted to show which group scored higher in the posttest including perception, comprehension, and production (see figure 3.6), indicated that students who belonged to the experimental group got greater scores than the control group. This implies that teaching pragmatics, namely the speech act of request, through blended learning led to attaining a higher level in pragmatics compared to the teaching of the same content in only face-to-face instruction. Thereof, the blended learning model adopted, face-to-face instruction, and an interactive website, are viable educational tools that can develop EFL learners' pragmatic competence remarkably.

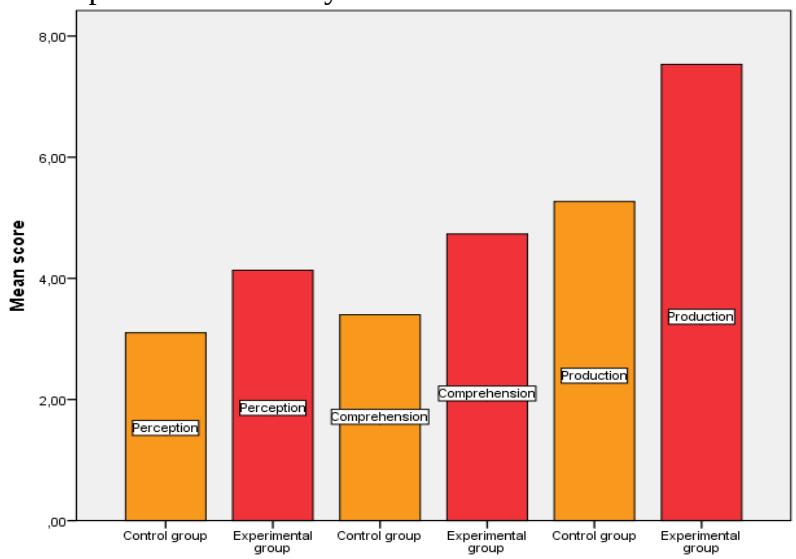

Figure 3.7. Control group versus experimental group on the mean score results of the three sub-competencies

From figure 3.7, it is clear that, at all levels, the students in the experimental group are shown to outperform the students in the control group. Thus, interactive websites together with classroom teaching, indeed, have great potential in improving EFL learners' pragmatic competence.

Discussion

In this section, the researchers attempted to confirm or refute the hypotheses generated and provide answers to the two research questions:

1) Does the use of the blended learning model help EFL learners develop their pragmatic competence?
2) Are the students able to perceive, comprehend, and carry out the speech act under study appropriately after utilizing the blended learning model?

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Trying to answer these questions, links, and connections will also be established with the previous studies as far as pragmatic competence and ICT are concerned. As noted earlier, the control group embraces 32 and the experimental group includes 30 students. To answer the above research question and gain deeper insights, it is of crucial significance to mention the mean scores (obtained in the posttests) for each group including each sub-competence separately. The first component to compare is perception. The control group‘s mean score of 3.18 with a standard deviation of 1.17 and the experimental group’s mean score of 4.13 with a standard deviation of 0.50 indicates that students in the experimental group outperformed students in the control group. From the p-value, which is 0.001, the difference between the mean scores of both groups is significant.

The second constituent to compare is comprehension. The control group’s mean score of 3.37 with a standard deviation of 0.75 and the experimental group’s mean score of 4.73 with a standard deviation of 0.44 indicates that students in the experimental group outperformed students in the control group. From the p-value, which is 0.001, the difference between the mean scores of both groups is significant.

The third element to compare is production. The control group’s mean score of 5.31 with a standard deviation of 3.07 and the experimental group’s mean score of 7.53 with a standard deviation of 2.44 indicates that students in the experimental group outperformed students in the control group. From the p-value, 0.003 is lower than 0.05, the difference between the mean scores of both groups is significant.

Last but not least, the mean total score is decisive in telling. The control group’s mean total score of 11.87 with a standard deviation of 3.49 and the experimental group’s mean score of 16.40 with a standard deviation of 2.54 indicates that the students in the experimental group outperformed the students in the control group. Based on the p-value, which is 0.001, the difference between the mean scores of both groups is significant. Thereof, the findings of the study are aligned with Dewar and Whittington (2004).

One key finding the recent study put forward is that the blended learning approach for teaching pragmatics is more beneficial to the learners in contrast to a fully online approach or a traditional form of instruction. With regard to previous studies (Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003; Walker, 2005), one major importance is participants’ attitudes towards the blended versus online approach, as seen above. In the context of foreign education, Dziuban et al. (2004, p. 5) found that their blended learning courses had “the potential to increase student learning outcomes while lowering attrition rates in comparison with equivalent fully online courses” and that blended learning results in “in success and attrition rates [were] comparable to the face-to-face modality for all ethnicities.” A study conducted by Harker and Koutsantoni

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(2005, p. 197) also found that "the blended learning model was much more effective in student retention" than the distance learning mode.

Furthermore, developing a blend is an iterative process according to Beetham and Sharpe (2007, p. 8) who believe that "effective designs will evolve only through cycles of practice, evaluation, and reflection". Rossett et al. (2003) stress that "there's no cookbook for blends" and state, with reference to the business world, that "the topic cries out for empirical research". In relation to ELT, Neumeier (2005, p. 176) supports this statement and emphasizes that "further research is needed in order to enhance the quality of blended learning environments". Westbrook (2008, p. 14) concurs, as to his mind most of the research on blended learning has been carried out in the tertiary sector and therefore there is a "huge deficit in terms of research on using blended learning by individuals or small language schools".

Implications

There are four implications of the current quasi-experimental study for foreign language program designers and teachers. First, similar to the results of previous research, the findings of the current study provided further evidence for the promising potential of the teaching of pragmatic competence via blended learning models (face-to-face instruction coupled with an online interactive website). The quasi-experimental intervention in the current study manifested a statistically significant improvement in EFL learners' pragmatic competence. Second, online EFL content designers and teachers need to pay close attention to the changes in students' learning styles, interests, and motivation in EFL instruction seeing they are heavy users of digital technology. The use of ICT tools along with face-to-face forms of instruction in the teaching pragmatics, as shown, should be part and parcel of day-in-day-out EFL instruction. Third, indeed, the integration of technology in the teaching of different competencies in the language requires training on the part of the teacher. Fourth, given the fact that the world now has become a small village in which people from different cultural backgrounds come into contact, it is incumbent upon school qualified personnel in general and teachers, in particular, to capitalize on blended learning models so that students can effectively employ such devices in learning more about cross-cultural communication as a way to develop their intercultural communicative competence. In a nutshell, the current study advocating the potential of blended learning models stressed that interactive websites along with face-to-face teaching should be adopted as a new way to develop students pragmatic competence. It must be synergized into the language learning instruction with the support of surrounding educational systems.

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Limitations

This study had some limitations that were beyond the researchers' control and the scope of the agency. The limitations concern the flaws in the quasi-experimental research design, the sampling method, and the testing effects. The sample in the current study required in-tact classes. Thus, random sampling is not feasible at all (foreign language education & social sciences). Convenience sampling is used in this study for two main reasons. First, it is not feasible to randomly assign students to control and experimental groups within the same classroom, because it would be unethical and impractical to ask the experimental group not to attend the class during the period of the treatment. There is likely to be a degree of self-selection bias. This can either lead to the sample not being representative of the population being studied or exaggerating some particular findings from the study. Second, experts in research methodology and statistics unanimously agree on the fact that quasi-experiment is more powerful in some cases in social sciences, as opposed to true experiment which is more practical in exact sciences. There may be influenced by their previous responses to the same questions (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993). The current study utilized the pre-post, quasi-experimental design to test the participants twice on the same sets of instruments; thus the testing effects might be unavoidable.

Recommendations for Future Research

With reference to the limitations discussed previously, three suggestions are put forward for future research on pragmatic competence teaching via blended learning models. First, future-oriented research might address the research inherent design flaws of the current study (Quasi-Designs) by opting for a different design. Second, future researchers are invited to investigate the effects of blended learning models on novel speech acts (different functions), of blended learning models on the teaching of various language functions and speech acts. Finally, regarding the negative impact of self-administered surveys (discussed in the literature), on the data quality, it is recommended for future researchers to consider other forms.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the potential of a blended learning model to enhance learners' pragmatic competence. This study adds to the existing pool of knowledge in the use of ICT in education in general and language teaching in particular (Snow & Goldfield, 1983; Elley, 1989; Strickland & Taylor, 1989; Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Klesius & Griffith, 1996; Lawless & Pellegrino, 2007; Lai, 2008; Law, 2008; Thomas & Knezek, 2008; Ertmer, 2010; Thomas, Reinders, and Warschauer, 2013; Cohen, 2016). The study was conducted through a quasi-experimental design using a pre-test

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and a post-test, starting from the more obvious and general knowledge to be acquired to the more specific and detailed information. The data gathered from the tests were compared and analyzed by certain statistical procedures to test the hypotheses and answer the two research questions. Hypothesis testing was done by an assorted set of statistical tools, providing clear evidence and establishing reliable proof for supporting the hypotheses which assumed that teaching EFL learners' pragmatic competence via a blended learning model (face to face instruction coupled with an online interactive) would increase their pragmatic competence. The current study informs a new way of teaching pragmatics to EFL learners. EFL teachers are highly encouraged to amalgamate face-to-face learning with online interactive activities e.g., websites or software, as shown in the findings. The more interaction and communication the learners have, the better their pragmatic competence, on the grounds that pragmatics is primarily interactive in nature.

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