

FACTORS IN THE FORMATION OF COGNITIVE-PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE IN THE PROFESSIONAL TRAINING OF ENGLISH TEACHERS

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Abstract: This article examines the key factors involved in the formation of cognitive-pragmatic competence in the professional training of English language teachers. Drawing on theoretical frameworks in cognitive pragmatics, applied linguistics, and language teacher education, the study identifies five principal factors – inferential ability and metalinguistic awareness, sociocultural exposure, explicit pragmatic instruction, reflective practice, and institutional environment – and analyzes their role in shaping pragmatic development. The findings indicate that cognitive-pragmatic competence does not emerge incidentally through language proficiency alone but requires deliberate instructional intervention and supportive professional conditions. The article concludes that integrating pragmatic competence development as an explicit goal within teacher education programs is essential for preparing English teachers capable of meeting the communicative demands of contemporary educational contexts.

Keywords: cognitive-pragmatic competence, English teacher training, pragmatic awareness, reflective practice.

Introduction

The growing complexity of professional communication in modern educational settings has brought renewed attention to what it truly means for an English language teacher to be communicatively competent. Grammatical accuracy and methodological proficiency, while foundational, no longer suffice as benchmarks of teacher readiness in contexts where language functions as a dynamic, socially embedded practice. Among the competencies that have gained increasing theoretical significance is cognitive-pragmatic competence – the capacity to interpret and produce language in ways that are not only linguistically well-formed but contextually appropriate, inferentially sound, and interactionally effective.

This competence occupies a particularly critical position in the professional profile of English teachers. Unlike other subject specialists, language teachers are simultaneously users and models of the target language; their pragmatic choices in the classroom carry both communicative and pedagogical weight. Yet teacher education programs have historically devoted far greater attention to syntactic knowledge and instructional technique than to the development of this deeper communicative dimension, leaving a significant gap between theoretical ideals and practical preparation.

The theoretical landscape surrounding pragmatic competence has evolved considerably over recent decades. Scholars working within cognitive pragmatics have moved beyond earlier accounts of language use to explore how mental processes – inference, relevance assessment, and contextual mapping – underpin communicative meaning-making (Sperber & Wilson, 1986; Kecskes, 2014). Applied to teacher education, these insights raise important questions: through what processes does pragmatic awareness develop in professional contexts, and what conditions are most conducive to its formation? It is against this background that the present article examines the principal factors involved in the formation of cognitive-pragmatic competence within the professional training of English teachers.

Literature Review

The concept of pragmatic competence was first systematically articulated by Chomsky's distinction between linguistic competence and performance, later expanded by Hymes, who argued that communicative competence necessarily includes knowledge of when, where, and to whom language is appropriately used. This foundational insight laid the groundwork for subsequent theoretical elaborations that brought cognitive dimensions into the picture. A significant theoretical advance came with Relevance Theory, proposed by Sperber and Wilson, which situated pragmatic interpretation within cognitive processes rather than social convention alone. According to this framework, utterance comprehension involves inferential mechanisms guided by the principle of relevance – the assumption that any communicative act carries the greatest possible effect for the least cognitive effort. This cognitive reorientation proved particularly productive for understanding how teachers process and produce contextually appropriate language in real-time classroom interaction.

Building on these foundations, Kecskes introduced the concept of socio-cognitive pragmatics, emphasizing that pragmatic competence emerges from the interaction between individual cognitive states and shared sociocultural knowledge. For English teacher training, this perspective is especially relevant: teacher's pragmatic judgments are shaped not only by personal cognitive development but by the cultural and institutional contexts in which professional practice unfolds. Within applied linguistics, Bardovi-Harlig demonstrated that even advanced language learners – including prospective teachers – frequently exhibit pragmatic underdevelopment relative to their grammatical proficiency, a phenomenon she termed the "*pragmatic-grammatical gap*". This finding has direct implications for curriculum design in teacher education, suggesting that pragmatic competence requires explicit instructional attention rather than incidental acquisition.

The role of reflective practice in developing teacher pragmatic awareness has been emphasized by Johnson and Golombek, who argued that structured reflection on communicative experience enables teachers to move from implicit intuition to principled pragmatic judgment. Similarly, Ishihara and Cohen proposed a pedagogical framework specifically targeting pragmatic instruction in language teacher preparation, identifying awareness-raising, practice, and feedback as essential components of competence formation. Institutional and sociocultural factors have also been foregrounded in recent scholarship.

Borg established that teacher cognition – including pragmatic beliefs and dispositions – is profoundly shaped by prior language learning experience, training context, and ongoing professional environment. This finding underscores that cognitive-pragmatic competence is not a fixed trait but a developmentally sensitive capacity, responsive to the conditions of professional formation.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in a systematic review of theoretical and empirical literature pertaining to pragmatic competence development in language teacher education. Data were drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, monographs, and scholarly frameworks within the fields of cognitive pragmatics, applied linguistics, and teacher cognition. The analytical approach is interpretive in nature, aiming to identify, compare, and synthesize existing theoretical positions and empirical findings in order to construct a coherent account of the factors shaping cognitive-pragmatic competence during professional teacher training. This methodology was deemed appropriate given that the primary objective of the study is theoretical elaboration rather than the generation of new empirical data.

Results And Discussion

Cognitive factors: Inferential ability and metalinguistic awareness

A teacher's capacity for pragmatic inference – deriving meaning beyond the literal content of an utterance – is among the most significant internal factors shaping cognitive-pragmatic competence. In classroom settings, this manifests concretely: when a student says *"This exercise is really long"*, an inferentially competent teacher recognizes this not merely as an observation but potentially as an indirect complaint or a request for modification. Metalinguistic awareness complements this capacity by enabling teachers to reflect consciously on communicative choices. This can be cultivated through stimulated recall tasks, in which teachers review recordings of their own lessons and articulate the reasoning behind specific pragmatic decisions, demonstrating measurably greater sensitivity to pragmatic nuance over time.

Sociocultural exposure and intercultural experience

Pragmatic competence is inseparable from sociocultural knowledge, as speakers rely on culturally shared assumptions to construct and interpret meaning. Teachers with significant intercultural experience demonstrate more flexible and contextually sensitive communicative behavior. A practical example concerns speech act performance: non-native English-speaking teachers frequently produce refusals that are grammatically correct yet pragmatically inappropriate – for instance, *"That idea is not good"* where a pragmatically fluent speaker would use "I'm not sure that would work in our context." Incorporating cross-cultural pragmatic comparison tasks and exposure to authentic corpora such as MICASE directly addresses this developmental gap.

Explicit pragmatic instruction

Pragmatic competence does not develop reliably through language exposure alone; it

requires deliberate instructional intervention. A productive three-stage model applicable to teacher training includes: awareness-raising, through authentic examples of pragmatic success and failure; guided practice, through simulated professional interactions with feedback; and autonomous use, in which strategies are applied flexibly in real contexts. A concrete technique is the discourse completion task (DCT), in which trainees respond to scenarios – such as a student submitting work late – and compare their responses against documented native-speaker norms, revealing the pragmatic values different choices enact.

Reflective practice

Reflective engagement with experience is the primary mechanism through which implicit communicative knowledge becomes explicit and controllable. Portfolio-based approaches are particularly effective: when teachers document and analyze critical communicative incidents – moments of misunderstanding or perceived pragmatic failure – they surface the tacit assumptions governing their behavior. A teacher who notices that her use of “*Look at the board*” consistently produces student discomfort may, through reflection, recognize its pragmatic force and develop softer alternatives. Supervised practicums with structured observation checklists targeting request mitigation, feedback delivery, and repair strategies further systematize this developmental process.

Institutional and environmental factors

The institutional environment exerts a powerful influence on teachers' pragmatic development. Programs that embed pragmatic awareness within curriculum design, assessment criteria, and faculty modeling produce graduates with stronger pragmatic orientation than those where formal accuracy is prioritized over communicative appropriateness. Including pragmatic competence indicators within teaching performance rubrics, alongside mentoring relationships and communities of professional practice, creates the systemic conditions under which cognitive-pragmatic competence can be consistently and sustainably cultivated.

Conclusion

The formation of cognitive-pragmatic competence in the professional training of English teachers is a multidimensional process shaped by the interaction of cognitive, sociocultural, instructional, reflective, and institutional factors. The findings of this study demonstrate that pragmatic competence cannot be left to incidental acquisition but demands purposeful attention within teacher education curricula through explicit instruction, structured reflection, and intercultural engagement. When these conditions are systematically met, teachers are equipped not only to communicate effectively, but to model and foster genuine pragmatic fluency in their learners, ultimately raising the quality of English language education as a whole.

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