



## EVALUATION OF ESL SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM IN NIGERIA: A SOCIOCULTURAL PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH IN ENHANCING PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE

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### **Abstract:**

English language teaching is incomplete without a maximum focus on how the L2 learners use the language they learn with utmost appropriateness according to contexts during conversations. In an increasingly volatile world, appropriate language use is a vital tool to reducing interpersonal clashes, and ensuring peaceful co-existence. For the L2 learners to master this appropriate language use, their pragmatic competence in the language has to be developed. The role of classroom instruction in the development of this competence has been widely acknowledged. Thus, any curriculum that does not make adequate provision for this instruction is doing a colossal disservice to the L2 learners. This paper has concertedly made efforts to raise awareness on the need for curriculum developers in Nigeria to clearly give policy direction on teaching of pragmatics, at least beginning from the senior secondary classes. Also, the paper provides a conceptual strategy (Transactional Classroom Meeting) that is wholly interwoven with the sociocultural constructs of mediation, scaffolding and zone of proximal development ZPD, on how teachers can teach pragmatics in ESL classrooms. It is confidently perceived that this strategy would elicit the necessary social interactions that would enable the L2 learners to internalize the pragmatic principles in order to enhance their pragmatic competence. Future researchers can leverage on this by carrying out empirical studies to find out the definite impact of this strategy.

**Keywords:** ESL, curriculum, sociocultural, pragmatic competence

### **1. Introduction**

English language has continually grown in global influence, especially for providing a threshold for technology, which has subsumed almost all spheres of human existence. The global prominence of English language continues to exert much influence on the

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curriculum development of many countries, particularly in countries where it serves as either second language or foreign language. In Nigeria, English language has a long history, as the birthing of the country can hardly be separated from it. Consequently, educational development in Nigeria, beginning from colonial era is intertwined with English; and till date, it serves as the official language and language of instruction in most levels of education (Usman, 2017). English language is a compulsory subject at basic, intermediate and advanced levels of education. In fact, it is one of the compulsory requirements for a candidate to gain admission into any tertiary institution in Nigeria (National Policy on Education, NPE, 2004). In view of the multicultural nature of Nigeria, the neutrality of English language coupled with its global influence makes it serve well as a language of unity amongst the citizenries.

Pragmatic competence is the ability to use language in communication in a way that it is suitable to the people and the context involved in the interaction. It is the knowledge of the best ways to express intentions and meanings as appropriate to a particular social and cultural context of communication (Nguyen, Pham & Pham, 2017). Pragmatics entails the L2 user's ability to use language in a variety of contexts, and lack of this competence may make L2 learners appear rude and impolite in their conversations (Hilliard, 2017). Quoting verbatim from Crystal (1985, p. 240) pragmatic competence is defined as *"language use from the point of difficulties in terms of language choice and the constrain learners encountered in the act of communicating events"*. It is the context of usage that defines language choices in communicative events, and it can be constraining. The L2 user's ability to wriggle out of this complexity and achieve the language intentions by making the right choices is very paramount. When people engage in conversations, there are intentions they want to use combination of words to achieve in the listeners. What determines the achievement of these intentions is their pragmatic competence. This competence has redefined thought pattern in language research and teaching. It is possible for an L2 user to possess the linguistic elements even in communicative form but lacking in the sociocultural appropriateness of the language usage (Enyi & Orji, 2019). But with the nature of humans as social beings, language success seems to be dependent on pragmatics. Language is not only a cultural aspect but also a resource for cultural performance. We use words to do things, and as actionable resources, they are speech acts (Austin, 1962). This captures the functionality of language as a social tool. Speech acts can be used to perform requesting, apology, refusal, complimenting, greeting, complaint and many more (Searle, 1979). To do all these things appropriately, pragmatic competence is required.

Pragmatic competence covers two main aspects: pragma-linguistics and socio-pragmatics (Leech, 1983). While the pragma-linguistics is related to grammar, the socio-pragmatics is related to sociology. This means that pragmatic competence is all encompassing, as it relates to both linguistic forms and meanings, and the sociocultural appropriateness. This places pragmatic competence as the most important language competence. However, language grammar and pragmatics are exclusively mutual. According to Kasper (2000), it is unclear which leads to the other in between these

language constructs (grammar and pragmatics), even though a grammatical development may require an established pragmatic knowledge. *“There are strong research evidences that pragmatic and grammatical awareness are to a large extent independent and their development may be related to different learning environment in a sophisticated language context”* (Kasper, 2000, p. 5-6). Citing Bardovi-Harlig, Kasper (2000) further maintains that a high level grammatical competence does not equal to a concomitant high level of pragmatic competence. But one cannot dispute the fact that pragmatic knowledge is demonstrated using grammar. It is possible for students to make pragmatic mistakes just because they lack the needed linguistic knowledge (Hilliard, 2017). However, a focus on grammar does not translate to pragmatic competence. The pedagogical implication of this revelation is that a language curriculum that focuses on linguistic forms and meaning at the expense of pragmatic development is rather doing a disservice to the language learners.

Although only a handful of research has been done on the effects of instruction in interlanguage pragmatics, yet the few in existence offers encouraging proofs that instruction provides an algorithm for pragmatic development (Kasper & Schmidt 1996). Recently, the realm of research on pedagogical intervention in pragmatic development keeps expanding. And many of these researchers are in agreement that pragmatic development could not be entirely left to unintentional language socialization, rather, pedagogical interventions provide indispensable support for pragmatic development (Enyi & Orji, 2019, Hillard, 2017; Li & Gao, 2017; Nguyen, Do, Nguyen & Pham 2015; Lenchuk & Ahmed, 2013). There is no doubt that pragmatic competence can be developed implicitly over time through language contact (Kasper & Schmidt 1996), but then intensity of target language contact through instruction cannot as well be disputed.

Regarding sociocultural theory, *“analytically, the double function of language as a means for communication and a tool for thinking, interaction is viewed as a tool for L2 learning and as a competency in its own right. The theory is therefore rightly situated in the study of pragmatics development”* (Kasper, 2000, p.23). Sociocultural theory primes social interaction as the major trigger of language development. Pedagogical interventions can therefore leverage the expert –novice model of interaction as found in the social interaction to enhance the pragmatic development of L2 learners. Being knowledgeable of the culture of the target language is necessary for effective communication and often reflects the social framework of any act of using the language (Lenchuk & Ahmed, 2013). Interaction as a social practice stimulates this cultural awareness.

Curriculum developers and other stakeholders have over the years made efforts to improve the teaching and learning of English language in Nigeria (Usman 2017, Amuseghan, 2007). As the need for proficiency in English expands, there is an urgent need to constantly review curriculum in order to achieve an all-inclusive learning. ESL curriculum for senior secondary schools in Nigeria provides a blueprint that expectedly guides schools and teachers in implementing the content therein, translated as syllabus and then as scheme of work. The objectives of the senior secondary school English language curriculum in Nigeria include: (a) To build upon the English language skills developed at the upper basic education classes, (b) develop the skills of listening,

speaking, reading and writing to enable the students undertake higher education without problems, (c) equip secondary school leavers with satisfactory level of proficiency in the language for use in their work places, (d) stimulate in the students the love for reading as a pleasurable activity, and (e) promote and enhance the various language skills and competencies for effective national and international communication (Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council, 2007). While these objectives can be rightly adjudged to be quite symmetrical in depth and breadth, as touching various English language competences, the concern is that the failure to explicitly mention contextual use of the language as covered in pragmatic competence, tends to be misleading to curriculum implementers (teachers) and even textbook writers.

Further, in the curriculum content, all through Senior Secondary One to Senior Secondary Three, there is no mention of speech acts. The curriculum content in these three classes covers vocabulary development, oracy skills (spoken English and listening comprehension), literacy skills (reading comprehension and writing for communication), English grammar- structural patterns and grammatical structures (NERDC 2007). A critical look in the subtopics embedded in the identified themes clearly shows that there is a conspicuous neglect of pragmatic development in the senior secondary education curriculum on English language. This justifies the concern raised by Enyi and Orji (2019) that in Nigeria more emphasis has been on teaching grammatical forms and sound sequence with predilection on accuracy and correctness, thereby neglecting a very essential aspect of communicative competence- pragmatic competence. This paper also shares with this concern. In view of this, the objectives of this paper are to:

- 1) raise awareness towards the review of ESL senior secondary curriculum in Nigeria to explicitly include pragmatic development instruction,
- 2) provide the ESL teachers with sociocultural strategies for developing the L2 learners' pragmatic competence in the classroom.

## **2. Theoretical and Conceptual Review of Strategies for Teaching Pragmatic Competence**

Buri, Baker and Acton (2019) noted the challenges that face pragmatics instruction in ESL classrooms, and thus proposed an integrated approach that draws from haptic (movement and touch) pronunciation teaching technique. This method leverages on the relationship that phonology has with pragmatics. According to Buri and colleagues, the method uses intonational patterns accompanied by systematic gestures in teaching the speech acts. They technically referred to it as "*touchinami*", which is a systematic gesture that combines movement and touch to enable the learners have experience of intonational contour and prominence, within or as bounded by prefabricated language chunks. Although English language is not a tonal language, yet it uses intonations to express meanings. Such intonational patterns as used by Buri and colleagues are, level, fall, rise, rise-fall. For a teacher to use this method there must be the competence of demonstration of these tones. What the teacher does is to find the speech acts, for instance

representatives, expressives, declaratives, and the likes, and then match them with the intonational patterns. It can also be used to engage the students in conversations. It requires a strong commitment to pay attention on the gestures of the students in the learning contexts (Buri, Baketr & Acton, 2019). These researchers are confident that this approach has the potency of promoting pragmatic competence, considering the positive feedback from haptic approach in other fields. However, the researchers are yet to implement it in an empirical study in pragmatic competence. And there is no clear language theory that supports pragmatic development aligned with it. In contrast, *“approaches to language instruction and assessment should be informed by theory on pragmatic development”* (Kasper and Schmidt, 1996 p. 149). Again, teachers who are not trained in haptic techniques will definitely find this strategy a herculean task.

Ishihara (2007) described a web-based curriculum for pragmatics instruction in Japanese as a foreign language. This method is an explicit conscious awareness raising pragmatic –focused strategy, whereby the learners are guided on appropriate language use (Ishihara, 2007). It includes learning tasks that feature naturalistic audio samples on empirically pragmatic information. *“The L2 learners then engage in several exercises while self-checking or self- evaluating the answers and electronically sending exercise responses to the teacher and curriculum writers through the web system”* (Ishihara, 2007, p. 21), which helps in effective feedback system. It is developed to serve L2 learners in pragmatic development beyond the classroom. It is part of the federally funded interventions on pragmatic development researches under the auspices of National Language Resource Center at the Center of Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA), and it was a collaborative effort (Ishihara, 2007). The method leverages on five key components and principles of curriculum: *“Empirically established pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic information and naturalistic audio dialogue samples; learner analysis of contextual factors followed by an explicit feedback; language-focused exercises with grammatical, lexical and prosodic information; output practice focusing on L2 pragmatic use; self-evaluation and immediate feedback; and explanatory information for L2 sociopragmatic norm”* (Ishihara, 2007, p. 25).

The web-based curriculum for pragmatics instruction by Ishihara is particularly relevant because it bridges the gap of not being in direct contact with the target language. Pragmatics interventions help a great deal in improving the pragmatic abilities especially in contexts where the learners are not directly in contact with the L2 (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996; Kasper & Rose, 1993). The major concerns with this approach are those associated with the use of technology in general. Despite the irrefutable gains of technology especially for independent learning, it is difficult to make it work for all learners in all contexts as there is digital divides across various contexts (Achike & Adeniyi, 2017; Ishihara, 2007), and this web-based curriculum as a technologically embedded approach is not an exception.

Hilliard (2017) identified twelve activities for teaching the pragmatics of complaining to L2 learners. Although the examples given in these activities are basically on the speech act of complaining, Hilliard however hinted that teachers can adapt it in teaching other speech acts. First in these activities is *“discussion of speech acts. In this,*

students are meant to discuss the speech acts in small groups and try identifying the pragmatic differences between the students' L1 and L2" (Hilliard, 2017). It is believed that this type of discussion will help to avoid negative transfer. Second in the activities as mentioned by Hilliard is comparing L1 and L2 complaints. In this activity, with the guidance of the teacher students mention their experiences as regards complaining or any other speech act in the past. While the students say this with their L1, the teacher guides them to translate it to the target language. This activity is a leeway to creating pragmatic awareness in the learners.

The third in these activities according to Hilliard (2017) is to read texts or listen to passages about complaining in other cultures. This is one way of raising pragmatics awareness. The students read texts, listen to radio or watch video about certain speech acts in another culture and then compare it with their own. The next in these activities is teaching the students specific examples of complaint as a speech act. "*These examples can be taken from textbook dialogues, websites, or television shows and movies*" (Hilliard, 2017, p.8) and it has the advantage of providing authentic materials to the learners. Lumberg (2015, p. 281) suggests that the students can discuss the following questions after listening to or watching the L2 examples: 1. Would you respond differently in that scenario if it had happened in your culture? 2. How do you feel about the complaint of the speaker in the given context? 3. Which expressions and strategies do you have in your L1 to complain to each other? 4. How do these compare to the complaint expression used in the given example?

The fifth activity according to Hilliard (2017) is presenting L2 strategies for complaining. This provides support for students who are not sure of how to go about their complaining. The teacher provides lists of phrases on complaint. The students are given the task of selecting from the list provided to fill the gaps in the contexts provided for them in their worksheet. They students did try making new complaints. Activity six is developing pragmalinguistics through grammar and vocabulary instruction. It is possible for students to make pragmatic mistakes just because they lack the needed linguistic knowledge (Hilliard, 2017). In view of this, it may be appropriate the L2 teachers introduce, review practice with the students, grammar, vocabulary, and phrasal chunks that would be needed by the students to enhance their pragmalinguistic knowledge and the overall pragmatic competence. However, while using this strategy to raise awareness on pragmalinguistics development is ideal, caution should be taken to avoid focusing on grammar in the name of enhancing pragmatic competence. Kasper (2000) citing Bardovi-Harlig maintains that high level of grammatical competence does not equate to a concomitant high level of pragmatic competence.

The seventh of these activities by Hilliard (2017) is discourse completion test. This contains prompts that can elicit diverse pragmatic responses which are used to evaluate the learners' pragmatic knowledge. The following activities may be involved therein: divide the students in small groups and give them specific discourse completion test; get the students form new groups and then compare their responses from their previous groups, and then allow each group to act out their best rendition in the class, which will

be generally discussed in the class to ascertain its level of appropriateness (Hilliard, 2017). Activity eight is analyzing and repairing pragmatic errors. This involves having the students analyze, explain and repair certain identified pragmatic errors. After they have rewritten it, they can then act it out to the class. This helps to raise the pragmatic awareness on the students, as it will help do same in their individual conversations. Activity nine includes role play with discussion. In this manner, students can play certain roles with designated cards specifying the speech acts of interest. According to Hilliard, giving the students veracity of contexts and social setting is quite essential. It will help them to know interlocutors of higher status, same status, and lower status. After the students have acted their roles individually, they can then act before the class.

Activity ten according to Hilliard is what is termed good version/bad version. This is a form of expanding the role play practice by asking the students to identify good and bad versions of the speech act as it relates to specific context and social setting. Activity eleven includes focusing on apologizing. Since the whole activities have been on complaint, it will be appropriate to also learn how to apologize which could be prompted by the complaint. It can also take the form of role play. As the students act to complain, others can respond through the appropriate apology. The last but not the least of the activities by Hilliard is learning variety of cultural background. Pragmatic culture varies from region to region, so it would be appropriate to have knowledge of what is obtainable in different regions using specific speech acts. In order to achieve this, Hilliard posits thus: *“students who are likely to interact with other non-native speakers in the region should be given role play situations and contexts that require them to complain to other non-native speakers in the activities”* (Hilliard, 2017, p.12).

## **2.1 Sociocultural Perspectives and the Transactional Classroom Meeting**

Classroom practices have always maintained a bi-directional interlink with theories (Feryok, 2017; Eun, 2010). This interlink is explained by the concept of praxis as adduced by Vygotsky (1987) which explains that theory provides a blueprint for practice and practice in turn shapes theory. In checking for a theory that ideally aligns with pragmatics instruction, the principles and constructs in Sociocultural theory make it quite symmetrical. Sociocultural theory as propounded by Lev Vygotsky considers human development as not just a function of psychological maturations and development but as a process that is triggered by social interactions. Any function in human development comes first at the social plane (between two or more individuals) and later on the individual plane (inside the individual). This process is made possible through internalization (Feryok, 2017). Teachers who incline to Sociocultural theory are more likely to encourage dialogic interactions, with several classroom activities, and students who are receptive to it would be active participants in the co-construction of knowledge (Eun, 2010).

In the words of Kasper (2000, p. 39) *“sociocognitive theory has demonstrated strengths as an explanatory framework for pragmatic development”*. It is wrong to consider development in interlanguage pragmatics as purely a function of cognitive system, considering that

the strategies for linguistic action are closely tied to self-identity and social identity (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996). There are three interrelated Sociocultural constructs that are germane to the suggested pedagogical strategy (the Transactional Classroom Meeting) in this paper. These constructs are mediation, scaffolding and zone of proximal development (ZPD).

Mediation entails the connection that exists between the society, culture and the human cognitive development which results in social interaction. Proponents of Sociocultural theory posit that functional representations are mediated through social and cultural systems such as symbols, language in particular; concepts which are developed through language; and activities conducted in language, such as parenting and schooling (Feryok, 2017). This implies that the school and the home represent the epicenters of this mediation which the learner has to internalize for learning to take place. This learning is not without some personal conflicts and social transformations (Mirzaee & Aliakbari, 2017). Scaffolding is the guided participation provided by an expert in the form of expert-novice apprenticeship that enables the learner to develop autonomy (Mirzaee & Aliakbari, 2017). It is a structural support provided by the teacher or a more competent learner to another learner so as to facilitate independent learning on the learner. ZPD is *“the distance between actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers”* (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Sociocultural theory in its entirety is development oriented. Both mediation and scaffolding aim at closing the gap as identified in ZPD.

The Transactional Classroom Meeting (TCM) is a strategy that contextualizes the activities of the students outside the classroom. Its focus is to facilitate social interaction by engaging the students in activities that enhance the performance of various speech acts, and that are already familiar to them. It takes the form of a normal meeting that students usually attend in their communities where various issues are discussed. Contextualization entails making connections between students' experiences outside the school and the school learning (Eun, 2010). TCM models the classroom after outside school experiences. It can be a meeting of religious association, age group, students' union, or any other group peculiar to the students. The teacher enquires from the students which that is most peculiar to them among these associations and transmutes the classroom as a setting for such a meeting. The leadership of such an association is acknowledged and students through the moderation of the teacher nominate fellow classmates who will role play as leaders. The leaders take their seats in front of the class as done during meetings of such. The teacher as the moderator drafts the agenda of the meeting, and in a way that it will facilitate performance of various speech acts by the students. The most essential role of the teacher in the course of mediation is to create a social environment, a classroom culture conducive for learning (Vygotsky, 1997). And more importantly, pragmatic knowledge is highly sensitive to social and cultural features (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996).



Consequently, the teacher lists the speech acts such as requesting, complaining, apologizing, complimenting, asking, thanking, and the likes. Students are then asked to choose a speech act among the listed ones and do as a way of making contribution during the meeting. It is made compulsory that each student must perform a speech act during the meeting. This process enables the teacher to understand the ZPD of the students and then work towards the development. Every speech act performed by the students is evaluated by both the students and the teacher. In this group dynamic assessment, the teacher asks participants of the meeting to identify the suitability or not of any speech act made, while the teacher gives the final verdict. For instance, if a student makes a speech act of requesting in line with the agenda of the meeting; participants in the meeting, with the moderation of the teacher assess it on the basis of being polite or impolite. If it is a complaint, it is assessed on the basis of how face threatening it is, and how it can be mitigated. This is a form of pragmatic repairs as identified by Hilliard (2017), but it differs on the ground that TCM gives an authentic context for such repairs. Although these assessments take place as a social interaction, it however gives the learners a scaffold to internalize the pragmatic principles, which in turn enhances their pragmatic competence.

Also, the secretary takes the minutes of the meeting in order to enhance a feedback in the subsequent class. This further creates a meta-pragmatic awareness, given that it provides opportunity for the students to think through their past pragmatic actions. The strengths of TCM lie in the fact that the social interaction as it appears in an authentic form, is brought to the classroom. It is not just an ordinary role play because many of the students will be imitating themselves rather than others. It also gives the opportunity of learning as many speech acts as possible per time. Also, it presents both teacher-learner and learner-learner models of apprenticeship in scaffolding and playing the mediational roles. This would certainly elicit maximum social interaction that the learners need to build their pragmatic competence. However, the TCM may only be effective in senior classes and advanced learners, who are well conscious of their activities outside the classroom. Also, it may not be effective in a very large class. The teacher has to be pedagogically equipped to be able to control the class for it to be effective even in small classes.

### **3. Conclusion and Recommendations**

This paper has made efforts to raise awareness on the plausibility of teaching pragmatics at the intermediate level of education and at advanced levels, from the interactionist's perspective. This is to complement the efforts of many researchers who have worked in this line. It has been observed that teaching of pragmatics is not given premium attention in the ESL curriculum in Nigeria. In line with the objective of this paper, ESL curriculum developers in Nigeria should play the frontal role of using the curriculum to provide a clear direction on teaching pragmatics in senior secondary schools. Again, ESL teachers need to be knowledgeable of contextual suitable methods and techniques that will support the learners' development of pragmatic competence. Thus, this paper suggests a

strategy- the Transactional Classroom Meeting that teachers can adopt or adapt in the ESL classrooms to effectively teach pragmatics and enhance the pragmatic competence of the learners. Future researchers can consider the application of TCM through empirical researches, particularly as it relates to specific speech acts. Also, with the increasing wave of technological advances, future researchers can explore how this technique can be blended with digital technology.

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This paper is a singular effort of the writer, and so, there is no clash of interest whatsoever.

### **About the author**

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