SEMANTIC AND PRAGMATIC CHALLENGES FACED BY INDONESIAN EFL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

The semantic and pragmatic difficulties Indonesian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners encounter are examined in this study. Even though a large number of Indonesian EFL students exhibit sufficient grammatical proficiency, they frequently struggle to comprehend contextual meanings and use language correctly in social situations. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study is to identify significant factors and investigate the semantic and pragmatic difficulties encountered by 20 Indonesian high school EFL students. Semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis of students' oral and written tasks were used to gather data, which was then subjected to thematic analysis. The study's findings show that while students possess sufficient grammatical knowledge, they struggle greatly to comprehend language in everyday communication situations. Lexical ambiguity, taking figurative language literally, and doubt regarding the meaning of words in context are the main semantic problems identified. In the meanwhile, pragmatic issues include misinterpreting deixis, misusing politeness techniques, and having trouble comprehending indirect intent in speech acts. The primary causes of these difficulties include first language interference, cultural norm variations, and a lack of exposure to real English interactions. The significance of explicitly combining semantic and pragmatic competences in English language learning is concluded by this study.

Keywords: *semantics, pragmatics, EFL learners, language learning, Indonesian students*

A. Introduction

Gaining proficiency in grammar is only one aspect of learning English; another is learning how to comprehend and utilize language in a range of social and cultural situations. Since English is a universal language, learners need to master both linguistic principles and semantic and pragmatic ability. While pragmatic competence enables learners to comprehend speakers' intentions and use language correctly in response to situational demands, semantic competence enables learners to comprehend literal and contextual meanings.

Recent studies have shown that pragmatic and semantic competence

have a significant impact on communicative competence. According to Taguchi (2022), pupils who lack pragmatic awareness often misinterpret indirect speech acts and contextual meanings. Similarly, Sykes (2021) argues that effective communication requires not only language competency but also cultural knowledge and contextual comprehension.

Additionally, due to globalization and technological improvements, learners are now increasingly exposed to authentic English conversation through social media, movies, online learning settings, and cross-border interactions. However, exposure does not guarantee successful comprehension on its own. In communication, students must be able to recognize cultural quirks and implied meanings (Ren, 2023).

1. Literature Review

a. Semantic competence in EFL learning

Semantics in linguistic discourse is the methodical investigation of textual meaning, including vocabulary words, syntactic constructions, and semantic components. The ability of a pupil to correctly understand and generate language meaning is highlighted by semantic competence. This ability is essential to learning vocabulary, understanding lexical links, deciphering figurative language, and evaluating contextual clues in English language instruction.

Because of the significant structural and conceptual differences between Indonesian and English, learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) from Indonesia sometimes encounter semantic difficulties. Lexical ambiguity, idiomatic constructions, synonyms, and polysemous lexical elements are the main areas of difficulty. When learners evaluate words exclusively through literal decoding instead of contextual analysis, misinterpretations frequently happen. According to empirical data, the biggest obstacles preventing Indonesian students from comprehending context-dependent meanings and specialized terminology continue to be their limited lexical capacity and lack of exposure to natural

language input. Furthermore, vocabulary development is essential to improving semantic mastery since a limited vocabulary limits the capacity to deduce subtle meanings during receptive language tasks.

b. Pragmatic competence in EFL learning

The ability to use and comprehend language correctly in accordance with situational dynamics, communicative objectives, and sociocultural norms is known as pragmatic competence. Because pragmatic development requires learners to interpret implicit communication intent beyond literal surface forms, it is crucial to the acquisition of second languages, as stressed by Kasper and Rose (2002). Similarly, Bardovi-Harlig (2013) claims that pragmatic proficiency goes beyond simple grammatical knowledge and necessitates ongoing participation in real-world interaction contexts.

Developing pragmatic competence continues to be a difficulty for Indonesian EFL learners. According to Istianah (2018), these kids frequently have trouble understanding inferred meanings, digesting indirect speech acts, and using appropriate etiquette techniques. These results show that contextual reasoning and intercultural awareness are just as important for successful pragmatic execution as grammatical proficiency. Therefore, misinterpreting speech acts and inferred meanings is a common cause of pragmatic failures, which ultimately undermine communicative success in cross-cultural interactions.

c. Semantic Challenges Faced by Indonesian EFL Learners

The semantic challenges faced by Indonesian EFL learners are caused by a number of underlying issues. First, mistakes in meaning formation are often caused by cross-linguistic differences between English and Indonesian. Learners find it difficult to comprehend English lexical units that have distinct meanings in various situations when they rely too much on word-for-word translation.

Second, idioms, metaphors, and phrasal verbs are examples of nonliteral language constructions that pose significant interpretation challenges. Communication breakdowns result from Indonesian pupils' tendency of processing such expressions through direct translation. Third, opportunities to notice subtle semantic patterns are limited by limited exposure to real English input in daily life. As a result, small differences between closely related lexical items are frequently overlooked, which has a detrimental effect on expressive language abilities and reading comprehension.

d. Pragmatic Challenges Faced by Indonesian EFL Learners

Because they necessitate a sophisticated comprehension of social dynamics and cultural norms, pragmatic hurdles are frequently more complicated than semantic ones. For Indonesian learners, understanding culturally specific idioms, sarcasm, humor, and indirect requests is a significant barrier because pragmatic meaning is mostly determined by contextual cues rather than literal verbal patterns.

There are still few opportunities for real communication with fluent or native English speakers in Indonesia, where the language is mostly used as a foreign language. As a result, there is frequently a lack of knowledge about the interactional norms of target-language communities. Processing and carrying out speech acts, which include a careful balancing act between situational elements and interpersonal relationships, is a significant manifestation of this problem (Searle, 1979). Furthermore, politeness techniques like indirectness, moderation, and hedging are commonly abused due to the different social expectations between Indonesian and English-speaking environments (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Because of this, even perfectly grammatically correct statements could be viewed as excessively abrupt or socially inappropriate.

e. The Connection Between Pragmatic and Semantic Proficiency

Semantic and pragmatic skills are intrinsically linked. While pragmatic competence allows learners to identify intended communicative goals within certain interactional frameworks, semantic knowledge serves as the basis for interpreting literal language. For example, it takes semantic knowledge to decode the literal meaning of "Could you open the window?" but pragmatic judgment is needed to recognize it as a courteous request rather than an inquiry concerning physical capacity. Communication success can be seriously hampered by deficiencies in either area.

2. Previous Studies

Semantic and pragmatic abilities among EFL learners have been the subject of numerous empirical research. According to Bardovi-Harlig and Bastos (2020), learners frequently had trouble understanding implicit meanings and indirect requests, suggesting that pragmatic abilities develop more slowly than grammatical competence. Similarly, Taguchi (2022) emphasized the need for explicit pragmatic instruction by pointing out that L2 learners often had trouble understanding conversational implicatures and indirect speech acts.

Sykes (2021) emphasized the need of genuine communication in developing pragmatic skills. Students who were frequently exposed to real-world communicative contexts performed better than those whose education was limited to typical classroom settings, according to the investigation. Similarly, Alcón-Soler (2022) discovered that learners' pragmatic performance was greatly improved by focused teaching on speech actions, conversational conventions, and politeness techniques.

Ren (2023) investigated students' understanding of polysemous words and contextual meanings in the semantic domain. The results demonstrated that many EFL learners focused on literal interpretations while ignoring contextual cues when processing ambiguous lexical words, which frequently resulted in misunderstandings.

Numerous researchers have concentrated on Indonesian EFL

students in particular. Putri and Hamzah (2021) claim that Indonesian students' low vocabulary and insufficient exposure to real English texts made it difficult for them to understand idiomatic expressions, figurative language, and polysemous terminology. In a similar vein, Sari and Pratama (2022) noted that Indonesian university students regularly projected native sociocultural norms onto English conversations, sometimes resulting in comments that were pragmatically unsuitable.

Additionally, Pratiwi (2021) examined both pragmatic and semantic barriers among Indonesian EFL learners, finding a substantial link between difficulties comprehending figurative language and difficulties determining speaker purpose. These results support the idea that both semantic and pragmatic competence are critical to total communicative effectiveness.

There are still a number of significant gaps in the growing body of research on the semantic and pragmatic skills of EFL learners. First, the majority of earlier research has focused too little on how semantic and pragmatic issues interact in dynamic interactions, instead examining them separately. Second, rather than thoroughly examining learners' subjective experiences and viewpoints, prior research has mostly concentrated on finding particular linguistic faults. Third, research on concurrent semantic and pragmatic challenges among Indonesian EFL learners is conspicuously lacking. This study examines the simultaneous semantic and pragmatic difficulties encountered by Indonesian EFL learners and examines their wider effects on English communication in order to close these gaps.

3. Research Objective

The purpose of this study is to examine the pragmatic and semantic issues encountered by Indonesian EFL students and to pinpoint the causes of these challenges. The study specifically looks at how learners struggle to comprehend speech acts, contextual meaning, figurative language, lexical meaning, and politeness techniques in English communication.

B. Methodology

a. Research Design

This study investigated the semantic and pragmatic difficulties

encountered by Indonesian EFL learners using a qualitative descriptive research design. Because it enables a thorough examination of learners' experiences, perspectives, and language use in real-world learning contexts, the qualitative technique was selected. The study's main goals were to comprehend the many kinds of pragmatic and semantic challenges that students face and to pinpoint the causes of such challenges.

b. Participants

Twenty Indonesian EFL students from a public senior high school in Indonesia participated in this study. Purposive sampling was used to choose them based on their background in studying English as a second language. The researcher was able to gather a variety of viewpoints on semantic and pragmatic difficulties because the participants represented students with different levels of English competence.

c. Reserch Instruments

This study used three research tools: document analysis sheets, semi-structured interview protocols, and guidelines for classroom observations. These tools were created to gather detailed information on pupils' pragmatic and semantic proficiency.

d. Data Collection Techniques

Direct classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis of students' assignments were used in a triangulated approach to data collecting. Initially, observations were made to track patterns of real-time interaction, with an emphasis on how students dealt with lexical meaning, deixis, figurative expressions, speech acts, and politeness techniques. In order to learn more about the participants' subjective learning experiences and the underlying cognitive or cultural causes for running into semantic and pragmatic obstacles, semi-structured interviews were then conducted. In order to confirm empirical evidence of communication breakdowns, samples of students' written work and spoken performance diaries were reviewed. Higher contextual validity and data trustworthiness were guaranteed by the integration of these many data sources.

e. Classroom Observasi

In order to assess how students comprehended and applied language in classroom interactions, observations were made during English classes. Students' challenges with deciphering lexical meanings, deixis, figurative expressions, speech acts, and politeness techniques received special emphasis. During the lessons, important behavioral and communication patterns were noted using field notes.

f. Semi-Structured Interview

To learn more about the participants' perspectives and experiences with semantic and pragmatic challenges, semi-structured interviews were held. Issues with terminology interpretation, contextual meaning, indirect expressions, speech acts, figurative language, and culturally appropriate language use were the main topics of discussion during the interviews. Participants were able to give thorough explanations of their learning experiences because to the flexible interview approach.

g. Document Analysis

Students' written and spoken replies from class assignments, exercises, presentations, and speaking activities were examined as part of the document analysis process. These texts were examined for signs of pragmatic and semantic issues, including lexical ambiguity, improper speech acts, abuse of deixis, misinterpretation of figurative language, and issues with politeness techniques.

h. Data Analysis Techniques

An integrative narrative framework adopted from Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) was used to examine the collected empirical data instead of a strict, step-by-step theme checklist. To gain contextual familiarity, the analysis approach started with recursive reads of student artifacts, interview transcripts, and observation notes. Following that, key data segments were grouped into contextual codes that addressed particular linguistic issues, including socio-cultural divergence, lexical ambiguity, deictic misunderstanding, figurative language literalism, inappropriate speech acts, politeness imbalances, and native

language transfer. The overall semantic and pragmatic challenges experienced by Indonesian EFL learners were demonstrated by the dynamic synthesis of these coded parts into theme patterns. In order to reach complex inferences about learners' communicative competence, these emerging themes were ultimately critically assessed against theories of second language acquisition.

C. Results and Discussion

a. Research Findings

Semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and written and spoken response analysis were used to gather the data. The results showed that when comprehending and creating English in communicative contexts, Indonesian EFL learners encountered a variety of semantic and pragmatic difficulties. The tasks were divided into two categories: pragmatic challenges and semantic challenges. The findings also showed that restricted vocabulary, cultural differences, first-language interference, and inadequate exposure to real English communication all had an impact on these challenges.

b. Semantic Challenges

It's crucial to comprehend the underlying reasons of these semantic difficulties before describing the particular difficulties that students encounter. The ability of pupils to understand lexical links, linguistic meaning, and even the meaning of words based on their context is largely determined by their level of semantic competence. These semantic difficulties frequently occur for Indonesian learners because of the substantial structural differences between English and Indonesian.

Students sometimes make the mistake of translating texts or conversations straight from their native tongue. Nonetheless, English vocabulary is frequently polysemic, which means that it has a variety of dynamic meanings that greatly rely on the context in which it is employed. This difficulty is aggravated by insufficient exposure to actual English texts in everyday life, which ultimately inhibits the development of pupils' lexical knowledge. As a result, individuals struggle to detect tiny differences between words and tend to ignore contextual information.

The semantic difficulties encountered by these EFL learners

can be broadly categorized into the following major areas based on data analysis gathered from classroom observations, in-depth interviews, and review of student assignments:

1. Lexical Ambiguity

   Lexical ambiguity was one of the participants' most frequent semantic challenges. Words with several meanings depending on the context were difficult for many students to comprehend. Several students expressed confusion during interviews when they came across polysemous words in talks and reading passages.

   For instance, some participants did not understand the word "bank" to represent the side of a river; instead, they only understood it as a financial organization. Words like light, fair, and right were also misinterpreted. Additionally, observations made in the classroom revealed that pupils frequently relied on literal dictionary definitions without taking contextual cues into account.

   These results imply that students are more likely to concentrate on literal interpretations than contextual interpretations. This difficulty was greatly exacerbated by a shallow vocabulary and little exposure to real-world language use.

2. Figurative Language

   Many pupils struggled to understand figurative language like idioms, metaphors, and similes, according to the investigation. These expressions were often taken literally by participants, leading to miscommunications.

   For example, some students did not comprehend the term "break the ice" as initiating a conversation, but rather as physically breaking ice. Similarly, phrases like "piece of cake" and "time is money"

were frequently misinterpreted.

Figurative language was rarely discussed in class activities, according to interview data. Because of this, students lacked the prior information necessary to successfully interpret nonliteral meanings. This result emphasizes how crucial it is to teach figurative language in relevant circumstances.

3. Vocabulary Meaning in Context

Understanding terminology in relation to context was another major problem. Students frequently failed to recognize context-specific meanings even though they were familiar with a large number of English vocabulary.

For instance, participants found it challenging when the term "run" was used in statements like "The company runs several projects," even though they understood it as a physical activity. Similar issues arose with terms whose meanings vary depending on the context.

The results show that effective communication requires more than just word knowledge. To improve their semantic competence, learners must be given the chance to practice word interpretation in a variety of communicative circumstances.

c. Pragmatic Challenges

1. Understanding Speech Acts

This study involved twenty EFL students from a public senior high school in Indonesia. They were selected using purposeful sampling according to their experience learning English as a second language. Because the participants represented students with varying degrees of English proficiency, the researcher was able to compile a range of perspectives on semantic and pragmatic challenges.

For instance, many students took the phrase "It's quite cold in here"

as a straightforward remark rather than an oblique request to turn down the air conditioner or close a window. Similarly, pupils frequently struggled to appropriately convey their refusals in English.

According to interview responses, learners were more accustomed to direct communication styles that are frequently employed in their native tongue. As a result, they frequently overlooked implied messages in conversations in English.

These results show that learners need to comprehend speakers' communicative goals in addition to grammatical knowledge in order to be pragmatically competent.

2. Politeness Strategies

It was also clear that using civility techniques was difficult. Participants frequently found it difficult to select appropriate expressions based on their relationship with the interlocutor, age, and social standing.

When addressing to professors or classmates, for instance, several pupils used straightforward instructions like "Give me your book," which may come across as rude in English-speaking settings. Others didn't know how to use phrases like "Could you" or "Would you mind" to soften queries.

Students seldom ever used civility techniques in real-world communication scenarios, according to observations made in the classroom. Their lack of exposure made it more difficult for them to communicate in English.

The results imply that learners' pragmatic development is significantly influenced by cultural variations between English-speaking and Indonesian societies.

3. Deixis Interpretation

Additionally, the study discovered that students had trouble deciphering deixis, especially references to people, places, and times. Expressions like this, that, here, there, now, and then are sometimes misinterpreted by students since their meanings significantly rely on context.

For example, a few of participants misinterpreted conversation allusions when the speaker's location or time period was not made clear. Reading comprehension exercises including changes in narrative viewpoint revealed similar challenges.

According to interview data, students frequently ignored the situational context in which deictic terms were used in favor of concentrating on their literal meanings.

This result suggests that learners must link language forms with contextual information in order to communicate effectively, a skill that many participants lacked.

d. Discussion

The research results show that Indonesian EFL learners have interrelated semantic and pragmatic difficulties even though they have sufficient grammatical understanding. Navigating lexical ambiguity, deciphering figurative language, and decoding context-bound vocabulary are the key challenges that define the semantic domain. Simultaneously, pragmatic obstacles appear as incorrect use of politeness techniques, incorrect interpretation of deixis, and incorrect assessment of indirect speech acts.

These results are consistent with other research showing that communicative competence includes context-dependent interpretation in addition to structural grammar. The analysis also shows that cultural differences, native language interference, and insufficient exposure to real-world English interactions are major causes of these language difficulties.

Thus, there is a considerable need for an integrated educational model that combines pragmatic and semantic instruction. Contextualized input, role-playing exercises, real-world communicative tasks, and clear instruction on pragmatics and nonliteral language are all recommended for language instructors. Learners' capacity to successfully navigate real-world English communication can be significantly improved by such instructional approaches.

D. Conclusion

Through a qualitative approach that included interviews, classroom observations, and analysis of students' written and spoken responses, this study investigated the semantic and pragmatic difficulties encountered by Indonesian EFL learners. The results showed that while the participants had sufficient

grammatical knowledge, they had significant trouble comprehending and utilizing English correctly in various communication contextsKesimpulan akhir yang diperoleh dalam penelitian dan saran perbaikan yang dianggap perlu ataupun penelitian lanjutan yang relevan.

Lexical ambiguity, interpreting figurative language, and comprehending word meaning in context were the main semantic difficulties found. Additionally, learners faced a number of pragmatic challenges pertaining to deixis interpretation, politeness techniques, and speech acts. These difficulties frequently resulted in miscommunication and improper language use.

The study also discovered that the main causes of these challenges were inadequate exposure to real English interactions, cultural disparities between Indonesian and English-speaking groups, and first-language interference. As a result, increasing students' semantic and pragmatic competency is just as crucial as raising their grammatical ability. Learners can become more proficient communicators in everyday contexts by including realistic communication techniques and contextual language learning into English training.

Summary of Findings

The results of this study show that learning and using English presents both pragmatic and semantic difficulties for Indonesian EFL learners. Determining vocabulary meanings based on context, comprehending figurative language, and deciphering lexical ambiguity are some of the semantic issues. Learners frequently depended on literal readings, which occasionally led to the intended message being misunderstood.

In terms of pragmatic ability, learners found it challenging to correctly comprehend deictic phrases, apply politeness techniques, and identify and produce suitable speech acts. Adapting their language to social interactions, communicative goals, and situational circumstances proved difficult for several individuals.

Additionally, the analysis identified three main elements that contribute to these difficulties: insufficient exposure to real-world English language use, limited comprehension of cultural norms in English communication, and

first-language interference. These results imply that communicative competence necessitates both language proficiency and the capacity to effectively comprehend meaning and context.

Research Implications

The study's conclusions have a number of ramifications for teaching and learning English. First, in addition to grammatical understanding, more emphasis should be placed on semantic and pragmatic competency in English training. Instructors should give students the chance to examine figurative language, contextual meanings, and various word interpretations in real texts and discussions.

Second, classroom exercises that emphasize speech acts, manners, and context-sensitive language use should explicitly teach pragmatic awareness. Learners can gain an understanding of how language works in actual social interactions through role plays, simulations, and authentic communication assignments.

Third, curriculum designers must to include pragmatic and semantic elements in instructional materials and evaluation procedures. Teachers can help students increase their communicative competence and lessen misunderstandings in intercultural communication by exposing them to real language use and cultural components of communication.

Lastly, in order to better address learners' communicative challenges, teacher training programs should provide English teachers with useful techniques for teaching semantic and pragmatic parts of language.

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