

A SEMANTIC-PRAGMATIC INVESTIGATION OF MEANING CONSTRUCTION AMONG INDONESIAN EFL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

Meaning construction in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms extends beyond understanding the literal meanings of words. It involves secondary school learners' ability to integrate semantic knowledge with pragmatic interpretation while responding appropriately to contextual, interpersonal, and sociocultural cues. This study investigates how Indonesian secondary school EFL learners construct meaning during classroom interaction by examining the interplay among teacher talk, semantic competence, pragmatic competence, Self-Perceived Communication Competence (SPCC), and Willingness to Communicate (WTC). Employing a qualitative case study design at a secondary school in Makassar, data were collected from English teachers and secondary school students through classroom observations, audio-video recordings, semi-structured interviews, and field notes. Classroom discourse was analyzed using Martin and White's Appraisal Theory, while interview data were analyzed thematically following Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's interactive model. Findings indicate that positive teacher talk contributes to a psychologically supportive classroom environment that enhances learners' communication confidence and encourages active participation in meaning negotiation. Semantic competence alone is insufficient; learners' pragmatic competence and contextual awareness play essential roles in interpreting implied meanings and indirect speech acts. Secondary school learners with stronger SPCC demonstrate higher WTC and more effective meaning negotiation. Meaning construction is thus a multidimensional process emerging from the interaction among linguistic competence, classroom discourse, and learners' psychological readiness.

Keywords: *Meaning Construction, Semantic Competence, Pragmatic Competence, Teacher Talk, Appraisal Theory, Self-Perceived Communication Competence (SPCC), Willingness to Communicate (WTC), Secondary School EFL Learners*

A. Introduction

Language functions not merely as a system of words and grammatical rules but also as a medium through which people create, negotiate, and interpret meaning during social

interaction. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, learners are expected to understand not only the literal meaning of linguistic forms but also the intended meaning conveyed by speakers in particular communicative contexts. Therefore, successful communication requires

learners to combine semantic knowledge with pragmatic understanding so that they can interpret utterances appropriately according to the situation in which communication occurs. From the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), language is viewed as a resource for making meaning rather than simply a collection of grammatical structures, making meaning construction an essential objective of language learning.

In the Indonesian EFL context, the development of communicative competence remains a considerable challenge. Although English teaching has gradually adopted communicative approaches, classroom practices in many secondary schools continue to emphasize grammatical accuracy, vocabulary mastery, and reading comprehension. These instructional priorities undoubtedly provide learners with important linguistic foundations; however, they often leave limited opportunities for students to engage in authentic communication. As a result, many learners are capable of producing grammatically correct sentences but still experience difficulty when interpreting implied meanings, identifying speakers' intentions, or responding appropriately in real communicative situations. Such conditions indicate that grammatical competence alone cannot fully support effective language use.

Another challenge arises from the limited exposure to English outside formal educational settings. Since English is rarely used as a language of daily communication in Indonesia, classroom interaction becomes the primary environment in which learners develop their communicative abilities. Within this setting, students learn not

only vocabulary and grammatical structures but also how meanings are negotiated through interaction with teachers and classmates. Consequently, classroom discourse plays a crucial role in shaping learners' ability to understand contextual meanings, interpret indirect expressions, and participate actively in communication.

Previous studies have consistently highlighted the importance of pragmatic competence in second-language communication. Learners with well-developed pragmatic awareness are generally more capable of interpreting indirect requests, conversational implicatures, politeness strategies, and context-dependent meanings. In contrast, learners who rely primarily on literal interpretation frequently encounter misunderstandings even when they possess sufficient grammatical knowledge. This situation demonstrates that semantic competence and pragmatic competence should not be viewed as separate abilities; instead, both interact continuously during the process of meaning construction.

The distinction between semantics and pragmatics has long attracted attention in linguistic research. Semantics primarily concerns the conventional meanings of words and sentences, whereas pragmatics focuses on how those meanings are interpreted according to context, communicative intentions, and sociocultural conventions. During classroom interaction, learners constantly move between these two dimensions. They are required to interpret references, infer implied meanings, identify intended referents, and understand how surrounding discourse contributes to meaning. Consequently, successful communication depends not only on

understanding linguistic forms but also on recognizing contextual information that guides interpretation.

Teacher talk represents another important component influencing meaning construction in EFL classrooms. Besides functioning as the major source of language input, teachers' verbal interactions establish the interpersonal climate in which communication occurs. Supportive feedback, encouraging questions, and constructive responses can foster learners' confidence to participate in classroom discussion, whereas overly evaluative or discouraging responses may reduce learners' willingness to express their ideas. From the perspective of Martin and White's Appraisal Theory, interpersonal meanings are realized through linguistic resources that express attitudes, judgments, and appreciation. These evaluative choices influence how learners perceive classroom interaction and how actively they engage in negotiating meaning.

In addition to linguistic and interpersonal factors, psychological aspects also contribute substantially to learners' communicative behavior. Self-Perceived Communication Competence (SPCC) reflects learners' beliefs about their own ability to communicate effectively, while Willingness to Communicate (WTC) refers to their readiness to initiate communication when opportunities arise. Students who perceive themselves as competent generally participate more confidently in classroom interaction, whereas those with lower confidence often hesitate despite possessing adequate language knowledge. Accordingly, psychological readiness serves as an

important factor that connects language competence with actual communicative performance.

Although numerous studies have examined semantic competence, pragmatic competence, teacher talk, SPCC, and WTC, these variables have frequently been investigated independently. Existing research has tended to emphasize either linguistic competence or psychological factors without examining how they interact simultaneously during classroom communication. Moreover, qualitative investigations focusing on Indonesian secondary school EFL learners remain relatively limited. Most previous studies have relied on survey-based approaches, providing only limited explanations of how learners actually negotiate meaning during authentic classroom interaction.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate how Indonesian secondary school EFL learners construct meaning during classroom interaction by exploring the relationship among semantic competence, pragmatic competence, teacher talk, Self-Perceived Communication Competence (SPCC), and Willingness to Communicate (WTC). By integrating these perspectives within a qualitative case study, this research seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the linguistic, interpersonal, and psychological processes involved in meaning construction in Indonesian EFL classrooms.

B. Research Method

This research employed a qualitative case study design to investigate how Indonesian secondary school EFL learners construct

meaning during classroom interaction from both semantic and pragmatic perspectives. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to obtain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, classroom discourse, and the interactional processes involved in meaning construction rather than to measure variables statistically. The study was conducted at a secondary school in Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia, where English is taught as a foreign language.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that they could provide rich and relevant information related to the research objectives. The participants consisted of one English teacher and several secondary school students representing different levels of classroom participation, including highly active, moderately active, and less active learners. This variation enabled the researcher to capture diverse perspectives regarding classroom interaction and meaning construction.

Data were gathered throughout one academic term using several qualitative techniques. Classroom observations were conducted regularly to document naturally occurring interactions between teachers and students. These observations were supported by detailed field notes that recorded classroom events, students' responses, and contextual information that could not be fully captured through recordings. In addition, classroom activities were audio- and video-recorded to ensure that all verbal interactions could be transcribed accurately for further analysis. Semi-structured interviews were also carried out with both the

teacher and selected students to explore their perceptions of classroom communication, meaning interpretation, and factors influencing their participation during English lessons. Relevant instructional documents, including lesson plans and learning materials, were examined to provide additional contextual information and support data triangulation.

The process of data collection was conducted systematically over approximately eight weeks. Before the observations began, formal permission was obtained from the school administration, the English teacher, participating students, and their parents. Classroom observations took place during regular English lessons to capture authentic communicative practices without disrupting the normal teaching process. Throughout the observations, the researcher documented verbal interactions as well as important contextual features such as classroom atmosphere, students' engagement, and non-verbal behaviours. After the observation sessions, individual semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 20–30 minutes were conducted and audio-recorded with participants' consent. All recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim to facilitate detailed qualitative analysis.

The collected data were analysed using two complementary analytical procedures. First, classroom discourse was examined through Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal Theory to identify how interpersonal meanings were constructed through linguistic resources expressing affect, judgement, and appreciation. Second, interview transcripts, observation notes, and supporting documents

were analysed thematically following the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which involves data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The integration of these analytical procedures enabled the researcher to examine both linguistic features and participants' perspectives in a comprehensive manner.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, several strategies were implemented throughout the research process. Data triangulation was achieved by comparing information obtained from classroom observations, interviews, field notes, and instructional documents. Member checking was conducted by inviting participants to review the interview transcripts and confirm that the interpretations accurately reflected their experiences. In addition, peer discussions with experienced researchers in English language education were carried out to strengthen analytical consistency and minimize subjective interpretation. These procedures were applied in accordance with the trustworthiness criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Ethical considerations were carefully observed during the study. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. The researcher assured participants that all personal information would remain confidential and that pseudonyms would be used in reporting the findings to protect their identities.

Research Trustworthiness

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, several

qualitative validation strategies were employed. Data triangulation was achieved by comparing findings from classroom observations, interviews, field notes, and instructional documents. Member checking was conducted by allowing participants to verify interview transcripts and interpretations. Peer debriefing with experienced English education researchers was also undertaken to enhance analytical consistency. These procedures followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for qualitative trustworthiness.

C. Result and Discussion

It is discovered that meaning production in secondary school EFL classes is a very dynamic, non-linear process that involves ongoing negotiation of language knowledge, contextual awareness, social interaction, and psychological preparedness. Semantic competence, pragmatic competence, teacher talk, Self-Perceived Communication Competence (SPCC), and Willingness to Communicate (WTC) all work in concert to support secondary students' appropriate meaning interpretation rather than as independent variables.

1. Teacher Talk as an Interpersonal Resource for Meaning Construction

The analysis of classroom interactions demonstrates that teacher

talk plays a central role in supporting learners' construction of meaning during English lessons. Rather than functioning solely as a source of linguistic input, teachers' utterances also establish an interpersonal environment that encourages students to participate in classroom communication. The findings suggest that positive verbal responses, supportive questioning techniques, and constructive feedback help learners feel more confident when expressing their ideas and interpreting meaning.

Drawing on Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal Theory, the classroom data reveal that teachers frequently employed linguistic resources associated with Affect, Judgement, and Appreciation to maintain positive interaction. Expressions of encouragement and appreciation reduced learners' fear of making mistakes and motivated them to engage more actively in classroom discussions. As a result, students became more willing to explain their opinions, ask questions, and negotiate meaning collaboratively with both the teacher and their peers.

The observations also indicate that meaning construction developed through continuous interaction rather than through individual interpretation alone. During classroom discussions, learners often depended on teacher prompts, peer contributions, and contextual information to understand unfamiliar expressions or implied meanings. Instead of providing immediate corrections, teachers generally guided students by asking follow-up questions and encouraging them to reconsider alternative interpretations. This instructional strategy enabled learners to refine their understanding gradually while

actively participating in the learning process.

Furthermore, learners who experienced supportive classroom interaction appeared to demonstrate greater confidence in expressing their thoughts. They were more willing to take communicative risks, offer explanations, and clarify misunderstandings without excessive concern about grammatical errors. These findings suggest that effective teacher talk functions not only as instructional language but also as interpersonal scaffolding that facilitates learners' semantic and pragmatic development.

2. The Interplay of Semantic and Pragmatic Competence

The findings indicate that semantic competence provides the initial foundation for understanding English expressions; however, literal interpretation alone is insufficient for achieving successful communication. While semantic knowledge enables learners to recognize vocabulary and grammatical structures, effective communication requires the ability to interpret meaning according to the surrounding context and the speaker's communicative intention.

Throughout the classroom observations, students occasionally experienced difficulty when interpreting indirect expressions, anaphoric references, or utterances whose meanings depended heavily on contextual information. In many cases, learners correctly understood the literal meaning of individual words but failed to identify the intended message because they did not consider the communicative situation. These findings highlight the importance of pragmatic competence in bridging the gap between linguistic knowledge and contextual interpretation.

Another important pattern emerging from the data concerns learners' reliance on contextual information during classroom communication. Students who considered the speaker's intention, previous classroom discourse, and situational context generally produced more accurate interpretations than those who focused exclusively on vocabulary and grammar. This suggests that meaning construction is influenced by the interaction between semantic knowledge and pragmatic awareness rather than by either component independently.

Overall, the findings reinforce the view that communicative competence develops through the integration of multiple linguistic resources. Semantic competence allows learners to understand the explicit content of an utterance, whereas pragmatic competence enables them to infer implied meanings and respond appropriately within specific communicative contexts. Consequently, both dimensions should be developed simultaneously in English language instruction.

3. Psychological Dimensions: SPCC and WTC

The interview findings reveal that psychological factors substantially influence learners' participation during classroom interaction. Besides linguistic competence, students' confidence in their own communication ability determines whether they actively engage in classroom discussions. This confidence is reflected in Self-Perceived Communication Competence (SPCC), which shapes learners' readiness to express ideas, ask questions, and respond to teachers during English lessons.

The data indicate that students with higher levels of SPCC were generally

more willing to communicate in English, even when they encountered unfamiliar vocabulary or complex communicative situations. Instead of avoiding participation, these learners tended to ask for clarification, negotiate meaning, and continue interacting until they reached an appropriate understanding. Such behaviour demonstrates that confidence encourages learners to use English as a tool for communication rather than simply as an academic subject.

In contrast, learners with lower SPCC frequently hesitated to participate despite demonstrating adequate understanding during individual interviews. Although they were able to explain meanings correctly outside classroom interaction, they often chose to remain silent during lessons because they feared making mistakes or being negatively evaluated by others. This finding suggests that psychological barriers may limit learners' classroom participation even when their linguistic competence is sufficient.

Another important finding is that Willingness to Communicate (WTC) appears to mediate the relationship between language competence and actual communication. Learners who perceived themselves as capable of communicating were more likely to initiate conversations, seek clarification, and respond spontaneously to classroom questions. Consequently, communicative competence should not be viewed solely as linguistic knowledge but also as learners' readiness to use that knowledge confidently in authentic interaction.

Overall, the findings emphasize that creating a supportive classroom environment is essential for strengthening both SPCC and WTC.

Positive teacher responses, collaborative classroom activities, and opportunities for meaningful communication encourage learners to participate more actively and contribute to successful meaning construction.

4. An Integrated Perspective of Meaning Construction

The findings demonstrate that meaning construction among Indonesian secondary school EFL learners is a complex process involving the interaction of linguistic competence, contextual understanding, interpersonal communication, and psychological readiness. These components do not function independently; instead, they continuously influence one another during classroom interaction. Successful communication occurs when learners are able to combine semantic knowledge with pragmatic interpretation while simultaneously responding to the interpersonal dynamics created by teacher talk.

Semantic competence provides learners with the linguistic foundation necessary to recognize vocabulary, grammatical structures, and literal meanings. However, the findings show that this knowledge alone is insufficient to achieve successful communication. Learners must also employ pragmatic competence to interpret implied meanings, identify speakers' intentions, and relate linguistic expressions to the surrounding context. The integration of these two competencies enables learners to construct meaning more accurately during classroom discourse.

Teacher talk further strengthens this process by providing interpersonal support that encourages active participation. When teachers offer constructive feedback, acknowledge

students' ideas, and create opportunities for discussion, learners become more confident in expressing opinions and negotiating meaning. Such classroom interaction not only facilitates language learning but also contributes to the development of learners' communicative confidence.

Psychological readiness also plays a significant role in meaning construction. Students with stronger SPCC generally display higher levels of WTC, allowing them to participate more actively in classroom communication. In contrast, learners with lower confidence tend to remain passive despite possessing sufficient linguistic knowledge. This finding indicates that effective English instruction should address both language competence and learners' emotional readiness to communicate.

Taken together, these findings suggest that meaning construction is best understood as an integrated process in which semantic competence, pragmatic competence, teacher talk, SPCC, and WTC operate simultaneously. Rather than treating these variables separately, English language teaching should encourage their development in a balanced and interconnected manner to support meaningful classroom communication.

Pedagogical Implications

The results of this study have several implications for English language teaching, particularly in Indonesian secondary schools. Teachers are encouraged to design classroom activities that promote authentic communication instead of focusing exclusively on grammatical accuracy. Learning tasks should provide opportunities for learners to interpret contextual meanings,

exchange ideas, and negotiate meaning collaboratively through interaction.

Furthermore, teachers should recognize the importance of their own classroom language. Supportive teacher talk characterized by encouragement, constructive feedback, and open-ended questioning can create a positive learning atmosphere that reduces communication anxiety and increases learners' confidence. Such an environment allows students to participate more actively and strengthens both their pragmatic competence and willingness to communicate.

Finally, English instruction should integrate linguistic knowledge with contextual and interpersonal aspects of communication. By balancing semantic understanding, pragmatic awareness, and communicative practice, teachers can better prepare learners to use English effectively in both academic and real-life situations.

D. CONCLUSION

This study contributes theoretically by integrating semantic competence, pragmatic competence, teacher talk, Self-Perceived Communication Competence, and Willingness to Communicate into a unified framework of meaning construction. Unlike previous studies that investigated these variables separately, the present study demonstrates their interconnected roles during naturally occurring classroom interaction.

Practically, the findings provide useful guidance for English teachers in designing communicative classroom activities that promote contextual interpretation, collaborative interaction, and learners' confidence in using English. Educational practitioners may also utilize these findings to develop classroom environments that support both linguistic competence and psychological readiness for communication.

This study essentially shows that meaning production among EFL students in Indonesian secondary schools is a multifaceted, intricate process that cannot be fully or completely explained by the lenses of grammatical mastery and semantic competence alone. Learners must smoothly combine their pragmatic competence and semantic knowledge in order to communicate effectively and authentically in secondary classroom interactions. Their ability to correctly resolve complicated allusions and inferences based on co-text, navigate the subtleties of contextual meanings, and react appropriately to indirect speech acts are all made possible by this integration.

The study also demonstrates that language proficiency does not exist in a vacuum. Secondary students' Self-Perceived Communication Competence (SPCC) and consequent Willingness to Communicate (WTC) are directly improved by supportive, well-received teacher discussion, which fosters an essential interactive environment. Students are psychologically empowered to engage in the negotiation of meaning when professors intentionally use their language to scaffold meaning interpersonally.

From a pedagogical standpoint, this study's conclusions clearly imply that secondary school English teachers need to consciously go beyond conventional, grammar-focused training. In addition to communicative exercises and positive appraisal techniques, teachers are urged to integrate explicit pragmatic instruction—which teaches students how to deduce meaning and use co-text—into their regular teaching practices.

Communicative competence will be greatly enhanced by fostering an environment in the classroom that prioritises practical attempts over semantic precision. It is strongly recommended that future studies expand on this integrated approach by conducting more extensive empirical classroom investigations and examining how these intersecting aspects function in a variety of secondary educational situations, skill levels, and sociocultural backgrounds.

Although this study provides valuable insights into meaning construction among Indonesian secondary school EFL learners, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted in only one secondary school using a qualitative case study

design, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Future studies are encouraged to involve participants from multiple schools and different educational levels while incorporating mixed-methods approaches to obtain broader empirical evidence. Further research may also investigate the influence of digital learning environments and intercultural communication on learners' semantic-pragmatic competence.

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