

# The Effect of Using Social Networks on Developing EFL Learners' Pragmatic Competence through Speaking Accuracy and Fluency

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**Abstract:** The current study aimed at exploring the effects of using social networks on developing EFL learners' pragmatic competence through speaking accuracy and fluency. For this purpose, 60 EFL learners were selected based on their scores on the Oxford Placement Test and were randomly assigned into one experimental and one control group each with 30 participants. The experimental group used the Telegram application to get the special instruction on pragmatics through speaking, while the control group received the conventional instruction on pragmatics through speaking. The results of two Mann-Whitney U tests revealed that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group in speaking accuracy and fluency. Therefore, the first and the second null hypotheses were rejected. Also, the result of the Independent Sample T-test showed that there was no statistically significant difference between the pragmatic competence of male and female learners who had been exposed to social networks. Therefore, the third null hypothesis was confirmed. The findings of the current study have pedagogical implications for teachers, learners, and educators and highlight the need for strategic investment.

**Key words:** pragmatic competence, social networks, speaking fluency, speaking accuracy, telegram messenger.

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## 1. Introduction

Language is always changing; indeed, to learn a linguistic system is not the only objective of foreign language learning (FLL) or second language acquisition (SLA), but second or foreign language learners should become skillful at integrating a communicative system with the linguistic system (Verhoeven & Vermeer, 2002). Based on Canale and Swain (1980), "it is common to find the term 'communicative competence' used to refer exclusively to knowledge or capability relating to the rules of language use and the term 'grammatical (or linguistic) competence' used to refer to the reciprocal rules of grammar" (p. 5). According to a variety of communicative competence models suggested in the history of applied linguistics, in order to be a competent communicator, L2 learners require something more than grammatical knowledge. Through redefining the communicative competence and the start of communicative approach, the main focus has been on the functional abilities in the second language. This functional ability is responsible for understanding and producing appropriate language in communicative contexts based on particular sociocultural elements (Rueda, 2006).

The issue of pragmatic competence as one of the aspects of communicative competence is associated with elements influencing the meaning of utterances produced by interlocutors. Indeed, pragmatics put emphasis on the application of language in specific situations; it describes the effective factors on both literal and nonliteral meaning in individuals' communication. As Fasold (2006) defines, "pragmatics concerns both the relationship between context of use and sentence meaning, and the relationships among sentence meaning, context of use, and speaker's meaning" (p.137). Therefore, effective communication can be achieved through extra-linguistic factors, and it is here that pragmatics comes into the picture. Pragmatics, based on some authors' definition, is the study of the negotiation of meaning between speakers' and hearer's interaction in a given context of utterance (Leech, 1983; Levinson, 1984; Thomas, 1995; Yule, 2000). With this in mind,

Crandall and Basturkmen (2004) believe that textbook conversations cannot provide adequate pragmatic input. To remedy shortcomings, technology suggests essential learning areas in the field of language learning (Lai, Shum, & Tian, 2014). Providing opportunities for self-study helps learners increase their ownership of responsibility for learning English via encouraging them to form self-access learning resources and search for useful and appropriate materials to promote their own progress. Indeed, learner-centered learning points out to the change in focus on the classroom from the teacher to the learners. This shift makes it so effective when students ultimately direct their learning through self-access facilities for autonomous learning (Sheerin, 1989).

Learners trying to learn EFL or ESL require further language support. It is necessary to practice in hearing, reading, speaking, and writing in order to develop the essential experience and skills (Ybarra & Green, 2003). To fulfill these requirements, they use various instruments and programs such as Line, WhatsApp, and Telegram to learn the language easily and effectively. Despite growing of computer assisted language learning (CALL) popularity, the related literature to provide noticeable evidence of its effectiveness on second language acquisition is in somehow new and recent (Lyth, 2008).

Due to the importance of speaking skill in oral communication, Iranian EFL teachers have put more emphasis on the speaking product and less attention is paid to the processes and strategies of speaking. Since speaking as a productive skill is important for learners of any languages, this study aimed at investigating the effect of using social networks on developing EFL learners' pragmatic competence through speaking fluency as well as accuracy.

## 2. Review of the Related Literature

The speaking skill does not mean just being familiar with the linguistic aspects of language; linguistic aspects of the message expanding oral communication need more than memorizing vocabulary and grammatical comprehension. Based on Harmer (2001), students should know language features and the ability to process them in the communication procedure. According to Halliday (1978, p. 169), "communication is not merely an exchange of words between groups, but it is a ...sociological encounter and through exchanging of meanings in the process of communication, social reality is created, maintained and modified". Therefore, communicative ability has progressed by the speaking skill through sending and receiving information. Based on Byrne's (1986) definition, oral communication is "two-way process between speaker and listener (or listeners) and involves the productive skill of speaking and the receptive skill of understanding (or listening with understanding)" (p. 8). Therefore, both speaker and listener play a role in oral communication because speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning in three steps, namely producing, receiving and processing information. It should be mention that, just knowing the linguistic features is not speaking because the linguistic features of the text expanding oral communication demands more than grammatical comprehension and memorizing vocabulary.

Since language and culture are so closely connected to each other, the study of one requires the study of the other. In this way, language influences speakers' points of view and their understanding of the world and the way in which they communicate (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2004). As a result, it becomes vitally important for language learners to become familiar with the pragmatics of their target language in order to avoid miscommunication (Levinson, 1983). Understanding contextual implications is a necessary part of achieving communicative competence (Rintell & Mitchell, 1989). It could also be said that pragmatics, the study of language from a functional perspective, is making attempts to elaborate dimensions of linguistic structure through referring to non-linguistic causes (Levinson, 1983). Teaching pragmatic competence has gained advantage from remarkable attention due to its identification as one of the significant elements of language ability (Bachman, 1990). Studies about instructional pragmatics has generally put emphasis on the impacts of pragmatic instruction by using research methodologies largely grounded in cognitive approaches related to SLA (Alcón-Soler, 2005; Bardovi-Harlig & Vellenga, 2012).

The assessment of learners' pragmatic competence is important in the process of language teaching, yet it is complex for different reasons. Assessment of L2 pragmatic knowledge is an understudied field of pragmatics. However, small numbers of language teachers address this significant subject in language teaching and testing. Therefore, pragmatic knowledge tests are few both in most language programs and in high-stakes testing. Some researchers have made attempts to evaluate learners' pragmatic knowledge, but they followed a speech-act framework often criticized for pragmatic construct under-representation (Roever, 2011; Yamashita, 2008). Nowadays, teachers play a key role in mediating online language learning based on the ability to evaluate the effectiveness of any given device, the possibilities and limitations for making meaning and communication suggested by the available modes (Hampel, 2006), and the ability to apply these based on the students' needs, task requirements, and appropriate learning results, is largely acknowledged. In fact, whether technologies are combined into pedagogical activities in an arbitrary fashion, or utilized sufficiently, their real further value to language learning could be quite confined, if not highly questionable. However, the significance of sufficient training programmes for CALL-based language teaching was known by pedagogical regards and proper theoretical frameworks.

Social networking tools encourage language socialization and engagement with language in socially and pragmatically appropriate ways. These tools are web-based services through which individuals may maintain and develop social ties with people in their personal network in a multifaceted and multisensory environment (Jones & Bronack, 2008). Although

some commentators express the dangers of online social interactions (Gutierrez, Morales, & Martinez, 2009), other scholars praise these platforms for their informal, collaborative learning environments and their potential to enhance classroom education (Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009). The use of technology helps and motivates the students and engages them in various ways of learning. Based on Parveen (2016), utilizing technology gives students an opportunity to involve independently, privacy, gives chances for self-paced interactions, and a safe context in which errors are corrected and accurate feedback is given.

New ways of learning and teaching English as a second or foreign language has been created by the development of internet. Internet can be regarded as a most suitable instrument in learning and teaching because it presents authentic learning resources available without being in English-speaking contexts. In fact, technology offers essential learning contexts in the field of language teaching and learning (Lai et al., 2014). In a study, Chun (1998) found out that synchronous CMC presented an instrument to overcome some of problems by decreasing the pragmatic pressure of the interaction and letting more individualized control of the learning condition. Recent studies offered that synchronous CMC could help learners have more involvement and better quality language with regard to pragmatic improvement than that found in face-to-face exchange in that learners have the opportunity to process input, monitor and output through a written-based medium.

In another study, Jeong (2005) observed that internet addiction had crucial and negative relation with learners' academic performance, as well as emotional features. Seo (2004) proved Jeong's findings when he stated that the negative impact of internet is just on those users who use excessively and not on all users. Other study done by Moon (2011) examined the effect of Facebook on undergraduate academic performance, acknowledged that social media have negative effect on learners. Based on the result, the more learners use Facebook, the more it had effect on their academic performance. Similarly, Oye (2012) claimed that, most of the younger learners used social networking sites mostly for socializing activities, rather than for academic objective. In another study carried out by Shana (2012), it was discovered that learners used social network mostly for chatting and making friends. The findings revealed that only %26 of the participants (respondents) showed that they used social media for academic goal.

Computer-assisted language learning has mainly been used to improve listening strategies and vocabulary acquisition, but in developing learners' speaking ability little has been done. The purposes of the present research work were to investigate if the use of social networks specifically use of telegram, as a pedagogical strategy, can help EFL learners develop their speaking abilities or not, and also to find out whether there is a difference between the performances of male and female in pragmatic competence via speaking skill.

### Research Questions

This study was an attempt to address the following research questions and fulfill the research objectives:

RQ1: Does using social networks have any statistically significant effect on developing EFL learners' pragmatic competence through speaking fluency?

RQ2: Does using social networks have any statistically significant effect on developing EFL learners' pragmatic competence through speaking accuracy?

RQ3: Is there any statistically significant difference between the pragmatic competence of male and female learners who have been exposed to social networks?

## 3. Method

### 3.1 Participants

At the beginning of the study, 97 students whose ages ranged from 15 to 20 years old agreed to take part in this study voluntarily. The following Table shows the descriptive statistics of the homogenized participants.

Table 3.1  
*Distribution and Characteristics of Participants in Each Group*

Groups	Number	Age	Female	Male
Control Group	30	15-20	18	12
Experimental Group	30	15-20	18	12

Through the administration of a proficiency test, 36 female and 24 male learners who scored one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected as the sample of the study.

### 3.2 The Instrument of the Study

To achieve the purpose of the study, the following instruments were used: (1) a standard general English proficiency test, Oxford Placement Test (OPT) containing 60 items; (2) an oral discourse completion test (ODCT) consisted of 20 different situations the pre-test and post-test was administered. The items of ODCT were also chosen from the previous studies such as Olshtain and Weinbach's (1987) study of complaints, Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz's (1990) study of refusals, Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) study of request, and Rose's (2005) study of apology.

It should be mentioned that, the researcher computed the reliability of the pre-test/post-test in a pilot test. The pilot test was carried out to test the feasibility and the reliability of the speaking test designed to assess learners' pragmatic competence while speaking. Two raters took the responsibility of scoring the speaking accuracy and fluency in general and the pragmatic competence in particular. The inter-rater reliability was used to determine the reliability of the speaking test. Each rater was given the recorded speeches as well as the transcription of the speeches to score independently. They were instructed in scoring tests by means of the scoring criteria, IELTS Speaking Band Descriptors.

### 3.3 Procedure

After selecting the sample of the study, the researcher assigned the participants into experimental and control groups each containing 30 learners. A speaking pre-test was administered for both groups before starting the experiment. To carry out the ODCT, learners were taught to give their immediate answers in English. They were not required to spend a lot of time thinking about what answer they should provide; instead, they had to respond as naturally as possible and try to express their response as they feel they would say it in the situation. Each participant was given a sheet including the descriptions of the situations as well as his/her role. They had approximately 1-2 minutes to focus on the situations and take notes if necessary. Following this, the teacher read each situation and the participants responded orally while their voices were recorded. They had the option of opting out if they felt that no verbal answer was necessary. After administration of the pre-test, the experimental group received the instruction via video clips, photos, and group discussions. Every day at a determined time all the participants of this group were online and received the materials. They could ask and answer questions via voice messages. They put their messages in the group and other learners could give comments. In fact, the students received teacher and peer correction. Other students could listen to the messages and give comments. On the other hand, the students of control group took part in a classroom and received traditional instruction including teacher's explanations, role plays, reading texts and answering the questions. They did not receive extra instruction via telegram. At the end of the treatment process, the posttest was administered to all the students in the two groups to assess the effectiveness of the treatment process. The 20-item ODCT was administered as the posttest. The speaking pretest and posttest were administered based on the teacher's guide and the speech samples were recorded on a voice recorder. Two English language supervisors were chosen as the raters. They used IELTS Speaking Band Descriptors (public version) to score the pretest and the posttest. The researcher of the present study used the inter-rater reliability to determine the reliability of the speaking tests.

### 3.4 Design of the Study

The researcher of this study used a quantitative research design. The design was a quasi-experimental design with treatment, a pretest and a posttest, and random assignment of the participants into two experimental and control groups. In this study, using social networks as independent variable and learners' pragmatic competence and speaking accuracy and fluency as dependent variables were studied in details. The factor of gender also was considered as another variable in this study.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Results Related to the First Research Question

Before analysing the first null hypothesis, the two groups were compared on their pre-test of pragmatic in order to prove their homogeneity. Therefore, the researcher tested the normality of the pre-test and post-test scores of the two groups on their fluency.

Table 4.1

*The Result of the Mann-Whitney U Test for the Comparison of the Fluency Posttest Scores*

	Post_Fluency
Mann-Whitney U	83.000
Wilcoxon W	548.000
Z	-5.522
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

Based on Table 4.1, the experimental group performed significantly better on the posttest of the pragmatic than the control group did, ( $U = 83, P < .05$ ). Hence, the researcher safely rejected the first null hypothesis that 'using social networks does not have any statistically significant effect on developing EFL learners' pragmatic competence through speaking fluency'.

#### 4.2 Results Related to the Second Research Question

Before analysing the second null hypothesis, the two groups were compared on their pre-test of pragmatic in order to prove their homogeneity. Therefore, the researcher tested the normality of the pre-test and post-test scores of the two groups on their accuracy.

Table 4.2

*The Result of the Mann-Whitney U Test for the Comparison of the Accuracy Posttest Scores*

	Post_Accuracy
Mann-Whitney U	49.000
Wilcoxon W	514.000
Z	-6.057
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

Based on the above Table, the experimental group performed significantly better on the posttest of the pragmatic than the control group did regarding accuracy, ( $U = 49, P < .05$ ). Hence, the researcher safely rejected the second null hypothesis that 'using social networks does not have any significant effect on developing EFL learners' pragmatic competence through speaking accuracy.

### 4.3 Results Related to the Third Research Question

Table 4.3

*The Result of the Independent Samples T-Test for the Comparison of Males and Females*

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Difference
	F	Sig.	t	df				
Exp-Posttest	.177	.677	.529	28	.601	-.33	.62	
Equal variances assumed								
Equal variances not assumed			.5325	21.594	.594	-.33	.61	

The independent t-test, also called the two samples t-test determines whether there is a statistically significant difference between the means for male and female participants. The Sig is larger than .05; it shows that variances are equal. So the first row of Levene's test is the basis of the interpretation of the mean scores. Based on the table 4, there was no difference between the male and the female participants, the p-value,  $t(28) = .529$ , is larger than the alpha level,  $P > .05$ . When the p-value is larger than .05, the researcher confirmed the third null hypothesis that states, there is no statistically significant difference between the pragmatic competence of male and female learners who have been exposed to social networks.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

Considering the outcomes of the present study, it can be concluded that the results of this study supports the outcomes of Amry (2014), Hwang, Wu, Zhuang, and Huang, (2013), and Jabbour (2013), who discovered that mobile learning had a positive effect on learners' achievement. These findings are also in agreement with a case study carried out by Nomass (2013) who reviewed briefly the way technology can be used in improving the language skills of the learner. The outcomes of her study revealed that most of the learners preferred the application of technology, particularly computers, in promoting their L2 skills. The findings of this study are also consistent with the results of Badaki, Naderi, and Ayati (2013), Mitra and Steffensmeier's (2000) studies, which found mobile learning to be effective in the process of teaching and learning. The results of this study are in agreement with the results of the study carried out by Lan, Hung, and Hsu (2011) who made an attempt to develop various guided writing strategies according to media richness theory and further assess the impacts of these writing strategies on younger learners' writing attitudes in the case of enjoyment, motivation, and anxiety. The results indicated that providing a web-based learning atmosphere with high richness media could guide learners to write and maintain more positive writing attitudes in the case enjoyment, motivation, and anxiety.

Also, the findings of the present study are in line with the results of Al-Aameri (2011), Hayati, Jalilifar, and Mashhdi (2013), and Thornton and Houser (2005) as their findings indicate that learners generally have a positive attitude toward mobile learning. It also confirms the results of Jonassen, Carr, and Yueh's (1998) research, which shows that mixing pleasure with learning is one of mobile learning's greatest advantages. Moreover, these findings are also in harmony with what is presented by Blake (2009) who explored that the internet chat group revealed higher average gain scores on all five measures in comparison to the control group and higher average on all measures in comparison to the face-to-face group for developing oral fluency in the L2. In addition, the outcomes indicated that students who utilized the internet chat method were able to improve their performance in speaking skills, and they could improve their speaking skills more than those who merely took part in face-to-face interaction lessons without utilizing this method.

In light of the results of another study carried out by Derakhshan and Eslami-Rasekh (2015), we can see that audio-visual materials enhancing learners' interlanguage pragmatic abilities provide authentic and contextualized input for EFL/ESL learners. The research findings also support the fact that the present textbooks do not take into account the most current pedagogical theories (Jiang, 2006) and that pragmatics does not play a primary role in textbooks (Boxer & Pickering, 1995). Therefore, ESL/EFL teachers should pay more attention to the limitations of textbooks used in their classes, and they should take the initiative in compensating for these drawbacks.

On the other hand, the outcomes of the present study are against what is presented by AL-Sa'di and Hamdan (2005) who explained the major linguistic aspects of English applied in real-time internet chat channels. They discovered that sentences were characteristically simple and short, great numbers of vocabularies were distorted and shortened in known and unknown way, acronyms and abbreviations were universal and taboo vocabularies were likely to take place in most chat sessions.

To wrap up the discussion and on the basis of the outcomes of this study, it was revealed that learners were likely to be influenced by social networks. Social networks are not only providing learners another world to make new friends, also providing them a good and effective way to learn new subjects. It also can be claimed that effective interaction is the way of promoting the learners' speaking skill and gender has no effect on their speaking performance. Finally, the researcher would like to say that besides the pragmatic competence, social networks have a great effect on developing learners' fluency, accuracy in speaking. Moreover, it helps in improving learners' language skills in general and also the receptive and productive skills simultaneously.

Most Iranian EFL learners are not pragmatically competent due to the lack of sufficient formal training in this field. Therefore, the researcher has argued that Iranian EFL learners should be provided with particular instructions of pragmatic knowledge to facilitate the development of their pragmatic competence. The research has revealed that EFL students were likely to be affected by social networks. Social networks are attractive; they are not only providing learners another world to make friends and releasing their pressure, also providing an opportunity to learn a language. With respect to the findings of this study and similar studies in the field of language teaching and learning, it can be concluded that the internet and computer-mediated communication are quickly becoming significant instruments of communication not only for cross-cultural cooperation, but also for improving learners' language proficiency. With the growing demand for learning English in nearly all over the world and a fast development of non-native English-speaking individuals, the relationship between English learning and computer application will become closer and stronger. However, factors other than English proficiency and technology influence cross-cultural communication. A more in-depth investigation of the elements that can contribute to the success of web-based programs demands the association of elements in both areas.

Teachers who intend to improve their learners' pragmatic knowledge can use the findings as a guide to help them in language learning activities. They should provide appropriate instructional approaches, instruments, and materials in the class in order to enhance learners' motivation through meaningful communication. By meaningful communication, it means authentic and two-way conversations that engage active listening, support and empathy. The main contribution of the present study to the existing research literature is that it adopts a more comprehensive look towards the effect of explicit instruction using social networks on developing pragmatic competence while speaking. The result of the study also revealed that students were intrinsically motivated to use their cellphones to learn new terms because they find out that learning to speak is of crucial importance to have effective and meaningful communication. Course designers require knowing which parts of e-learning are efficient for enhancing learning as well as the best ways to use these parts in course delivery.

Every study suffers from some limitations and delimitations; therefore, the present research was not an exception. As a result, the generalizations should be made with caution and further research is needed to overcome limitations. First, the study was limited to intermediate level of proficiency, so the findings are applicable to learners at this level. Further research is required to investigate the effect of pragmatic instruction on learners at other levels of proficiency (e.g. beginners, and advanced levels). Second, the present study involved a small number of participants; therefore, the results cannot be generalized for larger population. Further research can be done to explore the effect of pragmatic instruction on the acquisition of a larger sample of participants. Third, the present study was delimited to the improvement of pragmatic competence using social networks while speaking; interested researchers can investigate the effect of improvement of pragmatic competence considering other language skills. Finally, since most of the language learners in this study were well familiar with social networks and it was easy to use, the researcher preferred to use Telegram rather than other types of social networks; further research can be carried out using other types of social networks such as WhatsApp or Line.

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