



Pragmatic Instruction and Speaking Ability of Iraqi EFL Learners in Virtual vs. Face-to-face Classroom Contexts: Expressive, Declarative, and Directive Speech Acts in Focus

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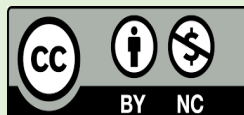
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Abstract

This study was an attempt to see whether the instruction of pragmatic markers in virtual vs. face-to-face classroom settings had any effect on Iraqi EFL learners' speaking ability. It also attempted to examine the intervening effects of some factors including age (teenagers in the language institute vs. adults in the university), gender, social class, and the learners' English language proficiency levels. To achieve these purposes, a group of 224 Iraqi EFL learners at a university and a private language institute in Kufa, Iraq passing conversation courses were selected and randomly divided into four groups. The two experimental groups (both in university and language institute settings) received instruction on pragmatic markers in online vs. face-to-face conversation classrooms while the two control groups (in university and language institute settings) did not receive instruction on pragmatic markers in online vs. face-to-face conversation classrooms. An English language speaking test was given to the learners to assess their oral performance before and after the treatment. The test was randomly selected from IELTS speaking tests. For the teenagers in the language institute, a simplified speaking task was designed based on IELTS criteria for assessing speaking performance. The results indicated that generally those who received pragmatic instruction outperformed those who did not receive such kind of instruction and the participants in face-to-face classrooms outperformed their virtual counterparts in terms of speaking ability. The study also examined the intervening effects of some social and personal factors including age, gender, social class and level of language proficiency. Based on the findings of this study, the male participants and the students from higher proficiency levels outperformed females and their lower proficiency counterparts in terms of speaking ability. However, they did not show any differences with regard to age and social class. This study offers important implications for EFL teachers, learners and material designers, with regard to the promising effect of face-to-face instruction of different pragmatic features of language through speech acts on learners' speaking skill.

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Introduction

Pragmatic competence has been considered as an important and formidable aspect of language to master. Due to its difficulty and importance, pragmatic instruction has received specific attention in L2 research. It is generally believed that grammar-centered instruction is rarely able to develop the pragmatic aspects of language (Li, 2015). However, EFL teachers either do not know how to integrate pragmatics into their language instruction (Birjandi & Soleimani, 2013) or avoid teaching pragmatic aspects of the second language. Some reasons have been mentioned for EFL teachers' neglect of teaching pragmatics. The first reason is that EFL teachers are non-native speakers of English; therefore, they do not have enough pragmatic knowledge themselves (Rose, 1994). The second reason is that the pedagogical resources appropriate for teaching pragmatics are not enough for providing pragmatic input for EFL learners (Birjandi & Soleimani, 2013, Gilmore, 2004; Petraki & Bayes, 2013; Uso-Juan, 2010). Another reason is that the available tests mostly assess the linguistic aspects of language without paying attention to the pragmatic aspects of the language (Liu, 2012).

Such kinds of limitations in L2 pragmatic instruction and research were the major impetus for conducting this study. Among the pragmatic aspects of the language, pragmatic markers (PMs) were selected as the major focus of this study. PMs have been considered as recurrent linguistic forms with little lexical meaning but high pragmatic function in communication (Andersen, 2001; Schiffrin, 1987). They are supposed to play an important role in developing pragmatic competence. They generally play the role of connectors, and help the text become more cohesive and coherent. As Crystal (1988) metaphorically stated, pragmatic expressions such as *but, finally, you know* work as the oil to make the flow of communication go smoothly and effectively. One important point to mention here is that in this study, the term "pragmatic marker" has been used as an umbrella term to include discourse markers as well. As Fraser (1996) stated, "a discourse marker is the type of pragmatic marker 'which signals the relationship of the basic message to the foregoing discourse'" (p. 186) while PMs have a number of functions to guide the speaker to organize the speech and to express his/her feelings and attitudes (Aijmer, 2013).

In an early study on pragmatic markers, Schiffrin (1987) used this term to refer to "sequentially dependent elements that bracket units of talk" (p. 31). Other terms have also been used in the literature to refer to pragmatic markers such as *cue phrases* (Knott & Dale, 1994), *discourse connectives* (Blakemore, 2002), *pragmatic connectives* (Stubbs, 1983), *pragmatic formatives* (Fraser, 1987), etc.

The term "pragmatic marker", employed by Andersen (2001), refers to the linguistic elements that do not carry much lexical meaning but play important pragmatic functions. In this study, the term *pragmatic marker* is used by the researchers, following the definition of Carter and McCarthy (2006). According to Carter and McCarthy (2006), PMs are "a class of items which operate outside the structural limits of the clause and encode speakers' intentions and interpersonal meanings" (p. 208). They subcategorized PMs into discourse markers, stance markers, hedges, and interjections as demonstrated as demonstrated in the following table.

Table 1. *Types of PMs (adapted from Carter & McCarthy, 2006, 208)*

Name	Definition	Examples
discourse markers	indicate the speaker's intentions with regard to organizing, structuring, and monitoring the discourse	you know so well I mean
stance markers	indicate the speaker's stance vis-à-vis the message	actually of course, hopefully
Hedges	enable speakers to be less assertive in formulating their message	I think just kind of
interjections	indicate affective responses and reactions to the discourse	gosh wow ouch

In most EFL contexts, explicit instruction of PMs is somehow neglected; therefore, their importance for L2 communication has not been highlighted (Liao, 2009). However, the previous studies confirmed that instruction seems effective in learning these signals more easily (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996). Most studies on L2 pragmatic development have focused on the identification and calculation of the use of L2 PMs and the research on their explicit instruction is rare (Magliacane & Howard, 2019; Müller, 2005).

The necessity of considering PMs for further research is especially felt for EFL contexts where language learners do not have a lot of opportunities to practice learning English. Few, if any, research evidence exists to show the significance of PMs and its instruction among English language learners in Iraq. Thus, this study is conceived to fill this gap by examining the effect of PM instruction on the speaking performance of Iraqi EFL learners.

Although PMs are frequently used in native speaker usage (Lewis, 2006), their instruction in L2 contexts is limited (Liao, 2009). PMs play important roles in the development of L2 proficiency (Neary-Sundquist, 2014). These signals help speakers to convey their intentions or attitudes. In other words, as Carter and McCarthy (2006) pointed out, "PMs are a broad class of items that can provide structure and organization to utterances while indicating attitude, assertiveness, or reactions to discourse" (p. 105).

Previous research in this area has a comparative nature, examining the pragmatic markers used by native and non-native speakers (Fernandez et al., 2014; Aijmer, 2013; Muller, 2005). Generally, in spite of their key role in communication, PMs are hardly addressed in EFL classroom practice and research (Vellenga 2004). This has led to the learners' insufficient knowledge of PMs. This is clearly the case in Iraq where PMs have been neglected in classroom practice. In fact, teaching materials for PMs are rare in the English language education system of Iraq.

Despite various functions that PMs have and their significant role in L2 communicative competence, they have not received due attention in SLA research (Müller, 2005). The present study attempted to fill the gap in the previous research by investigating the effect of instructing PMs on speaking ability of Iraqi EFL learners.

As the literature on PMs indicates, very few studies (e.g. Erman, 2001; Gabarro-Lopez, 2019), have examined the impact of social and personal factors on employing PMs in speech. Considering the point that there is a dearth of research on pragmatics, especially PMs, in Iraq, the present study aimed to focus on the EFL learners in this context to explore the use of these markers in the Iraqi EFL learners' speech and examine whether explicit instruction of these markers in online and face-to-face classrooms could enhance their use and improve speaking performance among this group of learners. More specifically, this study considered the use of PMs in relation to some social and personal factors such as social class, gender, age, and also the learner's English language proficiency level to determine whether instruction of PMs works better and improves speaking ability of certain learners (e.g. females vs. males, teenagers in language institutes vs. adults at universities, learners in low-proficiency vs. learners in high-proficiency levels, and different social classes) in particular learning contexts (e.g., traditional face-to-face classroom vs. online classrooms). To achieve these purposes, the following questions were addressed:

1. Are there any significant differences in speaking performance of the language learners who receive PM instruction and those who do not receive PM instruction on expressive, declarative, and directive speech acts?

1.1. Is there any significant difference in speaking performance of the learners in online classroom (in university and language institute) with PM instruction and the learners in face-to-face classroom (in university and language institute) where PM instruction also exists?

1.2. Is there any significant difference in speaking performance of the learners in online classroom (in university and language institute) who do not receive PM instruction and the learners in face-to-face speaking classroom (in university and language institute) where no PM instruction exists?

1.3. Is there any significant difference in speaking performance of the learners in online language classroom (in university and language institute) with PM instruction and the learners in online classroom (in university and language institute) without PM instruction?

1.4. Is there any significant difference in speaking performance of the learners in face-to-face classroom (in university and language institute) with PM instruction and the learners in face-to-face classroom (in university and language institute) without PM instruction?

1.5. Is there any significant difference in speaking performance of the learners in online classroom (in university and language institute) with PM instruction and the learners in face-to-face classroom (in university and language institute) without PM instruction?

1.6. Is there any significant difference in speaking performance of the learners in online classroom (in university and language institute) which does not receive PM instruction and the learners in face-to-face classroom (in university and language institute) which receives PM instruction?

2. Are there any significant differences in speaking performance between the Iraqi EFL learners who experience PM instruction in online and face-to-face classrooms with regard to their gender, age, social class, and English language proficiency level?

1. Review of the literature

The issue of pragmatic instruction has always attracted the attention of EFL researchers. Regarding the impact of instruction, [Alsuhaibani \(2022\)](#) examined the role of consciousness-raising instruction on EFL students' development of the speech act of complimenting. The results confirmed the positive effect of pragmatic consciousness-raising instruction on participants' application of compliments. In another study on speech acts, [Abolfathiasl and Abdullah \(2015\)](#) examined the effect of consciousness-raising tasks on EFL students' application of suggestions. The results showed that the frequency of using appropriate suggestion strategies and making use of linguistic resources increased after the instruction. In the EFL context of Iran, [Zand-Moghadam et al. \(2020\)](#) investigated the effect of being bilingual on meta-pragmatic awareness and pragmatic competence in third language learning among Turkmen-Persian bilinguals learning English as a third language. The results confirmed the outperformance of bilingual EFL learners over monolingual EFL learners in terms of both pragmatic competence and meta-pragmatic awareness. In a similar study, the effect of explicit vs. implicit instruction of compliment responses on Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic awareness was investigated by [Cheng and Liang \(2015\)](#) using role-plays and conversations. The findings confirmed the effectiveness of both explicit and implicit instruction of compliment responses on developing students' pragmatic awareness of compliment responses.

Regarding the effect of context (EFL vs. in-house L2 contexts) on learning pragmatic aspects of language, several studies have been undertaken with a comparative perspective. [Schauer \(2006\)](#) reported that the learners studying language in an L2 context used pragmatic aspects of language more appropriately than the group who learned in an EFL context. Another related factor was the years of residency in an L2 context. [Bataller's study \(2010\)](#) revealed a positive relationship between the length of residence in an L2 and the L2 learners' pragmatic competence (request strategies in that case). The same finding was reported by [Ren \(2013\)](#) for Chinese learners of English and [Taguchi \(2014\)](#).

Some studies focused on the EFL context without a comparative perspective. For example, [Caprario \(2020\)](#) attempted to examine the development of pragmatic competence in an EAP context focusing on the challenges the students face and the strategies they employ for overcoming them at the Sino-US institution in China. Some of the challenges reported by the learners were their inability to speak in the classroom, inability to make themselves understood when speaking, inability to repair communication flaws, which were all due to their inappropriate or lack of appropriate knowledge of pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic strategies.

In research, which was similar to the present study and was undertaken in the EFL context of Iran, [Davarzani and Talebzadeh \(2021\)](#) examined the effect of virtual vs. face to face classroom teaching of speech acts on pragmatic awareness of EFL learners. A quasi-experimental design was used to compare the performance of the learners on the pre-test and post-test of speech acts. The findings were in favor of direct instruction of speech acts in both virtual and face to face classroom contexts; though face to face classroom group outperformed those who were in the virtual classroom in terms of pragmatic awareness.

Regarding PM instruction, in an interesting study, Li (2015) observed some degrees of negative pragmatic transfer, due to the limited linguistic input of both the course-books EFL learners were exposed to and the formal instruction they received in the classrooms in a Chinese EFL context.

In another comparative study, Diao and Chen (2021) investigated the way Mandarin L1 and L2 speakers used final-utterance PMs in a mixed-methods study examining spontaneous conversations among American students and their Chinese classmates. The findings showed that final utterance PMs were usually neglected by both L1 and L2 speakers. However, qualitative results indicated that L1 speakers used them in order to negotiate intercultural differences and develop interpersonal relationship while L2 speakers were not aware of these functions.

However, few studies have taken a comparative perspective to examine the effects of face-to-face and virtual class environments on the development of L2 pragmatics and pragmatic awareness among Iraqi EFL learners, particularly, as far as technology-mediated online classes are concerned. That was the main impetus for conducting this study.

2. Methodology

2. 1. Design and participants

This quasi-experimental study was conducted from September 2021 to January 2022 (about four months). The participants included 224 Iraqi EFL learners of English Translation and teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) at a university and a private language institute in Kufa, Iraq. These participants who were passing conversation courses in the university or language institute were selected based on convenience sampling. They were randomly divided into four groups including experimental group one (Exp1), experimental group two (Exp2), control group one (Cont1), and control group two (Cont2). They received three different kinds of instruction lasting 30 sessions of 90 minutes.

The first group was the Exp1 and was the online dialogue class. This group consisted of 51 learners who had their conversation class in the university or language institute. Exp1 experienced explicit training in how to use PMs effectively. Exp1 was then divided into two smaller groups of adults studying in university (Exp1A) and teenagers learning English in a private language institute (Exp1T).

The second group was named the Exp2. This group, which consisted of 57 learners, participated in a face-to-face classroom and had PM instruction in the university or language institute venue. This group was also categorized into two smaller groups of adults in the university context (Exp2A) and teenagers in the private language institute (Exp2T) for subsequent analyses.

The third group served as the first control group (Cont1). The subjects of this group were 54 learners who took part in an online class (either in the university or language institute). In this group, the learners were not instructed in PM use in their speech. Cont1 group was also classified into two smaller groups of adults in the university (Cont1A) and teenagers in the private language institute (Cont1T) for the next analyses.

Finally, the fourth group was the Cont2. In this group, there were 62 learners and had their conversation class (in the university or language institute venue) in the traditional face-to-face classroom and did not receive any PM instruction. Cont2 group was also classified into two smaller groups of adults in the university (Cont2A) and teenagers in the private language institute (Cont2T) for the subsequent analyses

The participants included 125 female (55.8%) and 95 male (42.5%) subjects, and four (1.7%) participants who did not reveal their gender. Their ages varied from 14 to 28 years old. They belonged to different levels of language proficiency ranging from elementary to advanced level based on their scores on the language proficiency test. In order to ease the analysis of data and the reports, the researchers divided the respondents into two groups in terms of age and language proficiency. They reduced language proficiency to two groups of low proficiency (LP) (which included beginner, elementary, and lower intermediate levels) and high proficiency (HP) (which included upper intermediate, advanced, and very advanced levels). Moreover, the researchers categorized age into two groups of teenagers (14-18) and adults (18+).

From among 12 conversation courses in the university and language institute, eight were selected randomly for the purpose of this research. All the subjects of this study were native speakers of Arabic and were taking courses for learning English whose emphasis was on listening and speaking.

In this study, the participants' social class was determined subjectively by the participants themselves based on their own or fathers' occupation, income, education, and some other criteria.

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics (gender, age, language proficiency level, and social class) of the participants.

Table 2. Demographic Information of the Participants

Age			Gender		Language proficiency							Social class									
14-18	+18	Not disclosed	Male	Female	Not disclosed	Total	beginner	elementary	lower-intermediate	upper-intermediate	advanced	very advanced	Not disclosed	Total	Upper class	Upper-middle class	Middle class	Working class	Lower class	Not disclosed	Total
79	142	3	95	125	4	224	9	38	106	56	10	5	0	29	37	133	13	7	5	224	
35.2%	63.3%	1.3%	42.5%	55.8%	1.7%	100%	4%	16.9%	47.3%	25%	4.4%	2.2%	0	100%	12.94%	16.51%	59.37%	5.80%	3.12%	2.23%	100%

As Table 2 shows, the number of adult participants is more than teenagers with a ratio of 1.79 (35.2% are teenagers and 63.3% are adults). Three learners (1.3%) did not mention their age. Table 2 further shows that the female participants (55.8%) are more than male ones (42.5%). The table also demonstrates that the number of participants in the LP group in general (n=153, 68.3%) is more than the participants in the HP group (n=71, 31.6%). Moreover, Table 2 presents the number and percentage of the learners in different social classes; based on the findings shown in this table, 12.94% of the learners belonged to the upper class, 16.51% belonged to the upper middle class, 59.37% belonged to the middle class, 5.80% belonged to the working class and 3.12% belonged to the lower class.

The individuals' participation in this study was voluntary; the participants were willing to take part in the study. It is worth mentioning that the learners who were unwilling to take part (i.e., 13 participants) were omitted from the statistical analysis without being informed. A total of 224 learners were selected as the finalized research sample. The researchers followed ethical approval on the basis of the informed consent measures and informed the learners of this point that they were participating voluntarily and that they could withdraw when they wish. They were made sure that their personal information as well as their performance on the tests were completely confidential.

There were two instructors, one male (39 years old) and one female (40 years old) in this study. They were experienced EFL teachers with the teaching experience of about 16 years. For the purpose of this study, they were informed to teach with special focus on PMs. Moreover, one IELTS expert was invited as the examiner to help the researchers in marking and analysing the participants' oral performances. The oral performances of the participants were then scored based on IELTS Speaking Descriptor.

2. 2. English Language Proficiency Test

To measure the learners' English language proficiency, a version of Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT) was used. The participants of this study were supposed to answer all 60 items of this test comprising vocabulary, grammar, and cloze tests in multiple-choice format, in 30-45 minutes. In this study, following the scoring criteria developed by Allan (2004), the participants who scored 39 and below were assigned to the low proficiency level, and those whose scores were within the range of 40-60 were classified as high proficiency level.

2. 3. Pre-tests and Post-tests of Speaking

English language speaking tests were given to the learners to assess their oral performance before and after the treatment. The pre-test and the post-test were the same. For adults in the university, a sample IELTS test was used. This test was randomly selected from IELTS Speaking Tests. For the teenagers in the language institute, simplified speaking tasks were designed based on IELTS criteria for assessing speaking performance. The reliability and validity of these tests were checked. Face validity and content validity were examined by three IELTS experts. To examine the inter-rater reliability of the pre-test, Cronbach's α was employed. The results revealed that the inter-rater reliability index was satisfactory ($r=.87$).

Each participant was scored based on "IELTS Speaking Descriptor", which is considered a standard scale for scoring based on four criteria defined by Seedhouse et al. (2018): Fluency and Coherence refers to the ability to talk with normal levels of continuity, rate and effort and

to link ideas and language together to form coherent, connected speech. The key indicators of fluency are speech rate and speech continuity. For coherence, the key indicators are logical sequencing of sentences, clear marking of stages in a discussion, narration or argument, and the use of cohesive devices (e.g., connectors, pronouns and conjunctions) within and between 'sentences. Lexical Resource refers to the range of vocabulary the candidate can use and the precision with which meanings and attitudes can be expressed. The key indicators are the variety of words used, the adequacy and appropriacy of the words used and the ability to circumlocute (get round a vocabulary gap by using other words) with or without noticeable hesitation. Grammatical Range and Accuracy refer to the range and the accurate and appropriate use of the candidate's grammatical resource. The key indicators of grammatical range are the length and complexity of the spoken sentences, the appropriate use of subordinate clauses, and variety of sentence structures, and the ability to move elements around for information focus. The key indicators of grammatical accuracy are the number of grammatical errors in a given amount of speech and the communicative effect of error. Pronunciation refers to the capacity to produce comprehensible speech in fulfilling the speaking test requirements. The key indicators will be the amount of strain caused to the listener, the amount of unintelligible speech and the noticeability of L1 influence (p. 5).

2. 4. Personal Information Questionnaire

All the learners in the Experimental groups, i.e. Exp1 and Exp2, were asked to fill out a short questionnaire in the beginning of the semester to specify their gender, age, and social class. In this study, social class was determined subjectively by the participants themselves based on their own or their fathers' occupation, income, education, and some other criteria. The questionnaire was designed by the researchers and validated by two expert EFL teachers.

2. 5. Procedure

At the beginning, some intact English language classes at a university and a private language institute in Kufa were randomly selected. From among 12 available conversation classes, eight classes were randomly chosen; four classes in the university and four classes in the language institute. In these classes, the learners were learning English especially for improving their listening and speaking skills. All these classes were randomly divided into four general groups of Exp1, Exp2, Cont1, and Cont2. Prior to the experiment, the participants were informed about the objectives of the study and they signed the consent form. They were assured that their performance would not affect their final exam scores and the results would remain confidential. Moreover, the researchers rewarded them with a specific amount of money for their time and cooperation. Then, OQPT (2001) was given to all the participants to measure the level of their language proficiency.

In the second week, the pre-test was given to all the participants to determine their speaking score at the beginning of the research. Moreover, the participants in the experimental groups filled out the personal information questionnaire to specify their demographic characteristics including gender, age, language proficiency level, and social class (these details were going to be used in the analyses of the data later). They were instructed how to fill the self-report questionnaire. The participants completed this questionnaire in five minutes. Then, the treatment began.

In the control groups, the teachers did not have any specific emphasis on using PMs. In other words, they did not have any training on how to use these markers in speech. However, the experimental groups experienced explicit training on how to use PMs in their speech effectively. The treatment lasted for 30 sessions. At the end of the treatment, the participants in the four groups took the post-test. This test was the tool for measuring their speaking ability at the end of the semester and made it possible to make a comparison between the language learners' speaking scores at the beginning of the semester and their end-of-semester scores. Moreover, the extent of this improvement was compared across males and females, different age groups, different social groups and different language proficiency levels.

As mentioned before, the current study followed the definition and the list introduced by Carter and McCarthy (2006) for PMs. This classification is accompanied by a list of 121 expressions. This list was selected because of its comprehensive nature, covering a large number of PMs and its lucid definitions for every category.

3. Results and Discussion

In order to find the answers to the research questions, 224 Iraqi EFL learners of English translation and teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) at a university and a private language institute in Kufa, Iraq were selected based on convenience sampling. Then, they were randomly assigned into experimental group one (Exp1), experimental group two (Exp2), control group one (Cont1), and control group two (Cont2). The first experimental group included 51 learners attending online instruction on PMs in their conversation classes. This group was further divided into two smaller groups of adults studying in university and teenagers learning English in a private language institute. The parallel experimental group (57 learners) was treated in the same way except the context of instruction that was face-to-face. In a parallel manner, the first control group, who did not receive instruction on pragmatic markers, participated in online conversation classes and the second control group, who did not receive instruction on pragmatic markers, participated in face-to-face conversation classes.

In order to examine the normality of the scores, Shapiro-Wilk and Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests were employed. The results have been demonstrated in the following table.

Table 3. Results of Tests of Normality

Tests of Normality			Kolmogorov-Smirnova			Shapiro-Wilk		
Group			Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
			Online classroom	Exam	PreTest	0.167	51	0.166
Group	PostTest	0.139		51	0.180	0.940	51	0.060
Exam	PreTest	0.185		51	0.157	0.916	51	0.084
Group	PostTest	0.153		51	0.173	0.937	51	0.063
face-to-face classroom	Exam	PreTest	0.139	57	0.180	0.936	57	0.064
	Group	PostTest	0.148	57	0.176	0.930	57	0.070
	Exam	PreTest	0.185	57	0.158	0.923	57	0.077
	Group	PostTest	0.167	57	0.167	0.931	57	0.069

For ANOVA, the distribution of the dependent variable in both the experimental and the control groups should be normal or near normal. If the distribution is not normal but the skewedness and the kurtosis of the data distribution curve are small and negligible, again the ANOVA can be used. In order to examine the normality, Shapiro-Wilk and Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests were employed. As demonstrated in Table 4. 4, the results of both Shapiro-Wilk and Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests confirmed the normality of the scores of both the experimental and the control groups in the pre-test and post-test because the level of significance of all tests is above 0.05.

Equality of variances

According to this presupposition, the variances of the groups under investigation must be equal. Levene's Test was used to check the equality of error variances. Table 4. demonstrates the results of Levene's Test.

Table 4. *Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances*

	Group	F	df1	df2	Sig
Online	Exam	0.438	1	100	0.509
classroom	control	0.017	1	100	0.898
face-to-face	Exam	0.003	1	112	0.959
classroom	control	0.161	1	112	0.689

As demonstrated in Table 4.5, the level of significance is above 0.05. Therefore, the null hypothesis of equal variances is confirmed; the variances of the dependent variables among the groups are equal.

The first question of the study examined whether there was any significant difference in speaking performance of the learners in online classroom (in university and language institute) with PM instruction and the learners in face-to-face classroom (in university and language institute) where PM instruction also existed. The findings indicated that the speaking performance of both experimental groups, who received instruction on pragmatic markers, improved after the treatment; however, the face-to face experimental group outperformed the online experimental group in speaking performance.

Table 5. *Tests of Between-Subjects Effects*

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Group	9.584	1	9.584	6.282	0.013	0.029
Error	326.498	214	1.526			
Total	336.082	215				

This finding confirmed the important role of instruction for pragmatic development of the EFL learners. In other words, no matter what the mode of instruction was (online or face to face), it improved the pragmatic knowledge of the participants although the face-to-face instruction was more effective. The outperformance of the participants of the face-to-face class was quite in line with the findings of Davarzani and Talebzadeh (2020) who investigated the effect of virtual and face-to-face classroom instruction of speech acts on the pragmatic development of a group of Iranian EFL learners. The results of their study indicated that

instruction of speech acts both virtually and in the face-to-face context promoted pragmatic awareness among the Iranian EFL learners though face-to-face classroom instruction of speech acts proved more effective. This finding is also in line with those of previous studies like Fazilatfar and Cheraghi' (2013). They found that instruction had a positive effect on the development of EFL learners' socio-pragmatic competence for both explicit and implicit groups though the explicit group performed better. One justification worth mentioning regarding the better speaking performance of the face-to-face instruction group compared to the online instruction group is the probable effect of cultural factors (Yuan, 2018). Iraqi students are more accustomed to the face-to-face classroom instruction with the teacher-centered techniques. Therefore, they perform better in such kind of teaching context.

The first question was subdivided into six minor questions in order to examine different teaching contexts. The first sub-question examined whether there was any significant difference in speaking performance of the learners in online classroom (in university and language institute) who did not receive PM instruction and the learners in face-to-face speaking classroom (in university and language institute) where no PM instruction existed. The results indicated that there was no difference between the online group who did not receive PM instruction and the face-to-face group who did not receive the PM instruction. In other words, the findings of this study again confirmed that it is the "instruction" itself that makes a difference between the groups not the mode of instruction (virtual vs. face-to-face).

As indicated in Table 6, this difference has not been statistically significant at 0.05 level of significance. This means that the difference in speaking performance of the learners in online classroom (in university and language institute), who did not receive PM instruction and the learners in face-to-face classroom (in university and language institute) who did not receive PM instruction was not statistically significant ($\alpha=0.971$). Partial Eta squared reveals that this difference is zero.

Table 6. *Tests of Between-Subjects Effects*

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Group	0.002	1	0.002	0.001	0.971	0.000
Error	146.406	106	1.381			
Total	146.407	107				

This finding is in line with some previous studies like Heida (2016) and Takahashi (2001) that support the positive effect of pragmatic instruction, specifically explicit instruction on developing speaking ability.

The next sub-question examined whether there was a significant difference in speaking performance of the learners in face-to-face classroom (in university and language institute) with PM instruction and the learners in face-to-face classroom (in university and language institute) without PM instruction. As the results revealed, there was a considerable difference in the speaking performance of the learners in face-to-face classroom (in university and language institute) who received PM instruction and the learners in face-to-face classroom (in

university and language institute) who did not receive PM instruction in favour of the group who received the instruction.

Table 7. *Tests of Between-Subjects Effects*

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Group	6.395	1	6.395	4.031	0.047	0.035
Error	177.675	112	1.586			
Total	184.070	113				

It is compatible with the findings related to the first question of this phase, which highlighted the important role of instruction. As mentioned before, previous studies affirm the effect of pragmatic instruction for developing speaking ability (Heida, 2016; Takahashi, 2001).

In the next stage of the study, the difference in speaking performance between the Iraqi EFL learners who experienced PM instruction in online and face-to-face classrooms was examined with regard to their gender, age, social class and English language proficiency level. The results indicated no difference in speaking performance between the male and female participants who received PM instruction in the online class. However, the difference in the speaking performance of males and females in face-to-face class, who received pragmatic instruction was significant. The mean scores revealed that males outperformed females in the face-to-face class with regard to the speaking performance. Actually, the findings of research on gender differences in EFL contexts is very controversial. For instance, the results of the present study contradict those of Yoonjung, Na Young and Hea-Suk (2022) who claimed no difference among male and female EFL learners in online teaching platforms in Egypt. The results also contradict those of Erdiana (2019) who reported the speaking outperformance of the female learners over the males in the Indonesian EFL context. Therefore, it can be said that gender differences in the speaking performance of EFL learners are context-dependent. In other words, as the results of the present study confirmed, in some cultural contexts like Iraq, males may outperform females in face-to-face classrooms in terms of speaking because culturally speaking, women prefer to keep quiet or talk less in presence of men while in online classes, the difference was not statistically significant as indicated in the following table:

Table 8. *Tests of Between-Subjects Effects of Gender*

Group		Mean	Std. Deviation	N	F	P	Effect Size
Online with PM instruction	Female	3.313	1.178	24	3.739	0.059	0.071
	Male	3.907	1.019	27			
	Total	3.627	1.126	51			
Face-to-face with PM instruction	Female	3.672	1.197	29	11.284	0.001	0.170
	Male	4.696	1.100	28			
	Total	4.175	1.252	57			

Regarding age, however, no significant difference was found in speaking performance of the participants who received pragmatic instruction neither in online nor in face-to-face classes. This is in line with the findings of the study conducted by Aliakbari and Mahjoob (2016) that revealed no meaningful relationship between EFL learners' age and their speaking ability and WTC in an Iranian university context. This may imply that instruction is very important and it is the pragmatic instruction that led to the differences in speaking performance of the participants not their age.

Table 9. *Tests of Between-Subjects Effects of Age*

Group		Mean	Std. Deviation	N	F	P
Online with PM instruction	<22	3.417	1.107	30	3.237	2.635
	>22	3.929	1.110	21		
	Total	3.627	1.126	51		
Face-to-face with PM instruction	<22	4.013	1.290	39	2.126	0.150

In the same vein, concerning social class, no significant difference was found in speaking performance of the participants who received pragmatic instruction neither in online nor in face-to-face classes. In other words, the speaking performance of the participants of the experimental groups was not statistically different with regard to their social class (as defined in terms of their income and neighborhood). Again, this finding implies that the differences in speaking performance of the participants have been due to the pragmatic instruction they received not their social class.

Table 10. *Tests of Between-Subjects Effects of Social Class*

Group		Mean	Std. Deviation	N	f	P	Effect Size
Online with PM instruction	Low social class	3.605	1.098	38	0.057	0.813	0.001
	High social class	3.692	1.251	13			
	Total	3.627	1.126	51			
Face-to-face with PM instruction	Low social class	4.041	1.249	37	1.230	0.272	0.022

Finally, as the findings indicated, there was a significant difference in speaking performance of the participants who received pragmatic instruction both in online and in face-to-face classes with regard to language proficiency. In other words, both in online and in face-to-face classroom contexts, high proficiency learners outperformed low proficiency learners in terms of their speaking ability. This finding was compatible with those reported by Islam and Stapa (2021) in the EFL context of Bangladesh. They indicated that participants' current level of general language proficiency affects their speaking skill.

Table 11. Tests of Between-Subjects Effects of Language Proficiency

Group		Mean	Std. Deviation	N	f	P	Effect Size
Online and Test	Low	3.305	0.967	41	25.588	0.000	0.343
	High	4.950	0.685	10			
	Total	3.627	1.126	51			
Face-to-face and Test	Low	3.608	1.143	37	34.694	0.000	0.387
	High	5.225	0.595	20			
	Total	4.175	1.252	57			

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, in the first place, the significant effect of instruction (in this case, pragmatic instruction) on development of the speaking ability can be confirmed. In the second place, the higher effectiveness of face-to-face classroom instruction over virtual classroom instruction under the same conditions was confirmed. These findings are in line with those studies that support face to face classroom instruction. However, some other studies (Nasri, Shafiee & Sepehri, 2022) reported the effectiveness of online instruction and demonstrated that online instruction decreases learners' speaking anxiety. Therefore, a kind of blended teaching can be suggested which makes a good mixture of both virtual and face-to-face instruction based on the situation.

Another important conclusion of this study is that instruction of pragmatic markers through speech may bring about pragmatic awareness among the EFL learners. As indicated in this study, face-to-face classroom instruction is more effective and better develops the speaking performance of Iraqi EFL learners. The findings are consistent with previous research concerning face-to-face classroom and virtual EFL instruction (Alipour, et al., 2015; Chen, 2016; Chun, Kern, & Smith, 2016).

Implications of the study, Limitations and suggestions for further research

The results of this study have some implications for EFL teachers, learners and material designers, especially in the EFL context of Iraq. The promising effect of face-to-face instruction of different pragmatic features of language through speech acts can help learners improve their speaking skill (Seth et al., 2019). In this regard, developing appropriate tasks in order to assist learning of pragmatic aspects of language can be effective too (Taguchi, 2015).

In addition, EFL teachers can blend virtual and face-to-face classroom instruction of speech acts and other pragmatic aspects of language in order to develop language proficiency in general and speaking skill in particular. A blend of face-to-face and virtual instruction may prove effective for teaching all language components and skills. Therefore, such kind of orientation towards language teaching can be taken into account in the Iraqi EFL context. This orientation should get started at the macro level of policy making, including schools, universities and private institutes, and then move towards the other stake-holders such as material developers, course designers, and language teachers. In this way, technology can be integrated in language classes in the Iraqi EFL contexts.

Like other studies, this research suffered from some limitations. The first one is related to the number of the participants. Since this study required four EFL groups, the number of participants in each group was limited. Other studies can be conducted with larger number of participants.

The second limitation was that this study only focused on the effect of pragmatic instruction on developing Iraqi EFL learners' speaking ability; other studies can be conducted to examine such kind of effect on their general language ability or on other language skills. Another limitation was that this study only focused on pragmatic markers. Other studies can focus on other aspects of pragmatic knowledge and other features of the speech acts investigated in this study.

As the results indicated, the learners in the face-to-face classroom outperformed those in the virtual classroom. Since this finding contradicts the results of some similar studies, it can be traced back to the technological limitations existing in Iraqi EFL context. In other words, this finding may be due to the limitations in the technological resources available to the students and teachers. Further studies can deeply focus on such limitations, identify them and examine whether the better performance of the learners in face-to-face, face to face classroom (compared to online classrooms) can be due to technological limitations or not. This study only focused on examining the effect of pragmatic instruction on Iraqi EFL learners' speaking performance. Other studies can take a comparative perspective to compare the effect of pragmatic instruction on two or more language skills like speaking and writing. Finally, this study can be replicated with a blended approach; a kind of approach that appropriately mixes face-to-face and virtual classroom instruction in order to see which kind on instruction (face-to-face, virtual or blended) works better in the EFL context of Iraq.

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