

Threads of Socio-pragmatics in Higher Education: Perspectives on Improving EFL Learning and Use

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ABSTRACT

Research into language and social rapport connectedness has jumped to the fore in light of today's internationalization of EFL pedagogy. Pertinence in daily ritualistic behaviors is problematic in social spaces where pragmatics of communities meet and grapple with each other. Socio-pragmatics has then gained speed as a method to approach EFL instruction and usage. This paper attempts to reveal EFL teachers and students' consciousness levels of socio-pragmatics. It also assesses the adequacy of teachers' socio-pragmatics-based instruction as well as the appropriateness of students' socio-pragmatic performance. To attain those objectives, the researcher devised and distributed two questionnaires and a Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT) on a sample of 100 EFL students and 18 tutors at M'sila University, Algeria. Findings indicate that students held insufficient awareness and scored poorly in the performance test of socio-pragmatics. Although teachers demonstrated high consciousness levels, their socio-pragmatic instruction was very limited in the context of teaching. Relative deficiency at the levels of socio-pragmatics' instruction, awareness and/or performance perpetuates communicative problems to take form in EFL discourse. Thus, socio-pragmatics constitutes a method as well as a content-ridden construct that is of particular attention to infuse EFL higher education with efficiency and success.

Keywords: Socio-pragmatics, Pragma-linguistics, Socio-pragmatic Awareness, L2 Pedagogy and Implication, Communication across Cultures.

RESUMEN

La investigación en la conexión entre el lenguaje y el rapport social ha ganado centralidad debido a la actual internalización de la pedagogía del inglés como lengua extranjera (ILE). La pertinencia de conductas rituales cotidianas es problemática en espacios en los que la pragmática de las comunidades se entrecruzan. La socio-pragmática se ha convertido rápidamente en un método para abordar la enseñanza y el uso del ILE. Este artículo busca revelar los niveles de conciencia sobre la sociopragmática en estudiantes y profesores de ILE. Busca también evaluar la pertinencia de la enseñanza basada en la sociopragmática y lo adecuado de la actuación sociopragmática de los estudiantes. A estos fines, se diseñaron y distribuyeron dos cuestionarios y una actividad a completar por escrito (Written Discourse Completion Task, WDCT) a una muestra de 100 estudiantes de ILE y a 18 profesores de la Universidad de M'sila, Argelia. Los hallazgos indican que los estudiantes no tenían suficiente conocimiento de sociopragmática y que obtuvieron calificaciones bajas. Aunque los profesores demostraron altos grados de conocimiento, la enseñanza que impartían era limitada en términos de sociopragmática. Una enseñanza insuficiente de sociopragmática perpetúa problemas comunicativos en los hablantes de ILE. Por lo tanto, la sociopragmática como método y en tanto proveedora de contenidos puede enriquecer la educación superior y hacerla más exitosa.

Palabras claves: Socio-pragmática, Pragma-lingüística, Conciencia socio-pragmática, Pedagogía de L2, Comunicación intercultural

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Introduction

In the last few years, teaching second or foreign (S/F) languages has consensually become a manifold project. As it stands, foreign language education has embraced a sea change in teaching paradigms and in its assigned endeavours (Moeller & Catalano, 2015). In this respect, L2 teaching sought to, in Kaikkonen's words, "help learners grow out of the shell of their mother tongue and their own culture" (2001, p.64). It also held much promise to awareness raising and further training in the L2 pragmatics as an integrative necessity within S/F language curricula (Locastro, 2012). Teaching the L2 for language use and successful communication across cultures stands recently as the primary pursuit of all language-teaching approaches. (Heo, Han, Koch & Aydin, 2011).

As culture and language coexist within the same entity (Agar, 1994), methodological instruction in the L2 pragmatics, pragma-linguistics as well as socio-pragmatics, are mutually inclusive for sensitizing the S/F language culture, knowledge, interaction norms and social values of use to lessen the occurrence of pragmatic failures (Brubaek, 2013; Roohani, Mirzaei and Esmaeili, 2012). Because language use is loaded with the socio-cultural elements of everyday interaction, the teaching contents as well as methods ought to conform to the requirements of generating communicative competence underlying the principles of pragmatic ability (Bachman, 1990). (Thomson, 1997). For that reason, research into the improvement of training in L2 pragmatics has been ongoing (See Taguchi, 2009; Martínez-Flor, Usó Juan, & Guerra, 2003; Yoshimi & Wang, 2007; Rose & Kasper, 2001).

Although a plethora of experiments examined the learnability of L2 pragmatics (See Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003; Rose, 2005; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Rose & Kasper, 2001; Chin-Lin, 2007; Krisnawiti, 2011; Castillo & Eduardo, 2009), L2 tutors "are no longer sure of what they are supposed to teach nor what real world situations they are supposed to prepare their students for" (Kramsch, 2014, p.296). Perhaps because, in Tannen's words (1992, p. 60), "Our power to communicate so much by so few words inevitably entails the danger of miscommunication and because pragmatic failures in L2 learners' cross-cultural communication are still addressed, documented and subjected to analysis" (Oliveira, 2017). In fact, there has recently been a sharper tension between the methodological improvements and the linguistic contents learners receive in the classroom and their interactional needs in the outside world of language.

Background

Per definition, socio-pragmatics is "the sociological interface of pragmatics" and it relates to "the social perceptions underlying participants' performance and interpretation of linguistic action" (Leech, 1983, p. 10). The concept denotes sets of perceptual parameters that regulate the social appropriateness of speakers' natural language use. In support, by socio-pragmatics, Marmaridou (2011) argues, "they refer to the external pragmatic factors that concern the perception and the production of linguistic symbols in a specific setting, such as indirectness in the performance of speech acts" (p.82). Therefore, in socio-pragmatics, meanings and intents are confined to the speakers' environment and social identities (Locastro, 2012 and Mišić-Ilić, 2004).

While socio-pragmatics, according to Thomas (1983) and Crystal (2008), demonstrates the full understanding of the external socio-parametric variables under which specific strategies, formulas and perceptions are socially appropriate, Kasper and Rose (2002) affirm that pragma-linguistics underlies knowledge of a range of strategies and linguistic prototypes that serve the realization of a communicative act. The distinction then entails that pragma-linguistics can be applied to the study of the linguistic ends of pragmatics and it provides essentially linguistic resources (frames) for the correct transference of certain illocutions. However, Alcon and Martinez-Flor (2008) postulate that socio-pragmatics constitutes knowledge of the socio-cultural norms as well as conditions of language use and its role is to naturalize speech production and reception. In this respect, socio-pragmatics is recognized as culture-specific and pragma-linguistics is rather language-specific (Leech, 1983).

The significance of socio-pragmatics, as a content and a method, has been documented in a body of literature. Dascale (1985) explains that the main question of socio-pragmatic knowledge is

to enable understanding of the speakers' intentions in uttering words in a given context rather than determining the sentence meaning. Indeed, socio-pragmatic knowledge implies perceptions of a set of values, principles, speech act strategies and maxims used in a language according to the social variables and acts of communication (Harlow, 1990 and Demirezen, 1991). According to Safont-Jorda (2005), there is an urgent need to instruct L2 learners in socio-pragmatics to guide the appropriateness of their language use. Certainly, as Roohani, Mirzaei and Esmaeili put forward, "In order to decrease instances of pragmatic failure, students should learn pragma-linguistic as well as socio-pragmatic aspects of the target language use" (2012, p. 81).

Although an ostensive view presumes that L2 learners cannot reach native-like proficiency at the level of socio-pragmatic ability even if they blend into both linguistic and cultural elements of the target language (Cohen, 2008), Xiaole (2009) argues that "foreign language teachers can help learners prevent cross-cultural misunderstandings by presenting them with L2 socio-pragmatic knowledge" (p. 257). In the same vein, Zhang and Yan (2012) believe that "Immersion teaching" is an effective way to promote the L2 learners' level of socio-pragmatic awareness. Moreover, adopting video-driven prompts to exhibit training in socio-pragmatics proved to be effective for the regular acquisition of L2 socio-pragmatics (Zangoei and Derakhshan, 2014).

Furthermore, scenarios and plays were experimented and demonstrated as efficient tools to display linguistic as well as socio-cultural differences between L1 and L2 in the aim of bolstering socio-pragmatic competence (Chin-Linn, 2007). Thus, socio-pragmatics has gained speed as an effective method and many researchers have claimed for its necessity to be part of the L2 teaching context using a number of approaches and techniques (See also Schmidt, 1993; Rose, 1999; Eslami-Rasekh, 2005; Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor, 2008; Alcón-Soler and Guzmán-Pitarch, 2010; Ishihara, 2010; Abolfathiasl and Abdullah, 2015; Ekwelibe, 2015).

Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

Because an L2 speaker with a good command of grammar will not necessarily exhibit simultaneous socio-pragmatic competence (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996), socio-pragmatic instruction has become a challenging prerequisite in L2 contexts in order to assist learners' effective communication across cultures.

Despite the fact that socio-pragmatic awareness in EFL classrooms has extensively been subjected to investigation and experimentation in various contexts throughout the world, little large-scale research has probed it in an Algerian higher educational setting. Consequently, this study aims at shedding some light on the overall status of the L2 socio-pragmatics as a method in an Algerian higher educational context. More specifically, the present study seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are the levels of awareness EFL teachers and students at M'sila University hold about the underlying perceptions of socio-pragmatics as part of their language teaching, learning and use?
- 2) On what scale do Algerian EFL teachers at M'sila University integrate socio-pragmatics-based instruction in their teaching?
- 3) How well can Algerian EFL students perform in a small-scale socio-pragmatic competence test?

Methodology

This section is a composite of three subsections namely; participants, instrumentation and procedure, each of which is given a detailed account below.

Participants

The target population of the study included 3rd year Algerian university students majoring in English applied linguistics and EFL teachers at the same university. On the one hand, the students participating in this study were both female (76%) and male (24%) 3rd year students (N= 100). These comprised (35 %) of the whole population at the English language department at M'sila university,

Algeria. This sample is deemed to have acquired a sufficient linguistic background. On the other hand, 18 EFL teachers participated in the conduction of the present study.

Instrumentation

In order to meet the study objectives, two questionnaires were devised and used to accumulate data about both teachers' as well as students' awareness of socio-pragmatics. The questionnaires comprised a sum of 89 items. Most of these were formatted in Likert scale items ranging from 1 to 5. To assess the content validity of the questionnaires, evaluation sheets were distributed to both students and subject-matter experts in order to gain reviews and validations. A Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT) was elaborated to evaluate students' socio-pragmatic performance whereby they naturally elicit and interpret language in use. The two-section test relied on ten (10) indicators that were inspired from a framework for testing communicative competence (Pillar, 2011) to carefully assess the respondents' answers. To ensure the reliability of the WDCT, Cronbach's Alpha index was estimated and it was found to be 0.88.

Procedure

The first phase was designing the questionnaires. The researcher had to design two questionnaires to match the study objectives because prior models of the same investigation were sparse in literature. Deep probes were relied on to conceive sections of the questionnaires. After piloting the tools, the final versions were devised to cover the required number of items. In the second phase, the WDCT was designed and employed. It consisted of two sections to assess the students' socio-pragmatic ability in terms of their productions as well as interpretations of contextualized discourse. The data were then input into SPSS software and analyzed using appropriate statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics such as means, frequencies and standard deviation of variables were also calculated.

Results

In order to have access into the participants' consciousness and perceptions about the construct of socio-pragmatics, two sections of the questionnaires were devised and used. Table 1 indicates the participants' different levels of awareness as recorded through the mean values.

Table 1. Teachers and Students' Recuperative Mean Values about their awareness of Socio-pragmatics

Items :	Teachers					Students				
	Min	Max	Mean	S. D	Rank	Min	Max	Mean	S. D	Rank
Item 1	3.00	5.00	4.67	.60	1	1.00	5.00	2.6	.72	11
Item 2	3.00	5.00	4.37	.71	2	1.00	5.00	2.9	.77	9
Item 3	2.00	5.00	4.33	.95	3	1.00	5.00	3.08	.93	7
Item 4	2.00	5.00	4.13	1.04	4	2.00	5.00	3.50	.84	4
Item 5	1.00	5.00	4.13	1.22	5	3.00	5.00	2.75	.70	10
Item 6	2.00	5.00	4.07	1.08	6	2.00	5.00	3.09	.78	6
Item 7	1.00	5.00	3.97	1.32	7	2.00	5.00	3.70	.79	3
Item 8	1.00	5.00	3.87	1.19	8	2.00	5.00	3.00	.92	8
Item 9	1.00	5.00	3.80	1.24	9	2.00	5.00	3.76	.96	2
Item 10	1.00	5.00	3.73	1.50	10	2.00	5.00	3.23	.71	5
Item 11	1.00	5.00	3.27	1.55	11	2.00	5.00	3.11	.84	6
Item 12	1.00	5.00	3.13	1.52	12	1.00	5.00	4.19	1.0	1
Item 13	3.00	5.00	4.67	.60	1	1.00	5.00	2.6	.72	11
Item 14	3.00	5.00	4.37	.71	2	1.00	5.00	2.9	.77	9
Item 15	2.00	5.00	4.33	.95	3	1.00	5.00	3.08	.93	7

In consideration of the estimated level intervals of awareness referenced in this investigation the results demonstrated significant differences between teachers' and students' consciousness levels of the perceptions underlying socio-pragmatics as a concept and as a construct in language learning teaching and use. The findings in these sections revealed generally low to medium levels of awareness regarding the majority of the items used to examine students' awareness levels. However, high levels were recorded as to teachers' awareness on the same items. Table 1 indicates the mean values and the

ranks of the items regarding both participants' responses. Cumulative mean intervals revealed 4.05 for teachers reflecting a high value describing their awareness and 3.16 for students representing a medium value describing their consciousness. The rank numbers rate the mean values to reflect the awareness levels held by participants vis-à-vis the items. Noticeable differences were recorded accordingly.

In order to investigate teachers' instructions in socio-pragmatics, two sections of the questionnaires were elaborated and run. Table 2 displays the participants' responses indicating the different levels of practice teachers proclaim to deliver and students state to receive.

Table 2. Teachers and Students' Recuperative Mean Values about Instruction in Socio-pragmatics

Items :	Teachers					Students				
	Min	Max	Mean	S. D	Rank	Min	Max	Mean	S. D	Rank
Item 1	2.00	5.00	3.70	1.17	1	1.00	4.00	1.75	.90	15
Item 2	1.00	5.00	3.50	1.28	2	1.00	5.00	2.77	1.14	6
Item 3	1.00	5.00	3.23	1.19	3	1.00	5.00	2.10	1.10	14
Item 4	1.00	5.00	3.13	1.33	4	1.00	5.00	2.51	1.10	11
Item 5	1.00	5.00	3.07	1.46	5	1.00	5.00	3.55	1.30	1
Item 6	1.00	5.00	3.07	1.28	6	1.00	5.00	2.57	1.04	8
Item 7	1.00	5.00	3.00	1.36	7	1.00	4.00	2.25	.88	13
Item 8	1.00	5.00	3.00	1.50	8	1.00	5.00	3.02	.91	3
Item 9	1.00	5.00	2.93	1.23	9	1.00	5.00	2.84	1.27	5
Item 10	1.00	5.00	2.90	1.04	10	1.00	5.00	2.92	1.20	4
Item 11	1.00	5.00	2.80	1.27	11	1.00	4.00	2.33	.80	12
Item 12	1.00	5.00	2.77	1.19	12	1.00	4.00	2.63	.99	7
Item 13	1.00	5.00	2.70	1.20	13	1.00	5.00	2.52	1.34	9
Item 14	1.00	5.00	2.50	1.04	14	1.00	5.00	3.44	1.38	2
Item 15	1.00	4.00	2.50	1.04	15	1.00	5.00	2.52	.93	10

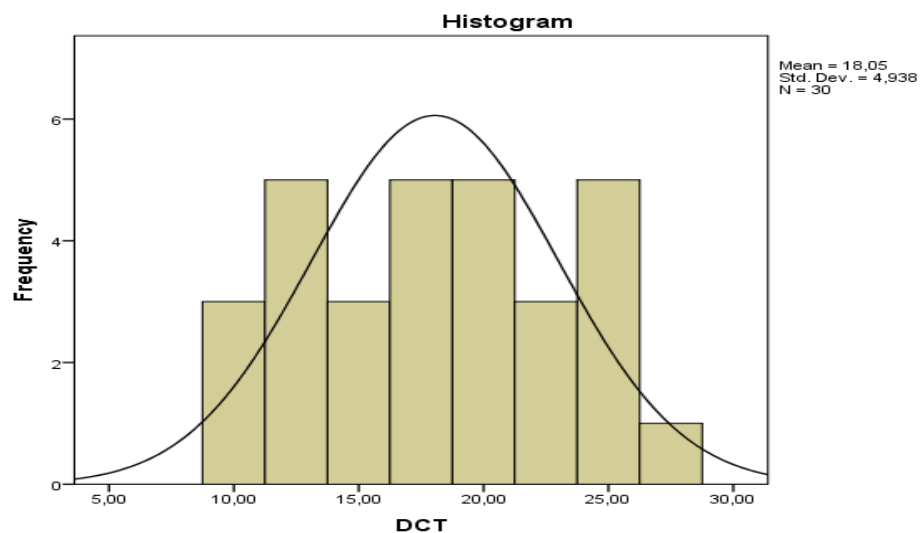
By examination of the mean values calculated in both teachers' and students' responses about the extent to which socio-pragmatics-based instruction takes place during their English classes, findings demonstrated generally low to medium levels of teachers' practice regarding the socio-pragmatic aspects under investigation. That is, scarce instruction in socio-pragmatics was delivered according to the participants' response analyses. In comparison, students' mean values proved to be lower than the teachers' regarding the majority of the items (1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11 and 12), and the mean ranks proved divergent reflecting some contradicting findings that can be rooted in some misperceptions of the underlying aspects of socio-pragmatics. Cumulative mean intervals were estimated to be 2.98 for teachers and 2.64 for students. Both values reflect medium levels of socio-pragmatics-based instruction practice as exhibited by the teachers. In all, results in Table 1 highlighted low levels of instruction in many aspects of socio-pragmatics. These levels can be described as poor and insufficient to aid students figure out a clear image of the construct and equip them with the necessary knowledge and competence.

To probe how well the students can perform in a small-scale socio-pragmatic competence test, a DCT was designed and delivered on which participants yielded responses about how appropriately they can produce and interpret natural occurring discourse. Table 3 displays the descriptive statistics of the test.

Table 3. The DCT Results of the Students' Socio-pragmatic Performance
Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error
Tests score	30	10.00	26.50	18.0500	4.93815	-.031	.427
Valid N (listwise)	30						

The above set of data was obtained from the primary test scores. The scores of this test were set in a continuum starting from 0, 00 as the lowest score to 40, 00 as the highest score a respondent can probably have in this test. Results showed that the scores ranged from 10, 00 (Min score) to 26.50 (Max score) in this test. However, according to the values of the mean ($M=18.05$) and the standard deviation ($SD=4.93$), most of the scores were below the average if compared to the highly estimated score (40/40). Although the negative skewness value indicates that scores were leaning towards relatively high scores, students' performance is therefore described as low and poorly satisfying. The histogram below illustrates the test findings in terms of the score epicentres.



Graph 1. Socio-pragmatic Competence Test Total Scores Descriptives

The graphical representation of the participants' scores confirmed the test finding. The histogram above identifies frequencies of the most prominently obtained scores which are 17, 00; 18.00 and 20.00. Because these are average and even low score values on a 40.00 point scale, this histogram indicates that most participants' performance is centered on the three score values which makes most test takers perform low and somehow medium in the small-scale socio-pragmatic competence test.

Discussion

The analysis of the data related to the participants' awareness levels and instructional practice of the construct of socio-pragmatics showed that while teachers held high levels of awareness, students' awareness levels proved low and unsatisfying. Considering the L2 context as a detached setting from the real world of language may be playing a role in directing students' awareness of the socio-pragmatic features of language (Marti and Fernandez, 2016). Despite the fact that students perceived speaking as the most important skill, they showed low awareness levels of socio-pragmatics, which is part of appropriate speaking. The type of linguistic instruction students receive at university (Brubæk, 2012) can probably explain this. Students' poor awareness levels of socio-pragmatics may also be considered as an outcome of teachers' low levels of instruction in pragmatics in general (Wyner and Cohen, 2015).

These analyses endorse the claim that the type of instruction EFL teachers themselves have received, formal linguistic training, can be the reason why they place great emphasis on morphology and syntax using materials that provide no realistic examples of contextualized language in use analyses and interpretations to aid their students understand socio-pragmatic issues (e.g. Cots, 1996; Baiget, Cots and Irún, 2000). In all, teachers' instruction in socio-pragmatics and in the use of authentic materials as well as in discourse analysis technique during their classes proved to be scarce

and insufficient regarding students' needs. This latter is perhaps an outcome of the difficulties EFL teachers face in teaching culture since socio-pragmatics is culture-specific (Çakir, 2006).

Analysis of the socio-pragmatic competence test data revealed students' low performance regarding the sections of the test. Students' attempts to appropriately produce and interpret natural occurring discourse were described as below the average and poor in the language of scores. Consequently, such a finding may mirror the participants' communicative abilities to send and receive pertinent locutions. Instances of miscommunication, misunderstandings and failures can probably take place in students' language use. The DCT results in both sections recorded low mean values in realising a set of communicative acts and in interpreting extracts from native interactional exchanges. These features included speech acts, politeness patterns, implicatures and socio-linguistic aspects of language use.

Algerian students varied the way they framed their language use to realize communicative acts and they differed also in the way they analyzed discourse and perceived its pragmatic force. These variations were rooted in the students' assessment of the three socio-pragmatic variables of power, social distance, and degree of imposition. Accordingly, socio-cultural disparities between the students' mother tongue (Arabic) and English led to the prevalence of distinctive or even opposing perceptions (Tatton, 2008). Moreover, different rhetorical and cultural patterns between the two languages resulted in selecting different speech act realisation strategies to observe (in) appropriateness (Ogiermann, 2009). These explanations can be referenced in students' limited and poor pragmatic ability and their lack of the socio-pragmatic knowledge of language use. Any deficiency at these levels of knowledge areas may affect language learners' actual performance in communication (Kwon, 2003).

Pedagogical Implications

In second language education and pedagogy, the study findings recommend further potential research in pragmatics to examine and probe pre-requisites of pragmatic ability on the level of socio-pragmatics. That is, research into the principles of English language use in context would help EFL speakers consolidate appropriateness in their communicative exchanges. Second language tutors can take advantage of these findings to back up elaborating their teaching tasks and assessment tests of pragmatics in general and of socio-pragmatics in particular. Results about speech act realisation strategies can therefore be used to raise students' awareness of appropriacy and of socially accepted verbal behavior in the target culture. This research foregrounds Algerian students' awareness of socio-pragmatics as part of their language learning and use. Moreover, it lays particular efforts on integrating socio-pragmatics-based instruction in the L2 learning context as part of teachers' creative teaching.

In practice, the utility of these research findings to language teaching/learning resides in seizing tutors' attention to reshape their students' perceptual clusters of socio-pragmatics on the one hand. On the other hand, learners' sensitivity towards the factual demands of cross-cultural communication may be promoted. The interdependence between sections of the questionnaires and the DCT results ascribes constructive criticism to EFL teaching in the Algerian higher educational context. Thus, training and awareness-raising instruction in socio-pragmatics comprise a phase of essence to prepare L2 speakers for the outside real world of language use.

Syllabus design is sought to endorse refinements at the level of practice conception and of material design as an attempt to mirror the teachable socio-pragmatic aspects in the classroom. Features like speech act sets, politeness patterns, implicatures and pragmatic transfers can be explored and instructed using authentic materials and pedagogical tools such as DCTs, conversation analysis, role plays and video prompts. These tools and materials are advised to be implemented indispensably regarding learners' abilities to both elicit and interpret daily communicative acts.

Conclusions

The present research intended to elaborate on referencing EFL teachers' and students' awareness of socio-pragmatics in the Algerian higher educational context. Besides, the study attempted to check

out students' performance in a small-scale socio-pragmatic competence test on both levels of discourse production and interpretation. This study made use of two questionnaires to explore the participants' perceptions, consciousness and practices. A two-section written discourse completion test (WDCT) was also devised and implemented to probe students' socio-pragmatic ability. The findings demonstrated that although teachers' levels of awareness proved high and raised, their students' responses revealed low levels of consciousness. Moreover, socio-pragmatics-based instruction in EFL classes proved scarce and very limited as attested by both teachers and students. Furthermore, results of the WDCT showed that test takers achieved a low score in their attempts to pertinently elicit communicative acts and fully understand verbal locutions.

In correlation, the employed sections of the questionnaires brought to light teachers' high levels of awareness that were not forged into classroom instructions. Consequently, students' consciousness of the construct and their performance in the test entailed poor and insufficient levels. Because successful communication frames the decisive goal of teaching/learning second and foreign languages, socio-pragmatics awareness-raising and content-based instructions fall as a necessity in the Algerian EFL classes. In view of this, further investigations into cross-cultural pragmatic studies are encouraged in the Algerian university context to improve language speakers' overall pragmatic and communicative abilities.

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