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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Student Needs and Teacher Practices in Pragmatic Speaking Instruction: A Preliminary Needs Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Despite its importance, pragmatic awareness remains underemphasised in Malaysian ESL classrooms, which limits students' ability to speak English effectively in real-life contexts. While previous studies have reported learners' pragmatic difficulties, fewer studies have examined secondary school students' perceived learning needs alongside teachers' instructional practices as an exploratory needs analysis. To address this gap, this preliminary needs analysis examined Form 4 students' perceived pragmatic awareness needs for speaking, alongside English teachers' related perceptions and practices, to identify targeted instructional gaps in secondary settings. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 60 Form 4 students and five English teachers in selected secondary schools through a need analysis questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Findings indicate that students were confident in routine speech acts (e.g. thanking, apologising) but experienced difficulties with discourse management, sociopragmatic awareness, and context-dependent functions. Teachers reported predominantly focusing on implicit instruction and exam-driven scripted speaking tasks, suggesting a gap in explicit pragmatic instruction. As an exploratory study, the findings provide preliminary insights to inform future instructional planning and large-scale research on pragmatic awareness in Malaysian ESL contexts.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by providing the first exploratory needs analysis of Malaysian secondary school students' pragmatic awareness in speaking, alongside English teachers' instructional practices, offering preliminary evidence to inform the integration of pragmatics into ESL speaking instruction.

1. Introduction

English language proficiency has become increasingly essential in Malaysia for academic advancement, global communication, employment prospects, and economic

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opportunities (Abdul Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021; Ashfar Ahmad et al., 2021). Despite years of learning English since primary school, many students still face challenges in achieving mastery in English, particularly in speaking skills (Nesaratnam et al., 2020). The Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025) and The English Language Education Enhancement Plan 2024-2025 (3PBI) emphasise the importance of English language proficiency and demonstrate the Ministry of Education's commitment to enhancing students' speaking proficiency (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2024).

To speak English proficiently, students need to develop their communicative competence, which includes pragmatic awareness as a crucial component. Pragmatic awareness is defined as the "conscious, reflective, explicit knowledge about pragmatics," which involves understanding and knowing the rules and conventions related to the appropriate use of language in various communication contexts (Alcón & Jordà, 2008). This awareness plays a crucial role in language acquisition, as acquiring language involves not just mastering linguistic forms but also their sociolinguistic dimensions (Canale & Swain, 1980). Students who possess only grammar and vocabulary knowledge may be insufficiently equipped to become proficient speakers (Hussein & Albakri, 2019). They also need to be able to express themselves effectively in various social situations. Therefore, to achieve speaking proficiency, students require both linguistic and pragmatic knowledge.

The gap between linguistic and pragmatic knowledge among students in Malaysian secondary schools is evident, as they often demonstrate limited pragmatic awareness. For example, students struggle to understand and use language appropriately in diverse social contexts, which contributes to insensitivity and inappropriateness that result in communication issues (Nor et al., 2015; Thuruvan & Md. Yunus, 2017; Yassin & Razak, 2018). This can also create social misunderstandings that negatively impact overall communication (Mangaleswaran & Abdul Aziz, 2019).

While previous Malaysian studies have reported pragmatic difficulties among ESL learners, there is a lack of targeted needs analysis focusing specifically on students' perceived learning needs regarding pragmatic awareness in speaking, particularly when examined alongside teachers' instructional practices. Moreover, there are few studies that investigate this as an exploratory needs analysis to inform future instructional design.

Therefore, this pilot study aims primarily to conduct a pragmatic awareness needs analysis of Malaysian secondary school students' speaking skills as well as explore English teachers' perceptions and instructional practices related to pragmatics. By identifying the students' perceived needs and teachers' classroom practices, this study seeks to provide preliminary evidence to inform the integration of pragmatic awareness into ESL speaking instruction. This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

i. What are Malaysian secondary school students' perceived learning needs regarding pragmatic awareness in speaking English?
ii. What are Malaysian secondary school English teachers' practices and perceptions regarding the teaching of pragmatics in speaking skills?

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2. Literature Review

2.1. Pragmatic Awareness in Second Language (L2) Learning

Pragmatic awareness refers to understanding and recognition of how language is used appropriately to convey meanings in a given context and applying this understanding effectively during real-world interactions (McConachy & Spencer-Oatey, 2020; Taguchi, 2011). Pragmatic awareness is foundational in the development of pragmatic competence, which is the ability to use language appropriately while navigating sociocultural, interpersonal, and interactional dynamics (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996; McConachy & Spencer-Oatey, 2020). Consequently, teaching and raising pragmatic awareness in L2 learning may enhance the development of students' pragmatic competence. This would enable language learners to interpret meanings and respond suitably in real-world communication.

Pragmatic awareness encompasses two key domains: pragmalinguistic, which involves linguistic knowledge and strategies to convey messages, and sociopragmatics, which concerns the knowledge of language use based on social and cultural factors (Kasper & Rose, 2001). Both domains are essential for pragmatic development, as they help learners to notice and select linguistic forms that align with appropriate social behaviours during interactions (McConachy & Spencer-Oatey, 2020). Thus, this can avoid miscommunication and impoliteness. This is in line with Canale and Swain (1980) arguments that possessing only grammatical and vocabulary knowledge without pragmatic awareness is insufficient for effective communication.

In Malaysian ESL contexts, many secondary school students frequently display limited pragmatic awareness in spoken interaction. Mangaleswaran and Abdul Aziz (2019) and Nor, Mazlan and Rajab (2015) found that many secondary school students' inappropriate lexical choices when speaking. Furthermore, Thuruvan and Md. Yunus (2017) and Yassin and Razak (2018) revealed that students were often impolite when speaking in English, leading to cultural insensitivity. These findings highlight the need to address pragmatic awareness to bridge the gap between linguistic accuracy and appropriate language use in social contexts.

2.2. Speech Acts and Pragmatic Functions

Austin (1962) first introduced the concept of speech acts in pragmatics where he stated that speech acts are sentences or utterances that are performatives and represent more than actions. Searle (1969) defined speech acts as the basic or minimal units of linguistic communication. Fatah (2020) stated that speech acts uttered will result in some kind of response from the listener, hence they are used to achieve specific communication goals. Searle (1976) classified speech acts into five categories which are assertives, directives, commissives, expressives and declarations, which helps to identify the functions of the utterances and their influence sentences construction. Atelsek (1981) later added opinions and agreements/disagreements as a distinct class of speech acts. These classification helps explain how utterances function pragmatically in spoken interaction.

Understanding speech acts is particularly important in speaking, as it enable speakers to understand how language is used to convey meaning effectively (Fatah et al., 2020). Taguchi (2012) also stated that speech acts can vary across different cultures. Yamashita (2008) adds that speech acts are culture-specific in terms of their usage. For ESL learners, having limited pragmatic awareness in using language appropriately according

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to target cultures can lead to unintended rudeness or misunderstanding, particularly in intercultural communication contexts. Thus, it is important for students to understand and use different types of speech acts in the target language so that they can use it correctly.

2.3. Pragmatics Instruction and Needs Analysis

Pragmatic instruction remains underrepresented in language teaching materials and curricula despite its importance for communicative competence (Bardovi-Harlig, 2020; Taguchi, 2015). Many instructors prioritise grammar and vocabulary over pragmatic skills development. Taguchi (2015) stated that pragmatics is indeed teachable. Hence, providing targeted support aimed at raising pragmatic awareness can significantly improve students' ability to use speech acts in diverse contexts (Mokoro, 2024). Ishihara and Cohen (2021) have proposed various awareness-raising pedagogical approaches to enhance L2 pragmatic competence.

Fatah et al. (2020) stress on the importance of explicitly teaching pragmatics as textbooks may present limited or decontextualised pragmatic input. However, Bardovi-Harlig (2020) cautions that exposure to authentic materials alone is inadequate and students need explicit guidance for effective pragmatic awareness and development. Without explicit pragmatic instruction, students may not achieve a sufficient level of pragmatic understanding (Kanik et al., 2023).

Meta-analyses by Ren et al. (2023) and Yalew et al. (2024) demonstrate that pragmatic instruction positively supports the development of pragmatic and communicative competence in L2 learners, particularly explicit instructional approaches outperform implicit ones in effectiveness. These findings highlight the importance of systematically embedding explicit instruction within language curricula. Accordingly, to design effective pragmatic instruction, a needs analysis should first be conducted to identify students' specific pragmatic gaps and learning needs (Sadeghi et al., 2014).

Needs analysis enables instructors to identify and address gaps between students' current abilities and their target proficiency levels. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) categorise "target needs" into three types. The first is "necessities", which refer to what students must know; the second is "wants", which are what students believe they need; and the third is "lacks", which describe students' proficiency gap. Similarly, Brindley (1989) differentiate between "objective needs" which is based on empirical data and instructional goals and "subjective needs" needs which is students' perceived needs. Understanding these categories is important, as they provide a structured framework for identifying and prioritising students' needs. This can provide instructors with the insights that helps to align their teaching content and methods with both empirical demands and students' expectations.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The study was designed as a preliminary needs analysis to examine Malaysian secondary school students' perceived pragmatic learning needs and to explore English teachers' instructional practices related to pragmatics. This design was selected because

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it allowed for a comprehensive understanding of pragmatic awareness from both students' and teachers' perspectives. Data collection was conducted in two stages which enables triangulation of findings. First, a quantitative questionnaire survey was conducted with students and this was followed by qualitative semi-structured interviews with English teachers.

3.2. Research Participants

This study employed purposive sampling to select participants with characteristics relevant to the study, making this method appropriate for the needs analysis (Johnson & Christensen, 2016). The quantitative phase of the study involved 60 Form 4 students (aged 16 years) from two secondary schools in Kedah, Malaysia (17 male, 43 female). Kedah was chosen as the research location because its economic development has increased the demand for English skills among the local workforce (BERNAMA, 2024) and the state's second-place ranking nationwide in the EF English Proficiency Index 2024 further reflects its commitment to improving English language education. This makes it a relevant context for the needs analysis. A small sample size was selected due to the study's focus on conducting a needs analysis, and a formal power calculation was not employed. The sample size was deemed adequate to identify key trends and patterns Participation was voluntary, written consent was obtained from students prior to the data collection, and no identifying information was collected to ensure confidentiality. For the qualitative phase, five English Language teachers from five different secondary schools participated in the interviews. The teachers had teaching experience between 5 to 30 years which ensures that they could provide relevant insights into pragmatic awareness and instruction. Given the small, purposively selected sample, the findings are intended to be exploratory and context-specific rather than generalisable to all Malaysian secondary schools.

3.3. Instruments

The questionnaire for needs analysis was adapted from Youn (2018) to suit the Malaysia secondary school context. The purpose of the questionnaire was to investigate students' prior knowledge and perceived learning needs regarding pragmatic awareness in speaking English. The questionnaire comprised 16 items that focused on various pragmatic speaking functions. They were organised into three sub-sections: (1) speech acts (thanking, apologising, requesting, refusing etc.), (2) discourse management (managing conversations, asking for clarification, giving feedback), and (3) sociopragmatic awareness (making appointments, understanding cultural jokes, cultural appropriateness, indirectness). All items were phrased in the "can do" statements in the form of "I know how to…" to allow students to self-assess their perceived pragmatic awareness. The questionnaire utilised a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), 3 (Agree), to 4 (Strongly Agree).

For the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers to explore their speaking instruction practices and how they incorporated pragmatic awareness into their speaking lessons and the techniques they used to teach it.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

For the quantitative phase, the questionnaires were distributed to 60 Form 4 students at two separate schools by their respective English teachers. The teachers facilitated the

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questionnaire during regular class hours. Prior to data collection, permission to conduct the study and informed consent was obtained from all student participants. They were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses.

In the qualitative phase, interviews were conducted face-to-face. Each interview session lasted approximately 10 to 15 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the teachers and were later transcribed verbatim for analysis. To enhance trustworthiness of the data, transcripts were returned to participants for member checking and thematic coding was cross-verified by a second researcher.

3.5. Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analysed using SPSS (Version 27) to calculate the descriptive statistics (frequencies, means and standard deviation). Cronbach's alpha was calculated for internal consistency reliability of each subscale. The qualitative data from the teacher interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which allows for the identification of key themes related to pragmatic awareness instruction. The analysis followed the six-phase procedure of familiarisation, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition and reporting.

4. Results

4.1. Questionnaire

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients for the questionnaire. The Cronbach's alpha (α) for the overall questionnaire was 0.816 (SD = 5.344) which indicates strong internal consistency reliability. However, it should be noted that a high reliability coefficient does not necessarily indicate the validity of the questionnaire. The Speech Acts subscale yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.777 representing an acceptable level of internal consistency. In contrast, the Discourse Management subscale had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.555, and the Sociopragmatic Awareness subscale achieved 0.592, demonstrating lower internal consistency reliability. These lower Cronbach's alpha values are likely due to the smaller number of items in these sections which often results in reduced reliability coefficients (Field, 2018). Despite this, the questionnaire was retained because it was adapted from Youn (2018) to preserve the theoretical integrity of the pragmatic items and to enable comparability with prior studies.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Needs Analysis

Questionnaire Items (k* = 16, α = .816, SD = 5.344)**		**N**	**Mean**	**SD**	**Rank*** **
Speech Acts (k = 8, α = .777, SD = 3.17)					
1.	Expressing disagreement	60	3.05	.675	7
2.	Giving comments or compliments on someone's opinion	60	3.15	.547	10
3.	Refusing a request politely	60	3.22	.783	11
4.	Requesting politely	60	3.47	.566	14
5.	Thanking politely	60	3.67	.510	16
6.	Apologising appropriately	60	3.50	.504	15
7.	Making an appointment	60	2.87	.791	2
8.	Expressing opinions and suggesting ideas	60	3.08	.619	8

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	politely				
Discourse Management (k = 4, α = .555, SD = 1.79)					
9.	Managing conversations	60	2.95	.769	3
10.	Asking clarification questions to an opinion	60	3.03	.581	5
11.	Giving feedback appropriately	60	3.03	.581	5
12.	Explaining clearly a situation to ask for help	60	2.80	.777	1
Sociopragmatic Awareness (k = 4, α = 5.92, SD = 1.71)					
13.	Understanding cultural jokes	60	3.08	.671	8
14.	Asking questions to clarify implied meaning	60	3.30	.696	12
15.	Understanding indirect meanings	60	3.33	.572	13
16.	Speaking culturally or academically appropriately	60	3.02	.596	4

Notes: k* = number of items in each sub-section; α** = Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient; Rank*** = rank order based on ascending mean score.

In order to identify the most needed areas for speaking instruction, the items were ranked according to their mean scores. The results indicated the following tasks as the most needed:

a. Explaining clearly a situation to ask for help (M = 2.80)
b. Making an appointment (M= 2.87)
c. Managing conversations (M = 2.95)
d. Speaking culturally or academically appropriately (M = 3.02)
e. Asking clarification questions to an opinion (M = 3.03)
f. Giving feedback appropriately (M = 3.03)

These findings show that explaining clearly a situation to ask for help, making an appointment, and managing conversations were perceived as the most challenging areas. Students perceived speaking culturally or academically appropriately, asking clarification questions to an opinion, and giving feedback appropriately as moderate needs. Notably, some items shared the same mean scores such as asking clarification questions to an opinion and giving feedback appropriately, as well as expressing opinions and suggesting ideas politely and understanding cultural jokes. This suggests that students may experience similar levels of difficulty across these pragmatic tasks.
On the other hand, the highest perceived abilities were:

i. Thanking politely (M = 3.67)
ii. Apologising appropriately (M = 3.50)
iii. Requesting politely (M = 3.47)
iv. Understanding indirect meanings (M = 3.33)
v. Asking questions to clarify implied meaning (M = 3.30)

The higher mean scores for these items suggest that students feel confident in their ability to perform these pragmatic functions, particularly those that are formulaic and frequently practised in classroom settings.

4.2. Interviews

The interviews with five Malaysian secondary school teachers revealed valuable insights regarding students' pragmatic awareness needs and their current speaking instruction practices. Each teacher was referred to by a letter for confidentiality (Teacher A, J, U, H, T). The findings from the interviews are organised by key themes, with illustrative quotations to support each theme.

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4.2.1. Limited Awareness and Explicit Teaching of Pragmatic Awareness

Four out of five teachers (A, J, U, H) reported that they were unfamiliar with the term *pragmatic awareness*. They needed clarification of what pragmatics meant and were given examples for their understanding. After further discussion, it became apparent that some teachers may have been incorporating pragmatic elements in their teaching practices, even if they did not explicitly identify them as such. For example, Teacher T mentioned,

"I would give situations for them, and then they are going to act out with simulations."
This suggests an implicit use of role-play, which is often associated with teaching pragmatic awareness (Ishihara & Cohen, 2021). Similarly, Teacher U shared,

> *"I usually become the role-model in class and students imitate what to do later."*

Teacher A noted:

> *"Usually during non-exam time, I will do role-play."*

These responses suggest that while the concept of pragmatic awareness was not widely known, the teachers may have embedded the underlying practices of pragmatics in their speaking instruction implicitly.

Despite this informal integration, four out of five teachers stated that their speaking instruction was mainly guided by the SPM (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia) speaking exam format. The teachers usually emphasise structured responses according to the speaking exam format which are interview, long-turn and paired discussion. This emphasis on exam alignment may have inadvertently narrowed the instructional focus and limited the opportunities for broader pragmatic skill development. Teacher J explained,

> *"Usually I based (speaking instruction) on exam because we have exam papers, right? In Paper 3 Speaking, there are three parts: interview, 1-minute talk and pair work, so I based on that."*

4.2.2. Instructional Strategies Used

All teachers reported using pair and group discussions as primary strategies to teach speaking, as these activities align with the discussion section of the SPM speaking test and help foster student interaction. Some teachers explained that they provide scripts containing phrases for students to memorise and use for the discussion. Teacher A explained,

> *"I usually give them (students) scripts to memorise, with a guide. And they will be with their speaking partner until the SPM exam in Form 5. So, when they have speaking practice in class, they already know that they have to sit with their partner and practice speaking using the guide I gave them."*

Similarly, Teacher H stated,

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> *"I will ask them (students) to memorise a few phrases, the ones that gave earlier so that they are able to communicate in a better way, especially when it comes to the vocabulary usage and certain grammatical structures."*

Teachers also employed audio-visual aids such as videos and movie clips to demonstrate authentic language use to the students. This helped students to observe the natural use of language and imitate it for classroom and real-life communication. Teacher H highlighted,

> *"I really love to use visual aids, and sometimes I love to use media, for example, the videos…. because they are able to understand better and then they have the subtitles, so, it's easier for them to imitate the sentence structures."*

Similarly, Teacher T explained,

> *"Usually, I would use videos…. for example, like YouTube. I show the conversations, and then they imitate them."*

Another strategy employed by the teachers to teach speaking was the use of role-play and simulations. Teachers A, J and T mentioned conducting role-play and simulations as part of their speaking instruction, although these were not their primary methods. Teacher A stated that she used role-play during "*non-exam time*", while Teacher J mentioned using role-play "*a bit in class*".

Teacher modelling was another strategy used to demonstrate appropriate speech. Teacher U stated,

> *"I usually become the role-model in class and students imitate what to do later."*

4.2.3. Student Strengths and Weaknesses in Pragmatic Functions

Teachers revealed varied views on students' pragmatic abilities. However, some common patterns emerged. All five teachers (A, J, U, H, T) reported that their students were generally strong in using formulaic or familiar speech acts such as thanking, refusing requests, making requests, and making appointments. This is likely due to frequent practice, memorisation and scripted interactions conducted in class.

Teacher A and U stated that their students were able to manage conversations. Teacher A added that her students were good at, "*expressing disagreement and speaking culturally and academically appropriately*." Teacher H observed that her students were strong at "*explaining clearly and expressing opinions and suggesting ideas politely*." These observations of student strengths, however, were not uniform across all teachers or perfectly aligned with students self-reports.

Most teachers identified that students were weak at performing complex pragmatic functions and interactive tasks. Teacher A, H and T stated that their students were weak at managing conversations, while Teacher A and U noted that their students had

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difficulties in understanding indirect meanings and cultural jokes. This highlights issues with sociopragmatic awareness.

Additionally, Teacher J, H, and T observed that their students had difficulties with asking clarification questions. Teacher J attributed this to the lack of the higher-order thinking skills to formulate the right questions to ask. She explains,

> *"It is hard for them you know, in discussion especially. Because this needs higher order thinking skills."*

Teacher H added that her students would often remain silent and unwilling to ask questions,

> *"They always keeping mum, I asked them to ask question or answer questions, they didn't want to do it."*

Teacher A and T reported that their students were weak at expressing opinions and suggesting ideas, as well as giving feedback. In addition, Teacher J observed that her students struggled with explaining situations clearly, and Teacher U noted that her students had difficulty refusing a request.

5. Discussion

The pilot findings from this study provide preliminary insights into Malaysian secondary school students' pragmatic awareness and the speaking instruction practices of English teachers. This section discusses the results to examine students' pragmatics learning needs and implications for English speaking instruction, particularly in the area of pragmatic awareness.

Students' self-assessment responses revealed students' pragmatic learning needs, especially in tasks such as explaining situations clearly (M = 2.80), making appointments (M = 2.87), and managing conversations (M = 2.95), speaking culturally or academically appropriately (M = 3.02), asking clarification questions to an opinion (M = 3.03) and giving feedback (M = 3.03). These results suggest that students struggle primarily with discourse management, negotiation-based speech acts and sociopragmatic appropriateness, which require skillful and spontaneous negotiation of context and interaction. In contrast, students reported higher confidence in more routine speech acts such as thanking (M = 3.67), apologising (M = 3.50), and requesting (M = 3.47). This contrast between competence in formulaic routines and difficulty with interactive context-adaptive tasks represents a key finding of this needs analysis.

The findings of this study align with Youn (2018), who reported that EAP students demonstrated competence in routine speech acts (e.g. thanking, apologising) but struggled with sociopragmatic tasks (e.g. making requests, refusing). While Youn's (2018) participants were university students in English-speaking countries, the parallel with Malaysian secondary students suggests a shared difficulty with context-adaptive and interactionally demanding tasks. Similarly, Budeng (2019) found that while university-level ESL learners displayed high pragmatic comprehension in typical speech acts situations, their pragmatic production was less-native like. These findings indicate that students struggled performing pragmatic functions requiring spontaneous, interactional and context-dependent language use, compared to routine and formulaic

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expressions. Taguchi (2015) explains that pragmatic features that are linguistically and structurally simple tend to be easier to teach and learn compared to tasks that require nuanced social interpretation. This is because they follow clear, repeatable structural patterns and are less dependent on complex social contexts, thus, easier for L2 learners to understand.

Budeng and Merza (2023) reported Filipino ESL students often produce non-native-like overly polite or indirect speech acts influenced by L1 cultural norms. Similarly, Saleem et al. (2021) identified pragmatic transfer among Pakistani ESL students leading to non-target-like English responses. This supports the present study's finding that that students struggle with pragmatics beyond formulaic expressions where language use requires social and cultural sensitivity.

The qualitative results of this study supported the quantitative findings. All five teachers confirmed that their students had no difficulties with thanking, refusing, requesting. However, teachers differed from students regarding making appointments. Although the teachers perceived no difficulty, students self-reported this as a challenge. This suggests either a gap in teacher awareness of subtle pragmatic breakdowns or students' underestimation of their own ability. In addition, similar to students' responses, most teachers acknowledged that their students struggled with discourse management, although two teachers believed their students could manage conversations but struggled with other related skills in discourse management. Teachers also observed that their students had difficulty with sociopragmatic awareness, particularly in understanding indirect meanings and cultural jokes.

These findings suggest a gap between students' strengths in routine speech acts and weaknesses in complex pragmatic functions. This gap aligns with teachers' limited awareness of pragmatic concepts. Most teachers were unfamiliar with the term "pragmatic" and "pragmatic awareness" and their teaching practices suggest that they may have taught pragmatics informally and implicitly through role-play, simulations and modelling consistent with Ishihara and Cohen (2021). This contrasts with Kesevan's (2021) findings where teachers relied on teacher-centred instruction by using display questions that promote short student responses. Similarly, Muyesser (2025) found that ESL instructors do not fully understand pragmatics or how to teach it effectively and do not teach pragmatics explicitly. In addition, Korkmaz and Karatepe (2023) reported that university EFL instructors demonstrated only moderate levels of pragmatic awareness and teaching competence despite recognising the importance of pragmatic and cross-cultural instruction. In line with these studies, Tajeddin and Khodaparast (2020) also observed a mismatch in the Iranian EFL context, where teachers acknowledged the importance of teaching pragmatics but failed to implement it in their classroom due to insufficient pragmatic awareness, insufficient training and a lack of practical teaching strategies. The lack of clear understanding of pragmatics and its importance among instructors may hamper their ability to provide explicit and effective pragmatic instruction.

The English teachers' instructional focus was heavily shaped by the speaking exam format, which emphasises the use of scripted responses and paired/group discussions mirroring exam tasks. As a result, they neglect the sociopragmatics aspects of the language in speaking instruction. Language teachers who lack adequate materials and training consequently put less emphasis on pragmatic issues in many ESL instruction and may be unable to provide targeted support in pragmatic awareness (Eslami-Rasekh,

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2005). The lack of pragmatic awareness has highlighted that pragmatic instruction is often given little emphasis in language education (Mcconachy & Spencer-Oatey, 2020a). Thus, the teachers' priorities in speaking instruction may reinforce formulaic language but neglect the nuanced and context-dependent aspects of real-life communication. Consequently, students may succeed in formulaic, exam-driven contexts but struggle with authentic everyday communication requiring sociopragmatic skill.

As Bardovi-Harlig (2005) noted that L2 learners might develop some pragmatic awareness without explicit instruction, but explicit instruction would raise pragmatic awareness and improve pragmatic production abilities. Without explicit guidance, students may fail to grasp pragmatic norms despite the exposure to authentic language. Saleem et al. (2021) similarly found L1 sociocultural norms transfer causing pragmatically inappropriate responses despite having advanced academic experience. This highlights that exposure alone does not guarantee pragmatic awareness, particularly when students' first language and cultural norms significantly different from the target language.

This is particularly critical in the Malaysian context, where many students have limited opportunities to interact in English outside of the classroom and mostly rely on textbooks and media for exposure (Azman & Razali, 2024; Gunasegaran & Razali, 2021; Seydalavi, 2024). Given Malaysian students' L1 and cultural backgrounds often differ significantly from English norms, this may increase the risk of pragmatic failure when speaking in authentic interactions (Mangaleswaran & Abdul Aziz, 2019; Taguchi, 2015). Bardovi-Harlig (2020) stresses that while authentic exposure is important, students require explicit guidance to effectively notice, interpret and apply pragmatic features in context. Supporting this, Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) found that even advanced students often make pragmatic errors due to incomplete understanding of the intended meaning or level of politeness in communication. Therefore, to foster accurate and context-appropriate L2 pragmatic use, explicit pragmatics instruction must be combined with contextualised, practice-based learning to reduce L1 influence and develop pragmatic competence (Budeng & Merza, 2023; Mcconachy & Spencer-Oatey, 2020a; Saleem et al., 2021).

6. Limitations

As a pilot study, there are several acknowledged limitations. First, the sample was relatively small, with only 60 students for the quantitative phase, and five teachers for the qualitative phase which strongly limits generalisability. The findings are exploratory and context-specific to the participating schools. Future research should involve a larger and more diverse group of participants from different regions to better examine students' pragmatic awareness and instruction. Additionally, the qualitative interviews were brief and primarily exploratory, focusing on pragmatic strengths and weaknesses and current teaching practices. Future research should conduct more extensive, in-depth interviews or classroom observations with a larger, more diverse teacher pool to provide richer insights into instructional challenges and innovations.

7. Conclusion

This pilot study investigated Malaysian secondary school students' perceived learning needs regarding pragmatic awareness in English speaking and explored teachers' practices and perceptions in teaching pragmatics. The exploratory findings revealed that

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while students demonstrated confidence in performing routine and formulaic speech acts such as thanking, apologising and requesting, they faced difficulties in more complex and context-dependent pragmatic functions including managing conversations, explaining situations clearly, giving feedback, understanding indirect meanings and making appointments appropriately.

Interviews with teachers further highlighted that pragmatic instruction in the observed Malaysian classrooms tends to be largely implicit which often delivered through role-play and modelling rather than explicit teaching. Instruction was also heavily shaped by exam-oriented practices focusing on scripted responses and task-based interactions reflecting the examination format. Many of the participating teachers possessed limited awareness of pragmatic concepts and provided little support for pragmatic competence development. As a result, pragmatic aspects of speaking receive limited attention which may leave students underprepared for real-world English communication outside the classroom.

This pilot study highlights preliminary evidence for the need for explicit pragmatic awareness instruction in Malaysian ESL teaching, with an emphasis on the context-dependent pragmatic functions with authentic interactive tasks and materials (Budeng & Merza, 2023; Saleem et al., 2021). Using technology to enhance pragmatic instruction and assessment like video-based pragmatic tests (Barani & Negari, 2023) and computer-animated production task (CAPT) (Halenko, 2022) could enrich pragmatics instruction and assessment.

Finally, teachers require ongoing professional development to deepen pragmatic knowledge and develop practical strategies to integrate pragmatic awareness meaningfully into their speaking instruction. Addressing these gaps is critical for improving Malaysian ESL learners' communicative competence and preparing them for authentic, real-life English interactions. The findings from this exploratory study serve as a foundation for larger-scale investigations into pragmatic needs and instruction in the Malaysian ESL context.

Ethics Considerations

Participation in this preliminary needs analysis was voluntary. Written consent was obtained from students prior to their participation in this study. Students were informed of the purpose of the study, the procedures involved and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. All responses were treated confidentially.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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