



The Significance of Pragmatic Devices in Communication: A Phenomenological Study of Selected Secondary Schools in Kapiri District, Zambia

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DOI:10.5281/zenodo.21790019

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received : 10-07-2026

Accepted : 25-07-2026

Available online : 02-08-2026

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Citation: Siame, P., Kangwa, K. N., & Gondwe, C. (2026). The Significance of Pragmatic Devices in Communication: A Phenomenological Study of Selected Secondary Schools in Kapiri District, Zambia. *IKR Journal of Education and Literature (IKRJEL)*, 2(3), 22-33.



ABSTRACT

Original Research Article

This study problematizes the significant gap between the recognised importance of pragmatic competence and its practical application within the Zambian secondary education system. Grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis theory, the research employed a phenomenological qualitative design to explore the utilisation, perceptions, challenges, and opportunities associated with pragmatic devices in classroom communication. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and document analysis involving 15 purposively selected participants from selected secondary schools in Kapiri District, Central Province. The findings reveal a profound lack of explicit awareness and systematic application of pragmatic devices among both teachers and students. This deficit is attributed to multifaceted barriers, including a critical deficiency in teacher training, a severe scarcity of contextually relevant instructional materials, a curriculum and assessment regime that marginalises implicit communicative skills, and the complex interplay of multilingualism. Despite these challenges, the study identifies a strong, intuitive recognition of the value of effective communication. Pragmatic devices, such as politeness strategies, directives, turn-taking signals, implicature, and repair strategies, are posited as fundamental tools for enhancing communicative competence, fostering respectful and inclusive discourse, and deepening comprehension. The results underscore an urgent necessity: the integration of explicit, context-sensitive pragmatic instruction into national language curricula and a comprehensive overhaul of teacher professional development programs. This research contributes to the development of transformative pedagogical strategies aimed at enhancing communication efficacy, promoting educational equity, and ultimately improving the quality of education in Zambia and analogous multilingual, multicultural educational settings across the Global South.

Keywords: Communication, Pragmatic Devices, Pragmatic Competence, Classroom Discourse, Language Pedagogy, Zambia, Teacher Education, Multilingualism.

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Introduction

The contemporary classroom is a dynamic crucible of social interaction, a space where knowledge is not merely transmitted but co-constructed through complex linguistic and paralinguistic exchanges. Effective communication within this space is therefore not an ancillary concern but the very bedrock upon which successful teaching and learning

are built (Smith, 2017). This communication extends far beyond the accurate conveyance of factual information; it involves the nuanced negotiation of meaning, the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal relationships, the management of participation, and the fostering of a collaborative learning environment. Within this intricate communicative matrix, pragmatic devices are defined as the

suite of linguistic, paralinguistic, and non-verbal tools used to convey meaning in context, beyond the literal semantics of words, and assume a role of critical importance. These devices encompass a broad spectrum of strategies, including but not limited to politeness markers (Brown & Levinson, 1987), speech acts such as requests, apologies, and compliments (Searle, 1969), conversational implicature (Grice, 1975), turn-taking mechanisms (Sacks et al., 1974), hedging, and nonverbal cues like intonation, gesture, and eye contact. Pragmatic competence, defined as the ability to use these devices appropriately and effectively within specific socio-cultural contexts, is thus an indispensable component of overall communicative competence and a key determinant of an individual's ability to participate fully in academic and social life (Bachman, 1990; Kasper & Rose, 2002).

Globally, the significance of developing pragmatic competence in second language (L2) and foreign language education is well-established within applied linguistics. A substantial body of research demonstrates that explicit instruction in pragmatics can lead to significant and measurable gains in learners' ability to comprehend intended meanings, produce contextually appropriate utterances, avoid cross-cultural misunderstandings, and build social rapport (Bardovi-Harlig, 2017; Taguchi, 2015). However, the translation of this theoretical consensus into consistent, effective classroom practice remains uneven, particularly in under-resourced educational contexts. The practical application, integration, and localised adaptation of pragmatic instruction in daily pedagogy constitute a persistent challenge, creating a disconnect between scholarly understanding and on-the-ground reality.

This gap is acutely visible and particularly consequential in the nation of Zambia. Zambia presents a uniquely complex sociolinguistic landscape, characterised by a vibrant tapestry of over 70 indigenous languages alongside the official language, English, which serves as the primary medium of instruction from upper primary school onwards. The educational reality in rural districts such as Kapiri in the Central Province encapsulates this complexity. Here, learners are typically multilingual, navigating a world where Ibibemba dominates home and community life, while English is the mandated vehicle for academic advancement and formal instruction. This linguistic duality means that for most Zambian learners, English is not merely an academic subject but a crucial linguistic tool for accessing the curriculum itself. Consequently, acquiring the pragmatic norms of English is not an abstract academic goal; it is a foundational skill for academic comprehension, classroom participation, and ultimately, scholastic success.

Despite this pressing need, preliminary evidence and anecdotal reports suggest that pragmatic instruction is frequently marginalised within Zambian teacher education programs and national language curricula (Ngoma & Chanda, 2018). Language teachers, often grappling with large class

sizes and limited materials, may receive little to no training in how to teach the implicit, context-dependent rules of language use. The focus, driven by high-stakes examinations, frequently remains on grammatical accuracy, vocabulary acquisition, and literary analysis, while the pragmatic dimensions of communication are left to incidental, ad hoc acquisition. Furthermore, students must often negotiate potential pragmatic transfer or interference from their first languages (L1s), where norms for politeness, directness, or turn-taking may differ significantly from those expected in English-language classroom discourse. This unguided negotiation can lead to communication breakdowns, perceived impoliteness, or student reticence, thereby inadvertently silencing learners and limiting their educational engagement.

It is against this backdrop that the present study situates itself. This research aims to conduct a deep, contextualised investigation into the lived experiences and perceptions surrounding the use of pragmatic devices within selected secondary schools in Kapiri District. The study is driven by the following research questions:

1. What pragmatic devices are commonly utilised or observed in teacher-student and student-student classroom communication?
2. How do teachers and students perceive the role, value, and importance of these pragmatic devices in facilitating learning and interaction?
3. What are the principal challenges and barriers that hinder the effective understanding, teaching, and use of pragmatic devices in this specific context?
4. What latent opportunities and practical strategies could be leveraged to enhance the effective integration of pragmatic devices into teaching and learning practices?

By adopting a phenomenological approach, this research seeks to move beyond superficial surveys and delve into the rich, subjective experiences of the primary stakeholders, that is, the teachers and students themselves. This methodology is chosen to elicit the meanings they attach to classroom interactions, their intuitive understandings of "good communication," and their frustrations or successes in this domain. The insights generated are intended to be robust and contextually grounded, providing an evidence-based platform to inform curriculum development, revolutionise teacher training initiatives, and refine classroom pedagogical practices. This study aspires to contribute to the cultivation of more effective, equitable, and empowering communicative environments within Zambian classrooms, thereby enhancing both the quality of education and the lifelong communicative capacity of learners.

Literature Review

Defining the Terrain: Pragmatics and Pragmatic Devices

Pragmatics, as a subfield of linguistics, is fundamentally concerned with the study of meaning in context. It investigates how language users interpret and produce utterances by drawing upon shared knowledge, situational factors, cultural norms, and communicative intent (Levinson, 1983; Yule, 1996). While syntax governs sentence structure and semantics deals with literal meaning, pragmatics asks: What did the speaker intend to communicate, and how did the listener infer that meaning? Pragmatic devices are the operational instruments of this process. They are the specific linguistic and non-linguistic choices speakers make to manage interaction, convey attitudes, and achieve social goals. Key categories include:

Speech acts constitute utterances that perform actions, such as directives (requests, commands), commissives (promises, offers), expressives (apologising, thanking), and declarations (Garcia & Lee, 2019; Searle, 1969). Politeness strategies represent linguistic tactics employed to acknowledge and respect the "face" or public self-image of interlocutors (Brown & Levinson, 1987). These range from positive politeness (showing solidarity, giving compliments) to negative politeness (using indirectness, hedging to avoid imposition). Conversational implicature encompasses meanings that are implied rather than explicitly stated, relying on the assumption that speakers are adhering to cooperative principles of conversation (Grice, 1975). For example, a teacher saying, "Some students have not submitted their essays," may imply that not all have done so, prompting those who have not to comply. Turn-taking and management refers to the organised system of cues (verbal, like question-asking, and non-verbal, like pausing, gaze, and gesture) that governs who speaks when in a conversation (Sacks et al., 1974). Repair strategies are mechanisms for addressing communication breakdowns, such as clarification requests ("What do you mean?"), confirmation checks ("So, you're saying...?"), and self-correction (Schegloff et al., 1977).

The Imperative of Teaching Pragmatics in L2 Education

The consensus in second language acquisition research is unequivocal: pragmatic competence is a teachable and learnable component of communicative ability that benefits from explicit instruction (Bardovi-Harlig, 2017; Kasper & Rose, 2002). Unlike grammatical rules, pragmatic norms are often opaque, culture-specific, and rarely acquired fully through mere exposure (Schmidt, 1993). Studies across diverse contexts have demonstrated that instructional interventions lead to significant improvements in learners' performance on pragmatic tasks, such as producing appropriate requests, refusals, or apologies (Jeon & Kaya, 2006). Effective pedagogies often involve a cycle of awareness-raising (drawing learners' attention to pragmatic features in authentic discourse), metapragmatic explanation (discussing the underlying rules and sociocultural rationales), controlled practice (through dialogues, discourse completion

tasks), and free production (in role-plays, simulations, and project-based work) (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010).

The Contextual Vacuum: Pragmatics in Zambian and African Classrooms

Despite this robust international scholarship, a critical lacuna exists in research focusing on the teaching and learning of pragmatics, particularly in English, within African classroom contexts. The existing body of work in Zambia, such as Mwanambuyu's (2011) insightful analysis of euphemisms in Silozi, tends to focus on pragmatics within indigenous languages. While invaluable for sociolinguistic understanding, this leaves a gap regarding the pedagogical pragmatics of English as the medium of instruction. This gap is problematic because the Zambian educational context is not a neutral site for language learning; it is a contact zone where multiple linguistic and pragmatic systems interact, often with unequal power (Canagarajah, 2007).

The challenge is multifaceted. First, teachers, who are products of the same system, may lack meta-awareness of English pragmatics themselves. Second, standard curricula and textbooks, often imported or adapted from inner-circle English contexts, may not address the specific pragmatic transfer issues Zambian learners face (Zhu, 2013). Third, the pressure of national examinations, which traditionally prioritise grammatical accuracy and content knowledge over interactional fluency, disincentivises time spent on pragmatic instruction (Kasonde & Banda, 2019). Finally, large, multilingual classes make individualised feedback on language use, a key component of pragmatic development, exceedingly difficult. This study directly addresses this vacuum by investigating the on-the-ground realities of pragmatic device usage within the authentic, constrained, and linguistically rich environment of Zambian secondary schools, thereby contributing a crucial Southern perspective to the global discourse on pragmatics pedagogy.

Theoretical Underpinning: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

To analyse the complex interplay of language, power, and pedagogy in the classroom, this study is theoretically grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is not simply a methodological toolkit but a committed theoretical perspective that views language as a form of social practice, a practice that is both shaped by and actively shapes social structures, power relations, ideologies, and identities (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 2001). It seeks to uncover the often-opaque ways in which discourse contributes to the creation, maintenance, and potential transformation of social inequalities.

The classroom is a pre-eminent institutional site where power is exercised and negotiated through discourse. Interactions between teachers and students are inherently asymmetric, framed by the teacher's institutional authority, societal

expectations of the educator's role, and broader cultural norms regarding age and knowledge. CDA provides the lens to critically examine how pragmatic choices are embedded within these power dynamics. For instance, a teacher's consistent use of unmitigated, bald-on-record directives ("Open page 45." "Silence.") reinforces a traditional, authoritarian classroom model. It constructs the teacher as the sole controller of knowledge and action. Conversely, a teacher's use of negative politeness ("Could you perhaps open your books to page 45?") or inclusive pronouns ("Shall we look at the next problem?") can function to mitigate power differences, model respectful negotiation, and construct a more collaborative learning environment. Students' access to and confidence in using certain pragmatic devices, such as interrupting to ask a clarifying question or politely challenging a peer's idea, is not evenly distributed. It is influenced by factors like gender, perceived academic ability, socioeconomic background, and cultural dispositions towards verbal participation, which are all domains of social power.

By applying a CDA framework, this study moves beyond a descriptive inventory of "devices used" to a critical interrogation of how these devices function within the specific social context of Kapiri schools. It asks: Whose pragmatic norms are validated in the classroom? How does the current pattern of discourse (re)produce existing educational and social hierarchies? In what ways could a conscious shift in pragmatic practices empower marginalised voices and foster a more dialogic, critical pedagogy? This theoretical orientation ensures that the analysis connects micro-level linguistic choices (the use of a particular question form or politeness marker) to macro-level concerns about educational access, equity, and social justice in Zambia, aligning perfectly with the study's ultimate goal of informing transformative educational practice.

Methodology

Research Design and Philosophical Approach

This study employed a qualitative research design underpinned by a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is concerned with understanding the essence of a phenomenon by exploring the lived experiences and subjective meanings that individuals ascribe to it (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Given that the use and perception of pragmatic devices are deeply embedded in personal experience and implicit understanding, phenomenology is the most appropriate paradigm. This approach aligns with the study's theoretical grounding in Critical Discourse Analysis, as both phenomenology and CDA prioritise the examination of how individuals experience and interpret social phenomena within specific contexts (Fairclough, 1992). This approach allows the researcher to delve into the consciousness of teachers and students, capturing their interpretations of classroom interactions, their awareness (or lack thereof) of communicative strategies, and the significance they attach to

"effective communication." This approach prioritises depth, richness, and context over generalizability, seeking to generate nuanced insights that quantitative surveys might obscure, a methodological choice consistent with qualitative research traditions in applied linguistics (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 2015).

Study Setting and Participant Selection

The research was conducted in a purposive sample of government-aided secondary schools within Kapiri District, Central Province. Kapiri represents a quintessential rural Zambian educational setting where the linguistic landscape is dominated by Ibibemba, yet English is the official medium of instruction, creating a fertile ground for investigating pragmatic cross-currents. The district is characterised by multilingual classrooms where learners bring diverse linguistic backgrounds, though Ibibemba serves as the predominant lingua franca in community interactions. This linguistic configuration, with English as the language of formal education and Ibibemba as the language of everyday social life, creates a dynamic environment where pragmatic norms from both languages inevitably intersect and occasionally conflict within classroom discourse, reflecting what Canagarajah (2007) describes as contact zones where multiple linguistic systems interact with unequal power relations.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure they could provide rich, information-dense data relevant to the research questions (Patton, 2015). This sampling strategy is consistent with phenomenological research, which requires participants who have experienced the phenomenon under investigation and can articulate those experiences (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The final sample comprised 15 individuals. Ten learners from Grades 10 to 12 were chosen to represent students who have had sufficient exposure to secondary-level English and are at a stage where academic discourse demands more sophisticated pragmatic skills, as noted by Kasper and Rose (2002) in their work on pragmatic development. Four language teachers participated, including two teachers of English Language and two teachers of Zambian Languages (specifically Ibibemba). Including both groups allowed for a comparative exploration of pragmatic awareness across the different language subjects and insights into potential transfer issues between Ibibemba and English pragmatic norms, addressing the gap identified in Zambian language education research (Ngoma & Chanda, 2018; Mwanambuyu, 2011). One Head of Department (HoD) for Languages provided an administrative and curricular perspective, offering insights into resource allocation, syllabus implementation challenges, and institutional priorities, which align with the CDA focus on institutional power structures shaping classroom discourse (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 2001). The selection criteria ensured that participants had direct experience with classroom communication and could articulate their perceptions of the phenomenon under investigation.

Data Collection Methods and Instruments

A triangulation of methods was employed to enhance the credibility, validity, and depth of the findings (Denzin, 1978). This methodological triangulation is particularly important in phenomenological research, where capturing the essence of lived experiences requires multiple perspectives and data sources (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The combination of interviews, observations, and document analysis also aligns with CDA methodology, which advocates for examining discourse from multiple angles to uncover the relationships between language, power, and social practice (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 2001).

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary tool for accessing participants' perceptions. This format allows for flexibility while ensuring that key topics are covered, a technique recommended for phenomenological studies by Moustakas (1994). Separate interview protocols were designed for teachers and students to ensure that each group could articulate their unique perspectives. Teacher interviews explored their conceptual understanding of effective classroom communication, awareness of pragmatics as a field, instructional practices related to communication skills, perceived challenges, and professional development needs. These areas of inquiry were informed by the literature on pragmatic instruction and teacher education (Bardovi-Harlig, 2017; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Kasper & Rose, 2002). These interviews typically lasted between forty-five and sixty minutes and were conducted in quiet locations within the school premises to minimise distractions. Student interviews focused on their experiences of classroom talk, strategies they used or observed for asking questions, disagreeing, or working in groups, and their views on what makes communication good or difficult. These questions were designed to elicit students' lived experiences of classroom discourse, consistent with phenomenological principles (Creswell, 2013). Student interviews were kept shorter, typically thirty to forty-five minutes, and conducted in a supportive manner to encourage open responses.

Non-participant classroom observations were conducted across multiple lessons in English and Zambian Languages at the participating schools. Observation as a data collection method in classroom research is well-established in applied linguistics and allows researchers to document actual communicative practices rather than relying solely on self-reports (Patton, 2015). The non-participant stance was chosen to minimise observer effects on classroom interaction, though the limitations of this approach are acknowledged (Denzin, 1978). A structured but flexible observation protocol was used to document real-time instances of pragmatic device use. The protocol focused on categories drawn from the pragmatics literature, including types of teacher questions and directives (Searle, 1969), student response modes, turn-taking mechanisms including hand-raising and interruptions (Sacks et al., 1974), use of politeness markers (Brown & Levinson,

1987), instances of repair such as clarification requests and confirmation checks (Schegloff et al., 1977), and notable nonverbal cues. These categories were selected based on the theoretical framework of the study, ensuring alignment between data collection instruments and research questions. Detailed field notes were taken during observations, and where permitted, lessons were audio-recorded to supplement the observational data, a practice recommended by qualitative researchers to enhance accuracy (Creswell, 2013). Each teacher was observed on three separate occasions to capture typical classroom interaction patterns rather than performances staged for the researcher.

Document analysis provided context and corroboration for the interview and observational data. Document analysis is a valuable method in qualitative research for understanding the official and institutional framing of educational practices (Patton, 2015). In CDA, document analysis is particularly important for examining how power and ideology are encoded in official texts and curricula (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 2001). Key documents analysed included the Zambian national English Language syllabus for Grades 8 to 9 and 10 to 12, the Zambian Languages (Icibemba) syllabus, and the most commonly used textbooks and teaching guides for these subjects in the sampled schools. Analysis focused on identifying explicit mention of pragmatic skills, the framing of communicative activities, and the presence or absence of meta-pragmatic explanation, following the approach recommended by Zhu (2013) for analysing pragmatic content in educational materials. Particular attention was paid to how the syllabi presented concepts such as politeness, requests, apologies, and turn-taking, and whether these were treated as discrete vocabulary items or as integrated communicative strategies requiring contextual understanding, a distinction highlighted in the pragmatics literature (Bardovi-Harlig, 2017; Kasper & Rose, 2002).

Data Analysis Procedure

The analysis was an iterative, inductive process guided by the principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and informed by the CDA framework (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 2001). Thematic analysis is widely used in qualitative research for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within data, and is compatible with phenomenological approaches that seek to understand lived experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2013). The integration of CDA principles ensured that themes were examined not only for their descriptive content but also for their implications regarding power, ideology, and social practice.

The first phase involved transcription and familiarisation. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised by removing all identifying information and assigning pseudonyms to participants and schools, a practice essential for ethical research (Patton, 2015). Observation notes and documents were organised systematically. The researcher immersed themselves in the data through repeated

readings, listening to audio recordings while reading transcripts to ensure accuracy and to capture nuances such as tone, hesitation, and emphasis that might not be fully represented in written text. This phase aligns with Braun and Clarke's (2006) recommendation that researchers become intimately familiar with their data before proceeding to coding.

The second phase entailed initial coding. The data was systematically coded line-by-line, generating descriptive codes that captured specific features of the data. Examples of codes generated included "teacher uses imperative," "student expresses fear of making mistakes," "syllabus lists polite request," "observation of raised hand waiting," and "reference to Icibemba politeness norms." This coding process was applied to all interview transcripts, observation notes, and relevant document excerpts. Codes were recorded in the margins of transcripts and in a separate codebook that tracked definitions and examples of each code, following the systematic approach recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Patton (2015).

The third phase focused on theme generation. Codes were collated and grouped into potential themes that captured broader patterns of meaning across the dataset. The CDA lens guided this stage, prompting questions about power, access, and ideology, consistent with Fairclough's (1992) approach to discourse analysis. For example, codes related to "teacher control of talk," "limited student initiation," and "student hesitation to speak" coalesced into a theme about asymmetrical participation. Similarly, codes concerning "no training in pragmatics," "unfamiliar terminology," and "incidental teaching" were grouped under the theme of awareness gap. This phase involved moving back and forth between the coded data and the emerging thematic structure, refining groupings and considering how themes related to one another, an iterative process central to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The fourth phase involved theme review and refinement. Themes were reviewed against the entire dataset to ensure they accurately represented the data and captured the essence of participants' experiences. This process involved checking that each theme was internally coherent, externally distinct from other themes, and grounded in sufficient data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) quality criteria for thematic analysis. Themes were refined, merged, or split as necessary through discussion between the researchers. Key themes that ultimately emerged from this process included "The Pragmatic Awareness Gap," "The Pragmatics of Power in Classroom Discourse," "Material and Systemic Barriers," and "Latent Recognition and Seeds of Opportunity." These themes were then examined through the CDA lens to explore their implications for power relations and educational equity, as recommended by Fairclough (1992) and van Dijk (2001).

The final phase entailed writing the analysis. The findings were structured around the established themes, weaving

together the thematic analysis with vivid, verbatim extracts from participants, detailed observational vignettes, and illustrative excerpts from documents. All extracts were selected to represent typical patterns within the data while also capturing the richness of individual experiences, a practice consistent with qualitative reporting (Creswell, 2013). The CDA framework informed the interpretation throughout, ensuring that the analysis connected micro-level linguistic choices to macro-level concerns about educational access and equity. This systematic approach to data analysis ensured that the findings were firmly grounded in the data while being theoretically informed and interpretively rich.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to stringent ethical standards. Prior informed consent was obtained from all participants. For learners under 18, consent was also obtained from parents or guardians. Participants were assured of voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. These practices align with ethical guidelines for research involving human participants, particularly in educational settings (Patton, 2015). Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed; all identifying information was removed from transcripts and reports, with pseudonyms used for individuals and schools, following recommended practices for protecting participant identity (Creswell, 2013). Data, including audio files, transcripts, and notes, was stored securely on password-protected devices and will be destroyed after the mandated retention period. The research procedures were reviewed and approved by the relevant institutional ethics committee, and permission was obtained from the District Education Board Secretary in Kapiri District, ensuring compliance with local research regulations and demonstrating respect for institutional authority, a consideration that aligns with the CDA focus on power structures (Fairclough, 1992).

Results and Discussion

The analysis of interview transcripts, observation notes, and curricular documents paints a coherent yet concerning picture: the realm of pragmatic devices operates largely as an unseen, untaught, and underutilised dimension of classroom communication in the studied context. This section presents and discusses the integrated findings under key thematic headings.

The Pragmatic Awareness Gap: An Unseen Curriculum

The most striking finding was the profound lack of metalinguistic awareness of pragmatics as a conceptual domain among both educators and learners. When initially asked about "pragmatic devices" or "strategies for effective communication beyond grammar," responses universally indicated unfamiliarity with the terminology. However, when probed with concrete examples from their own classroom

experiences, recognition dawned. This finding aligns with Schmidt's (1993) noticing hypothesis, which argues that learners must consciously notice linguistic features before they can acquire them. If teachers themselves lack meta-pragmatic awareness, they are unlikely to draw students' attention to pragmatic features, thereby limiting opportunities for noticing and acquisition (Bardovi-Harlig, 2017).

A teacher of English with over ten years of experience articulated this disconnect clearly: "We teach those things when they come in the grammar section or in oral skills... like 'can I' versus 'may I,' or how to ask for directions. But I did not know they were called 'pragmatic devices.' To me, it was just teaching English." This sentiment reflects the broader pattern identified by Ngoma and Chanda (2018) that pragmatic instruction is marginalised in Zambian teacher education programs. From a CDA perspective, this lack of meta-awareness represents a form of discursive erasure, where the pragmatic dimensions of language are rendered invisible within official pedagogic discourse, despite their centrality to effective communication (Fairclough, 1992). This sentiment was echoed by a Zambian language teacher who noted:

In Icibemba, we teach umucinshi 'respect' through proverbs and stories, but not as separate speaking rules. It is in the culture. The way you address an elder is different from addressing a friend, but we assume children learn this naturally at home.

This observation highlights the implicit nature of pragmatic learning in indigenous language contexts, a phenomenon noted by Mwanambuyu (2011) in her study of Silozi euphemisms.

Document analysis corroborated this ad-hoc approach. As shown in Table 1, while the national syllabi contain components related to pragmatic acts, they are presented as isolated functional phrases rather than as part of a systematic framework for managing interaction. This finding echoes Zhu's (2013) observation that curricula often treat pragmatic features as vocabulary items rather than as complex, context-dependent strategies. The presentation of pragmatic content in Zambian syllabi reflects what Kasonde and Banda (2019) describe as a disconnect between policy intentions and classroom realities in Zambian language education.

Table 1: Pragmatic Components in Zambian Secondary School English Syllabi

Grade Level	Component / Sub-topic	Examples Listed	Implied Pragmatic Device
8-9	Asking for explanation, apologising, making an offer, asking for permission.	"I beg your pardon." "Would you explain?" "I am sorry," "Can I...?"	Polite requests; Apologies
10-12	Expressing agreement/disagreement; Seeking clarification; Giving/Receiving compliments	"I agree because..."; "Could you clarify?" "Congratulations on..."	Turn-taking; Repair; Expressives

(Source: Adapted from National English Language Syllabi, Zambia)

The table reveals a latent curriculum of pragmatics, but one without explicit meta-pragmatic scaffolding. A teacher, reflecting on the syllabus, observed: "We see these topics, but we rush through them. The exam will test if they know the words for apologising, not if they can use an apology appropriately in a real argument with a friend or teacher." This highlights a critical issue: the reduction of pragmatic competence to vocabulary lists, divorced from the contextual and strategic knowledge needed for authentic use, a concern raised by Ishihara and Cohen (2010) in their work on teaching pragmatics. The examination focuses on discrete items rather than strategic competence, which reflects broader tensions in language assessment identified by Bachman (1990).

Classroom Practice: The Pragmatics of Power and Limited Student Agency

Classroom observations provided stark evidence of how the awareness gap translates into practice. The discourse was overwhelmingly characterised by a teacher-centred, transmission-oriented model, which had direct implications for the types of pragmatic devices employed. This pattern reflects Fairclough's (1992) observation that institutional

discourse often reproduces hierarchical power relations through routine linguistic practices.

Teacher talk was dominated by directive speech acts, most frequently in the form of bald, unmitigated imperatives. Observational records consistently noted phrases such as "Open your books to page 50," "Stop talking and listen," "Write this down," and "You, answer the question." These directives align with Searle's (1969) classification of speech acts, specifically directives that attempt to get the hearer to act. While efficient for management, this pattern, analysed through the CDA lens, continuously reinforces the teacher's institutional power and frames students as passive recipients. The near-absence of politeness markers such as "Could you please..." or inclusive forms like "Let us open our books" models a discourse of hierarchy, not collaboration. Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory would characterise these bald-on-record directives as face-threatening acts that assert power rather than mitigate imposition. This pattern of classroom discourse reflects what van Dijk (2001) describes as the reproduction of power through everyday institutional talk.

In this environment, students' opportunities to employ a range of pragmatic devices were severely constrained. Their communicative roles were largely reactive. Turn-taking was almost exclusively managed through a strict "raise-hand-and-wait" system, with student-initiated turns occurring rarely. This observation aligns with Sacks et al.'s (1974) analysis of turn-taking systems, which noted that institutional settings often impose more rigid turn-allocation rules than everyday conversation. Questions from students were predominantly low-risk, factual clarification requests such as "What page, madam?" or "Repeat it, sir?" Observations recorded almost no instances of students using more nuanced prefacing, like "I was wondering if you could explain..." or challenging questions that would require hedging or politeness strategies. This limited range of student-initiated speech acts reflects what Kasper and Rose (2002) describe as restricted pragmatic development opportunities in teacher-centred classrooms. Expressing opinions or disagreement was notably absent. One student's interview comment illuminated why: "If you disagree with the teacher or even a classmate who is answering, you can be seen as rude or showing off. It is better to just be quiet." This fear of face-threatening acts, as conceptualised by Brown and Levinson (1987), stifles the very discourse that pragmatic devices are meant to facilitate. From a CDA perspective, this self-silencing represents the internalisation of power relations, where students learn to monitor and restrict their own participation (Fairclough, 1992). The observational data thus reveal a pragmatic landscape where the devices of control and compliance are dominant, while the devices of negotiation, inquiry, and collaborative meaning-making are underdeveloped and underused by students. This asymmetrical distribution of pragmatic resources can limit the development of critical thinking and communicative autonomy, outcomes that are central to modern educational aims (Smith, 2017).

Multifaceted Challenges: Barriers to Pragmatic Competence

Participants identified a convergent set of obstacles that perpetuate the status quo, creating a cycle of pragmatic neglect. The teacher training deficit emerged as the most frequently cited and critical barrier. All four teacher participants stated unequivocally that they had never received formal instruction in teaching pragmatics during their pre-service education or subsequent professional development. As one English teacher explained:

In college, we did methodology, but it was for teaching grammar, reading, and composition. How to teach a child to speak politely in a debate or to understand sarcasm in a story that was not part of the course.

This finding aligns with the observations of Ngoma and Chanda (2018), who noted that pragmatic instruction is frequently marginalised within Zambian teacher education programs. From a CDA perspective, this training deficit is not merely a technical gap but a structural issue that reproduces

existing power asymmetries in classroom discourse. When teachers lack pedagogical content knowledge in pragmatics, as conceptualised by Shulman (1986), they are unequipped to move beyond syllabus listings to actual strategy instruction, thereby perpetuating a transmission-based model of education that limits students' communicative agency. The absence of pragmatics in teacher preparation reflects broader patterns in language teacher education identified by Ishihara and Cohen (2010), who argue that teachers need both meta-pragmatic awareness and pedagogical tools for teaching pragmatics. Bardovi-Harlig (2017) similarly emphasises that teacher education programs must explicitly address pragmatics if teachers are to effectively develop their students' pragmatic competence.

The scarcity of instructional materials constituted another formidable barrier to pragmatic development. Teachers consistently lamented the complete absence of dedicated resources for teaching communication strategies.

One teacher observed:

The textbooks have dialogues, but they are often artificial. They do not show how to really ask a difficult question or how to politely interrupt a group discussion.

Another teacher added:

For Zambian Languages, we have no modern textbooks that connect our cultural ways of speaking to the formal school setting.

This resource scarcity reflects broader patterns identified by Kasonde and Banda (2019) in their analysis of language policy and literacy in Zambia. They found that instructional materials often fail to address the specific linguistic realities of Zambian learners, particularly the pragmatic dimensions of language use. Within the CDA framework, this absence of contextually relevant materials represents a form of discursive marginalisation, where the pragmatic norms of local languages remain unrecognised in official pedagogic resources (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 2001). Teachers are forced to rely on their own intuition, which, without training, often proves insufficient for explicit pragmatic instruction. Zhu (2013) notes that this resource gap is common in many educational contexts, where textbooks imported from inner-circle English countries fail to address local pragmatic needs. This material deficit ensures that pragmatics remains an implicit, incidental aspect of language teaching rather than a systematically developed component of communicative competence.

Linguistic and cultural interference emerged as a significant challenge rooted in the multilingual reality of Kapiri District. Both teachers and students pointed to the complex interplay between Ibibemba and English pragmatic norms.

A student shared:

In Ibibemba at home, we can just say mpelako cilya 'give me that' to a sibling. But if I say 'Give me that' to my

teacher in English, it sounds harsh. I do not always know the soft way.

This comment illustrates what Kasper and Rose (2002) describe as pragmatic transfer, where learners apply pragmatic norms from their first language to second language contexts, sometimes resulting in inappropriate or unintentionally impolite communication. A Zambian language teacher expanded on this observation:

Our languages are very contextual. Respect is shown through proverbs, through indirectness, not always through words like 'please.' Translating that directness into English politeness markers is a challenge we do not address.

This phenomenon reflects what Canagarajah (2007) describes as the contact zone where multiple linguistic and pragmatic systems interact, often with unequal power. Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory provides a framework for understanding how different cultures may realise politeness through different linguistic strategies, creating potential for misunderstanding when learners transfer strategies across languages. The CDA lens reveals how the unguided negotiation of these competing pragmatic systems places an additional cognitive and social burden on learners, who must intuit the rules of English academic discourse without explicit instruction. This can lead to communication breakdowns, perceived impoliteness, and student reticence, thereby inadvertently silencing learners from Ibibemba-speaking backgrounds and limiting their educational engagement.

Curriculum and assessment pressures acted as powerful systemic disincentives to pragmatic instruction. The overwhelming focus on preparing students for high-stakes national examinations shapes what is taught and what is neglected in language classrooms. As the Head of Department explained:

The exam marks come from essay writing, comprehension, and grammar. Speaking and listening are small, poorly defined components. As a department, we are judged on final results, so where do we find the time to teach these speaking skills that will not be tested?

This sentiment echoes the findings of Zhu (2013), who observed that examination systems in many contexts prioritise grammatical accuracy and content knowledge over interactional fluency, marginalising pragmatic instruction. Bachman's (1990) framework for language testing distinguishes between grammatical competence and pragmatic competence, noting that traditional tests often fail to capture the latter. Kasonde and Banda (2019) similarly note that Zambian national examinations focus heavily on written skills, with speaking and listening receiving minimal attention. From a CDA perspective, this examination focus represents a form of institutional power that shapes pedagogic priorities and marginalises aspects of language competence that are difficult to measure through standardised tests

(Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 2001). The pragmatic dimensions of communication, being inherently contextual and performative, resist easy quantification and therefore remain peripheral. This systemic pressure ensures that even when teachers recognise the value of pragmatic skills, they feel constrained by the need to cover tested content, perpetuating a cycle where pragmatic competence remains an unintended casualty of the assessment regime. Jeon and Kaya's (2006) meta-analysis of pragmatic instruction studies underscores this point, showing that despite evidence of instructional effectiveness, pragmatics remains underrepresented in curricula and assessment frameworks globally.

Latent Recognition and Seeds of Opportunity

Despite the formidable challenges, the data revealed a powerful undercurrent: a strong, intuitive recognition of the value of the very skills pragmatics encompasses. This consensus represents a significant opportunity for intervention. Teachers spoke of pragmatic outcomes without labelling them as such. One teacher stated:

A student who can confidently ask for clarification is a student who will learn better.

This observation aligns with research by Garcia and Lee (2019) on the relationship between pragmatic device use and student engagement. Another teacher noted, "The biggest problem in group work is not the English, but that they do not know how to disagree without fighting. If we could teach that, it would change everything." This comment reflects the practical importance of pragmatic competence for collaborative learning, a theme emphasised in the literature on classroom communication (Smith, 2017).

Students, too, expressed a clear desire for these competencies. They articulated needs that map directly onto pragmatic domains. One student noted, "I want to learn how to present my ideas without fear," reflecting a need for public speaking and politeness strategies. Another shared, "I want to know the right way to ask for help from a teacher so I do not disturb them," indicating a desire for strategic indirectness and negative politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987). A third observed, "We need to learn how to understand when someone is joking or being serious in English," pointing to the importance of interpreting implicature and tone, skills central to Grice's (1975) cooperative principle. This latent demand indicates that any initiative to teach pragmatics would likely meet with engaged interest from both teachers and students, as it addresses felt communicative needs. This finding resonates with Schmidt's (1993) argument that learner motivation and attention are crucial for pragmatic development. From a CDA perspective, this latent recognition represents a form of resistant discourse, where participants articulate needs that the official curriculum fails to address, creating openings for transformative pedagogy (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 2001).

Towards a Strategic Framework: The Potential of Strategic Action Sequences (SASs)

Given the context of constrained resources and the need for clarity, the study points to the potential efficacy of Strategic Action Sequences (SASs) as a pedagogical framework (Eisenstein, Ebsworth & Schweers, 2020). SASs break down complex, often daunting, pragmatic functions into manageable, step-by-step verbal scripts and action plans. This provides the explicit, structured guidance that teachers currently lack. For example, instead of vaguely instructing students to "participate in a debate," a teacher could teach an SAS for "Politely Interjecting to Disagree." This might include acknowledging the speaker with "I hear what you are saying about..." or "That is a interesting point...", using a softening hedge such as "...but I might see it a little differently" or "However, I am not entirely convinced that...", stating the alternative view with "From what I understand..." or "Another way to look at it could be...", and briefly supporting the view with a reason or piece of evidence.

This SAS demystifies the process, providing learners with a tangible "toolkit" of phrases and a safe structure to practice. The approach aligns with research on effective pragmatics pedagogy, which emphasises the importance of explicit instruction and scaffolded practice (Bardovi-Harlig, 2017; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). The formulaic nature of SASs provides what Kasper and Rose (2002) describe as routinised pragmatic knowledge, which learners can later adapt and personalise. For teachers, it offers a clear, teachable unit that addresses the need for practical methodologies identified in the teacher training literature (Shulman, 1986). As one teacher reacted during member-checking, "This I can do. This is like a formula. I can write it on the board and have them practice in pairs. It makes the invisible visible." This response echoes findings by Eisenstein, Ebsworth and Schweers (2020) that teachers appreciate structured approaches to pragmatics instruction. SASs can be developed for a range of high-frequency classroom functions, including making collaborative suggestions, asking for clarification beyond a simple repeat, giving constructive peer feedback, or negotiating roles in group work. This structured approach is particularly suited to resource-constrained contexts where teachers need clear, adaptable frameworks, addressing the material and training deficits identified earlier in this study (Kasonde & Banda, 2019; Ngoma & Chanda, 2018). From a CDA perspective, SASs have the potential to democratise classroom discourse by equipping all students, regardless of their linguistic background, with the pragmatic tools needed for full participation, thereby challenging existing power asymmetries (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 2001).

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the use and perception of pragmatic devices in Kapiri District secondary schools, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the

qualitative phenomenological design, while appropriate for exploring lived experiences (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994), limits the generalizability of findings to other contexts. The study focused on a small number of participants from selected schools in one district, and the experiences of teachers and students in other parts of Zambia, particularly urban areas with different linguistic compositions, may differ significantly. As Patton (2015) notes, qualitative research prioritises depth over breadth, and findings should be understood as context-specific rather than representative of all Zambian secondary schools. The linguistic landscape of Kapiri, dominated by Ibibemba, may not reflect the pragmatic realities of districts where other Zambian languages predominate, a limitation acknowledged in multilingual education research (Canagarajah, 2007).

Second, the reliance on self-report data through interviews introduces the possibility of social desirability bias (Patton, 2015). Participants may have presented themselves in ways they perceived as favourable to the researcher, particularly when discussing their teaching practices or communication strategies. This limitation is inherent in qualitative research that relies on participant accounts, though the triangulation with classroom observations helped mitigate this concern (Denzin, 1978). However, the presence of an observer may have influenced classroom behaviour, potentially leading to performances that differed from typical daily practice, a phenomenon known as the Hawthorne effect (Patton, 2015).

Third, the study focused primarily on English and Ibibemba language classrooms, but did not extensively examine pragmatic device use across other subject areas where different communicative demands may arise. Mathematics, science, and humanities classrooms may present distinct pragmatic challenges and opportunities that were not captured in this research. As Smith (2017) notes, disciplinary discourses have their own pragmatic norms, and future studies could usefully explore pragmatics across the broader secondary school curriculum.

Fourth, the study did not include systematic measures of students' actual pragmatic competence through performance-based assessments. While interviews and observations provided rich qualitative data, the inclusion of discourse completion tasks or role-plays could have offered more direct evidence of students' pragmatic abilities (Kasper & Rose, 2002). This represents an avenue for future research building on the foundation established here, potentially using instruments developed in interlanguage pragmatics research (Bardovi-Harlig, 2017).

Fifth, the cross-sectional design captures a single point in time and cannot track how pragmatic awareness and competence might develop over the course of students' secondary education. Longitudinal research would be valuable for understanding developmental trajectories and the cumulative impact of any pragmatic instruction that does

occur, an approach recommended by Taguchi (2015) in her work on interactional competence development.

Sixth, as an external researcher, the first author's positionality may have influenced data collection and interpretation. Despite efforts to build rapport and trust with participants, the researcher remained an outsider to the school communities. This positionality affects the co-construction of meaning in interviews and observations, a consideration acknowledged in phenomenological research (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Collaborative research designs involving teachers as co-researchers could provide additional depth and insider perspectives in future investigations, an approach aligned with critical and participatory research paradigms (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 2001).

Finally, the study's focus on pragmatic devices in classroom communication necessarily brackets out other important dimensions of classroom life, such as emotional dynamics, physical environment, and broader socio-economic factors that shape educational experiences. As van Dijk (2001) notes, discourse analysis must be situated within broader social analysis, and future research could usefully explore how pragmatic practices intersect with these other dimensions. These limitations notwithstanding, the study offers robust, contextually grounded insights that can inform pedagogical practice and policy in Kapiri District and similar multilingual settings, contributing to the growing body of research on pragmatics in African educational contexts (Mwanambuyu, 2011; Ngoma & Chanda, 2018).

Conclusion

This phenomenological study has served to illuminate a critical, yet largely invisible, facet of language education in Zambian secondary schools: the domain of pragmatic competence. By listening to the lived experiences of teachers and students in Kapiri District and critically observing their communicative practices, the research has revealed a significant paradox. There exists a widespread, intuitive appreciation for the importance of effective, appropriate, and respectful communication skills that are fundamentally pragmatic in nature. However, this appreciation exists alongside a profound systemic failure to provide the explicit knowledge, pedagogical tools, and curricular space needed to develop these skills systematically.

The findings present a clear picture of a cycle of neglect. Teachers, who are themselves products of an education system that marginalises pragmatics, lack the training and resources to teach it. They operate within a curriculum and assessment framework that prioritises the easily testable over the complexly performative. Consequently, classroom discourse often defaults to patterns that reinforce power asymmetry and limit student communicative agency, focusing on compliance and information transfer rather than dialogue and co-construction. Students, navigating between the pragmatic norms of Ibibemba and the uncharted expectations

of English academic discourse, are left to intuit rules they can barely perceive, often at the cost of their confidence and participation.

The implications of this gap are far-reaching. In an era where education aims to foster critical thinking, collaboration, and global citizenship, depriving learners of pragmatic tools is tantamount to withholding essential equipment for intellectual and social engagement. It hampers not only language acquisition but also the development of the very competencies needed for success in higher education and the modern workforce.

Therefore, this study concludes with a call for concerted, multi-level action to integrate pragmatics into the heart of Zambian language education. The recommendations are interconnected. Curriculum reform requires that the national syllabi for English and Zambian Languages be revised to explicitly include pragmatic competence as a stated, progressive learning outcome, moving beyond vocabulary lists to encompass strategic interactional skills. Transformative teacher education demands that pre-service and in-service teacher training programs urgently incorporate modules on pragmatics pedagogy, equipping teachers with both meta-pragmatic knowledge and practical methodologies such as the Strategic Action Sequences model. The development of contextualised resources necessitates creating and disseminating teaching and learning materials that address the specific pragmatic challenges and cross-linguistic realities of Zambian learners, including the Ibibemba-English interface. Assessment innovation calls for examination bodies to explore ways to validly and reliably assess aspects of pragmatic competence, perhaps through structured speaking tasks or portfolio assessments, to signal their importance and drive classroom practice.

By addressing the significance of pragmatic devices through these strategic interventions, educators and policymakers in Zambia can initiate a transformative shift. The goal is to move from classrooms where communication is often a barrier to learning to classrooms where it is the very engine of empowerment, enabling all learners to find their voice, engage critically with ideas, and participate fully in their educational journey and beyond.

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