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Noura Almehaidly

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Pragmatics in the Saudi EFL Classroom: Investigating Textbook Content and Teachers' Perceptions and Practices

Noura Almehaidly

University of York

ABSTRACT

Pragmatic competence is a crucial component of communicative competence and language knowledge. It plays a significant role in second language learning and teaching, especially in English as a foreign language (EFL) context (Cohen, 2012). Despite its recognition as a core objective in the EFL curriculum by the Saudi Ministry of Education, recent studies highlight a concerning lack of pragmatic awareness and conversational proficiency among Saudi EFL learners (Almegren, 2022). Furthermore, there is limited information available on the pragmatic content covered in EFL textbooks designed for Saudi students. Consequently, this study analyses the pragmatic content of a textbook series used nationwide in Saudi secondary schools. It specifically examines the type, frequency and distribution of speech acts, with the metapragmatic information covering topics of politeness, appropriacy, register, usage, illocutionary force, and cultural aspects. Quantitative and qualitative content analyses are employed to analyse the textbook data, using checklists based on Searle's (1979) taxonomy of speech acts and on metapragmatic information, drawing on the framework of Vellenga (2004). Furthermore, the study investigates whether teachers follow or diverge from these textbooks when teaching pragmatics, and their perceptions of the covered pragmatic content. The initial findings indicate that the textbooks include a wide range of speech act types; that there is limited coverage of contextual and metapragmatic information; that there is a lack of a discernible pattern in the distribution of pragmatic information across textbooks; and that teachers mostly rely on textbooks to teach pragmatics; with unanimous dissatisfaction among them regarding the quality, albeit perceived adequacy in quantity, of SA in the textbooks. Based on these findings, pedagogical suggestions are proposed to enhance learners' pragmatic competence through improved teaching materials and classroom instruction.

KEYWORDS

EFL textbook analysis; L2 pragmatics, pragmatic content; communicative competence; teaching speech acts

Introduction

Effective linguistic communication extends beyond grammatical accuracy, including the ability to use culturally and socially appropriate language in various communication contexts. This ability, referred to as pragmatic competence, involves understanding what to say, how to say it and when to say it, depending on the situation and the interlocutors involved. For instance, it enables speakers to understand that while greeting someone with 'Good afternoon, sir' may be suitable in a formal business setting, it would seem odd or insincere when used with a friend. Central to pragmatics is speech acts (SAs), a term first introduced by Austin in 1962 and later developed by Searle (1969, 1975, 1979) to refer to the idea that utterances do not only convey information, but they also perform actions that may diverge from literal meanings. For example, we use language to make requests, refuse, resign, give advice, promise, express opinions and more.

The significance of pragmatic competence in second language learning is widely acknowledged,

especially in today's globally interconnected world where English serves as a lingua franca and cultural interactions occur (Nguyen & Canh, 2019). Misunderstandings stemming from cultural differences can lead to pragmatic failure with far-reaching consequences (e.g., mistranslations can hinder diplomatic efforts). To avoid this outcome, language learners need to develop strong pragmatic skills. Research in pragmatics has consistently demonstrated the effectiveness of explicit instruction in developing the pragmatic competence of EFL learners (see Plonsky & Zhuang, 2019 for a review). This is due to the fact that pragmatics is a complex field and many of its features are non-salient for learners and often go unnoticed, even after prolonged exposure, making explicit instruction necessary (Cohen, 2012). Learners, unaware of these differences, may unintentionally apply pragmatic rules from their first language to the target language, which is liable to result in pragmatic failure if the rules differ significantly (Qian et al., 2024). This is especially significant in the Saudi EFL context, where the norms of the learners' native culture differ markedly from those cultures where English is spoken as a native language and opportunities to recognise these differences outside of the classroom are limited.

That is not to say that teaching L2 pragmatics should aim to impose English-speaking cultural norms on learners but rather to raise awareness of cultural differences and encourage reflection on sociopragmatic rules variations, empowering them to make intentional language choices (Félix-Brasdefer & Mugford, 2017; Mahmud, 2019). It follows that instructional materials should provide ample pragmatic information to enable learners to make well-informed decisions that align with their own values while promoting effective communication. As Dirven and Pütz (1993) pointed out, "a major aim of foreign language learning is, then, to become aware of cultural communicative differences" and show a "willingness to accommodate" (p. 152).

Pragmatic Competence in the Saudi English Language Curriculum

Schools in Saudi Arabia mostly work under the supervision of the Ministry of Education (MoE). The MoE sets out the curriculum, its objectives, the syllabus, and prescribed textbooks. The MoE introduced the Saudi English Language Framework (SELF) in 2014 to provide a reformed curricular guidelines and educational objectives that govern English language instruction in Saudi schools. The SELF has been developed in alignment with the latest advancements in language theory and practice, emphasising "developing [students'] communicative competence in the English language" (p. 9). Communicative competence in a language includes different areas, including grammatical and pragmatic competencies (Huang, 2021). Accordingly, the SELF guideline specifies learning pragmatic aspects, including SAs, appropriateness, politeness, register, and culture, among its main learning objectives.

Research on Pragmatics within ELT Textbooks

With the increasing recognition of the importance of pragmatic competence, a growing body of research has explored how ESL/EFL textbooks address pragmatic components. These investigations have varied in focus, from comprehensive analyses covering a broad range of pragmatic aspects (e.g., Dendenne, 2019; Nu & Murray, 2020; Vu, 2017), to examinations concentrating on a specific area within pragmatics, such as SAs (e.g., Nguyen, 2011; Takafumi et al., 2007). Notably, there has been no investigation into the pragmatic content of textbooks used in the Saudi context.

In a seminal study, Vellenga (2004) conducted a content analysis of the pragmatic information within four ESL and EFL textbooks designed for intermediate proficiency levels. The study also examined whether teachers supplemented textbook content by conducting brief interviews. Vellenga's framework categorised pragmatic information into general pragmatic information, metalanguage style, SAs, and metapragmatic explanations accompanying SAs. SAs were a significant focus, comprising half of the analysis scale. However, the author did not seem to follow specific classifications for identifying and coding the covered SAs. The results showed minimal pragmatic information within the textbooks: the textbooks covered 22 SA types,

only two of which were discussed in terms of appropriacy and context. The interviews revealed that teachers hardly introduce additional pragmatic material due to limited time and expertise. The study concluded that, given the lack of pragmatic information in the textbooks, the acquisition of pragmatic competence from them was highly improbable.

Ji (2007) and Vu (2017) conducted content analyses of EFL textbooks designed for English major students at the university level in China and Vietnam, respectively. Both studies adopted Vellenga's (2004) framework for pragmatic input, with the addition of pragmatic tasks as a new category and emphasis on cultural information as a separate category. This expanded framework was also used by Nu and Murray (2020) in a Vietnamese secondary school context. Both Ji's (2007) and Vu's (2017) found a general oversight of pragmatic knowledge in the examined textbooks. They observed limited quantity and variety of pragmatic information, along with rare pragmatic-oriented tasks. Vu's study even encountered so few pragmatic activities that further analysis was not possible. These findings echo those of Nu and Murray (2020), who reported that explicit pragmatic information appeared on only 5.5% of the textbooks' pages and was absent from teachers' manuals.

Additionally, Ji (2007) and Vu (2017) explored educators' perspectives on teaching pragmatics and their integration of pragmatic materials and tasks in the classroom through questionnaires, observations, and interviews. Both studies found that teachers heavily relied on textbooks for instruction, facing challenges due to the limited pragmatic content in these resources and their own lack of understanding of pragmatics and its teaching methods. Consequently, the studies highlighted the urgent need to incorporate pragmatics into textbook development and improve teachers' competence in teaching and evaluating pragmatic skills.

In studies conducted in an Arabic context, Dendenne (2019) and Neddar (2010) examined the pragmatic content of EFL and ESL textbooks used in Algeria. Both studies followed Vellenga's (2004) approach and utilised content analysis to assess the coverage and quality of pragmatic information in these textbooks. Dendenne found that pragmatic topics were limited in the textbooks, with a focus on pragmalinguistic aspects of SAs while neglecting their contextual use. In contrast, Neddar reported a higher quantity of SA information, with approximately 27% of textbook pages covering pragmatic issues. However, Neddar highlighted the insufficient quality of these SAs, which lacked a diverse range of formulas and accompanying explanations, potentially hindering effective pragmatic knowledge acquisition and leading to negative pragmatic transfer.

Focusing on SA content, Takafumi et al. (2007) conducted a content analysis of 17 textbooks used in Japanese secondary schools. The authors adapted a more speech-act-focused framework centred on the range and distribution of SAs, their linguistic presentations, and associated contextual and metapragmatic information. The results showed a low quantity of SAs, with each textbook teaching an average of only six SAs. Furthermore, there was no variation in the realisation forms of SAs, raising concerns that students may overgeneralize their use due to the limited forms linked to each function. In a similar study, Nguyen (2011) analysed three upper-secondary education textbooks in Vietnam to assess the coverage and presentation of SAs. Contrary to previous findings, Nguyen's study found a wide variety of SAs across the textbooks, with a total of 27 SA types taught and practised. However, closer examination revealed shortcomings in the presentation of these SAs: they were often taught out of context, lacked metapragmatic explanations, and showed an irregular distribution. Therefore, the study encouraged textbook writers to supplement materials with authentic input and contribute adequate explanations of usage rules to help learners develop pragmatically.

Overall, research examining the treatment of pragmatics within ESL/EFL textbooks consistently identifies deficiencies in the quantity and quality of pragmatic information provided. However, most of these studies directed their attention towards various kinds of pragmatic topics included in textbooks. While this broad approach offers a holistic perspective, it often lacks the depth necessary for a rigorous and systematic examination of each pragmatic aspect. Furthermore, because pragmatic issues are often interrelated (Mey, 2006), the inclusion of a wide range of topics in a single analysis framework may result in overlapping

categories if the researcher is not careful. Therefore, this study is commenced with the belief that textbooks should be investigated with a narrower focus – their treatment of a specific pragmatic feature – encompassing various considerations such as that feature’s frequency, distribution, instruction, and contextualisation. Moreover, unlike previous studies that mostly relied on intuitive judgments, this study employs a specific taxonomy for identifying and classifying SA types in textbooks to achieve a more systematic and rigorous analysis. Additionally, considering the context-dependency of textbook content, this study incorporates curriculum guidelines and objectives as reference points for pragmatic coverage analysis, a factor often overlooked in previous research. Most previous studies seemed to operate under the assumption that pragmatic competence should be a universal inclusion in all EFL/ESL textbooks, regardless of their intended aims and teaching contexts. Vellenga’s (2004) selection of ESL grammar textbooks may be a case in point.

Considering the existing research gap and the absence of prior investigations into the pragmatic content within EFL textbooks used in Saudi schools, this research aims to address this gap by analysing the SA content and the metapragmatic information provided within nationwide-used EFL textbooks for secondary school students in Saudi Arabia, as well as investigating the teachers’ perceptions and adaptation practices of this content. This examination is paramount given the country’s status as an EFL environment, where the development of communicative competence is emphasised, yet opportunities for sufficient English input and practice outside the classroom are limited. Consequently, the role of textbooks in enhancing students’ pragmatic competence within such a context becomes more prominent, emphasising the necessity of exploring the incorporation of pragmatic competence within these materials.

Aims of the Study

The present study sets out to investigate the pragmatic content pertaining to SAs, including metapragmatic content, in the *MegaGoal* textbook series (1–6) used in Saudi schools. This involves examining types, frequency, distribution of explicit SAs, and the metapragmatic information supplied with them to facilitate learning. It also aims to determine whether EFL teachers adhere to or adapt the textbooks when teaching pragmatics. The perceptions and views of those teachers in relation to pragmatic content are also taken into account. Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the types, frequencies and distribution of SAs explicitly presented in the *MegaGoal* series used in Saudi schools?
2. What are the types, frequencies and distribution of metapragmatic information explicitly presented with SAs in the *MegaGoal* textbook series used in Saudi schools?
3. Do Saudi EFL teachers supplement the *MegaGoal* textbooks when teaching SAs?
4. What is the teacher’s perspective on SA content in *MegaGoal* textbooks?

This study hopes to serve as a foundational step, potentially opening doors for further research into the treatment of pragmatic aspects in language textbooks employed by Saudi Arabia. It could also pave the way for comparative studies involving diverse contexts and countries. By providing a greater understanding of the nature of pragmatic content in language textbooks and how teachers use these textbooks in their pragmatic instruction, this study will offer valuable recommendations that can be of great value to EFL textbook designers, teachers, and policymakers in Saudi Arabia.

Methods

The textbooks chosen for the study analysis are the student books (hereafter, textbooks) from the *MegaGoal* series used in Saudi Arabia. It is a regional edition designed in cooperation between the publisher, McGraw-Hill Publications, and the Saudi MoE to align with the curricular guidelines and the students’ specific needs. The series includes six textbooks taught sequentially for students from first to third grades

of secondary school, who are at intermediate proficiency level. This level is recognised as the optimal stage to develop L2 pragmatics given that learners have already acquired the fundamental grammar and vocabulary skills necessary to understand the nuanced pragmatic aspects of the language (see Takafumi et al., 2007).

The textbooks were analysed using qualitative and quantitative content analysis approaches. Quantitative content analysis is concerned with counting occurrences and frequencies of SA and metapragmatic information in the data, whereas qualitative content analysis deals with latent meanings and interpretations to explain the target phenomena rather than only counting them (Krippendorff, 2018). Accordingly, every textbook was examined, page-by-page, using two checklists developed for the purpose of this study to confirm the presence or of the main SA and metapragmatic types, and to help obtain their frequency.

The first checklist includes the types and subtypes of SAs according to Searle's (1979) classification. The main SA types are *representatives*; where speakers oblige themselves to the truth or falseness of an expressed proposition (e.g., asserting, hypothesising, and expressing opinions); *directives*, where they try to get someone to do something (e.g., pleading, ordering, and giving advise); *commissives*, where they commit themselves to a certain action (e.g., promising, offering, threatening); *expressives*, where they express attitudes and feelings (e.g., thanking, apologising, and congratulating); and *declaratives*, used to change the reality according to the proposition declared (e.g., appointing, hiring, and sentencing).

The second checklist, drawn from Vellenga's (2004) framework, focused on the metapragmatic information explicitly provided with SAs in the textbooks, which is considered essential for raising learners' pragmatic awareness. It specifically refers to any additional discussion, instruction, direction, comment, or usage note explicitly given in the textbooks to explain the use of SAs in relation to pragmatic concepts such as politeness, appropriacy, register, usage, illocutionary force, and other cultural information (see also Vu, 2017).

Furthermore, nine EFL teachers in Saudi secondary schools with experience in using the *MegaGoal* series were interviewed to investigate whether they adapt or supplement the covered pragmatic content and to seek their perceptions regarding the quantity and quality of this content. Specifically, the interview inquiries addressed the following points: (a) whether teachers adhere to the textbooks' content when delivering pragmatic information; (b) if they endeavour to supplement or modify this content based on their students' needs and proficiency levels; (c) the rationale and motivations guiding their adherence to or supplementation of textbook content; (d) their opinions on the adequacy of the amount of SA information within the textbooks relative to their students' needs; and (e) their assessments of the quality of this information.

Results and Discussion

SA information

The analysis showed that the *MegaGoal* textbooks encompassed a comprehensive range of English SAs outlined in the checklist. The results of how often each SA type and subtypes were explicitly covered within the six textbooks is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1 shows that four of the five main types of speech acts SAs were addressed in the six textbooks. *Directive* SAs were the most common, making up 33.8% of occurrences, followed by *representatives* at 30.7% and *expressives* at 28.1%. *Commissives* had the lowest coverage at 7.2%, while *declaratives* were not covered at all. Additionally, the textbooks included a total of 39 different SA subtypes, occurring 579 times collectively (an average of 96.5 occurrences in each textbook). Giving opinions was the most frequent, accounting for 8.8% of SA occurrences, followed by asking (8.6%), giving advice (6.9%), and reporting (6.3%). Only giving opinions, giving advice, and greeting SAs appeared in all six textbooks. Other subtypes, such as commanding, suggesting, refusing, offering, and promising, had distribution rates ranging from 0.1% to 3%. Some SAs like confirming and responding to jokes were exceedingly rare, each appearing only once. Notably, certain common SAs like complimenting, thanking, congratulating, and inviting were not covered in the textbooks.

Table 1
 Frequency and Distribution of SA Types and Subtypes in MegaGoal Textbooks

SA type	SA subtype	Total			
		F.	%	F.	%
<i>Representatives</i>	Making predictions	8	1.3%	178	30.7%
	Making deductions	10	1.7%		
	Reporting	37	6.3%		
	Confirming	1	0.1%		
	Negotiating	5	0.8%		
	Agreeing	29	5%		
	Disagreeing	24	4.1%		
	Giving opinions	51	8.8%		
	Expressing preference	13	2.2%		
<i>Commissive</i>	Promising	6	1%	42	7.2%
	Offering	8	1.3%		
	Accepting	12	2%		
	Declining	8	1.3%		
	Refusing	8	1.3%		
<i>Expressive</i>	Greeting	33	5.6%	163	28.1%
	Bidding farewell	25	4.3%		
	Introducing	6	1%		
	Making complaints	12	2%		
	Expressing wishes	18	3.1%		
	Expressing regret	15	2.5%		
	Criticising	5	0.8%		
	Apologising	5	0.8%		
	Expressing enthusiasm	11	1.8%		
	Expressing surprise	21	3.6%		
	Encouraging	7	1.2%		
	Telling jokes	4	0.6%		
	Responding to jokes	1	0.1%		
	<i>Directives</i>	Asking	50		
Giving advice		40	6.9%		
Making suggestions		13	2.2%		
Making requests		22	3.7%		
Commanding		4	0.6%		
Giving directions		31	5.3%		
Persuading		10	1.7%		
Warning		5	0.8%		
Prohibiting		3	0.5%		
Taking permission		7	1.2%		
Giving permission		4	0.6%		
Favour asking		7	1.2%		
Total		39	579	100%	579

Note. 'F.' stands for frequency.

While there is no recommended frequency of SAs within language textbooks, this study argues that the quantity of SAs identified in the *MegaGoal* textbooks is appropriate to ensure ample coverage of SAs while also providing a comprehensive overview of other essential language components. This is considering the cognitive load principle, which suggests that effective learning occurs when the capacity of working memory is appropriately managed (Plass, et al., 2010), as well as the proficiency level of the Saudi students for whom the textbooks are intended. Additionally, most interviewed teachers concurred that the quantity of SAs within the textbooks aligned well with their students' level and needs, affirming the assertion that the textbooks covered a sufficient frequency of SAs. Furthermore, compared to previous studies (e.g., Neddar, 2010; Nguyen, 2011; Nu & Murray, 2020; Vellenga, 2004; Vu, 2017), the *MegaGoal* textbooks presented a higher frequency of SAs. For instance, Vellenga (2004) found an average of 5.5 SAs in four integrated EFL textbooks, an amount the author deemed limited given the students' intermediate level and linguistic development. Similarly, Neddar (2010) found an average of 10.75 SAs in each of four ELT textbooks used in middle schools in Algeria; the author, similarly, considered this number as limited given the learners' proficiency level.

However, in terms of SA types, the findings indicated that only four of the five SA categories were addressed in the textbooks, indicating an incomprehensive SA coverage. Within these categories, some subtypes like giving opinions, reporting, and greeting were overrepresented, while others, such as negotiating, confirming, apologising, and offering, were underrepresented regardless of their complexity level, frequency in natural language and curriculum objectives. From a pragmatic perspective, providing learners with diverse SA practice opportunities would be more advantageous for achieving objectives and enhancing proficiency, rather than focusing excessively on certain SA types while neglecting others. The lack of a discernible pattern in the frequency and distribution of SAs suggested some arbitrariness in the design of the textbooks, as previous studies have also indicated (see Nguyen, 2011; Nu & Murray, 2020; Ren & Han, 2016). This imbalanced distribution may limit learners' exposure to certain types of SA input, impeding their acquisition and effective use of those SAs.

Furthermore, highly formulaic SAs like greetings and farewells received extensive coverage in the textbooks, while more challenging and complex ones, such as negotiating, persuading and criticising, were not given comparable attention albeit being similarly specified as learning goals in the SELF. This discrepancy does not align with learners' needs either, as several researchers have noted that Saudi EFL learners often struggle to use appropriate expressions in their negotiation, criticising and persuasion interactions (e.g., Almegren, 2022; Almutwakkil & Alshakhi, 2022). The absence of explicit input on common SAs such as complimenting and inviting further indicates a gap between textbook content and natural language use and curricular objectives.

Another issue in the SA content was the delayed introduction of SAs such as apologising, which is essential for maintaining social harmony, to final textbook, whereas other SAs which involve risking social harmony, such as warning, commanding, and refusing, were only covered in the earlier textbooks. This finding is perplexing considering that the SA of apologising might be needed to mitigate conflicts and misunderstandings arising from the misuse of the latter SAs among students at the early intermediate stage.

The Metapragmatic Information Accompanying SAs

The analysis revealed that metapragmatic information related to SAs was present in all *MegaGoal* textbooks. Figure 1 below provides an overview of the distribution of each type of metapragmatic information identified in the textbooks.

Usage information was the most frequently mentioned metapragmatic information in the textbooks, accounting for 68.8% of the distribution. Register discussions ranked second, with a distribution rate of 16.1%, followed by politeness at 6.6%, appropriacy at 5.6%, and illocutionary force information at the lowest distribution of 2.8%. Interestingly, metapragmatic discussions related to culture were not incorporated with SAs across the six textbooks.

Furthermore, Figure 2 below shows the total amount of SA occurrences that were accompanied by metapragmatic information across the textbooks.

Figure 1
 Distribution of Metapragmatic Information Types in MegaGoal Textbooks

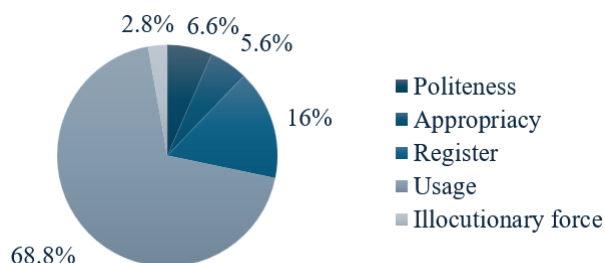
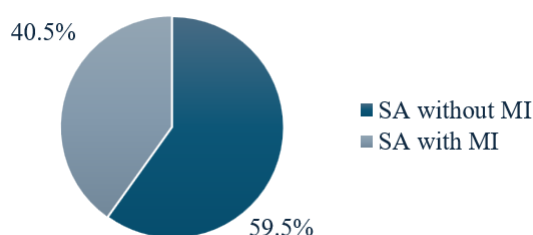


Figure 2
 Total SA Occurrences with Metapragmatic Information in the Six Textbooks



Metapragmatic information was identified in 235 out of the 579 occurrences of SAs across the six textbooks, accounting for 40.5% of the total SA frequency.

Overall, the analysis of textbooks indicates a limited coverage of metapragmatic information, consistent with prior research (e.g., Dendenne, 2019; Ren & Han, 2016; Nu & Murray, 2020). Most SAs lacked accompanying metapragmatic guidance that aids in comprehension and appropriate usage, suggesting an abstract representation of SAs in the textbooks without regard for real-life applicability. Additionally, there was a notable variation in emphasis across the different metapragmatic types, with a greater focus on usage explanations. These discrepancies reflect a lack of guiding principles in the design of the textbooks.

Politeness information was notably insufficient across textbooks. Only seven instances of politeness remarks were found, with limited contextualisation and variety. For instance, politeness was often described using basic adjectives without situational context or detailed explanations. For example, when teaching making requests and asking for information through the use of modal verbs, the textbook preceded these forms with the label “polite ways to ...” (*MegaGoal 3*, p. 78). The same instruction was used in *MegaGoal 2*. This illustrated below (*MegaGoal 2*, p. 78):

Polite Ways to Ask for Information with *Can*, *Could* and *Would*

Excuse me, can (could) you tell me where the bank is?	Would you be able to tell me where the bank is?
Can (Could) you tell me where the bank is?	Would you mind telling me where the bank is?

Polite Ways to Make Requests with *Can*, *Could* and *Would*

Q: Can you give me your credit card details, please?	A: Certainly.
Q: Could you help me?	A: Of course.
Q: Would you open the window, please?	A: Sure.

As shown in the excerpt, the only reference to politeness was the term ‘polite.’ This observation aligns with McConachy and Hata’s (2013) critique of ELT textbooks, namely, that they tend to oversimplify metapragmatic characterisations of other cultures by using basic adjectives, such as *polite* or *formal*, with the result that the expressions remain opaque to learners, who are likely to interpret their level of politeness based on their own cultural background.

Furthermore, the politeness content was narrowly linked to a few SA strategies, such as such as the use of please or modals, neglecting other important strategies. This limited perspective could lead learners to believe there are only a few ways to be polite in English, potentially causing communication tension (Neddar, 2010).

Regarding appropriacy information, the textbooks addressed contextual variables in only six instances, mainly focusing on greetings and farewells. For example, the instruction for a writing activity in *MegaGoal 2* read:

When you write an email to a friend, greet and sign your letter in an informal manner ... when you write to a business/professional contact, address and sign the letter more formally. (p. 15)

This statement acknowledges the importance of considering social distance and the context of communication when selecting an SA expression. Interestingly, the same information was also offered to students in two other textbooks. While repeating information can help reinforce language learning, it is also important to provide learners with new pragmatic aspects which the textbooks did not offer. This oversight in addressing contextual and interlocutor factors governing the appropriate SA use was in misalignment with the curricular guidelines that emphasise teaching “sociolinguistic appropriateness” (p. 53) aiming to enable learners “to interact socially in a variety of situations and contexts” (p. 9). It can limit learners’ ability to make informed and appropriate language choices.

Discussions on register or formality were also limited in the textbooks. They appeared 17 times across the textbooks, covering seven SAs. For instance, students were taught that when expressing wishes, “*was* is usually used in informal spoken English with I” after the verb “*wish*” (*MegaGoal 6*, p. 79), and that “*could* is more formal” than *can* in requests (*MegaGoal 6*, p. 65), illustrating differences in formality levels and between spoken and written language.

The Saudi curriculum highlights register awareness as a crucial learning outcome, expecting textbooks to provide ample register information (see the SELF, 52–53). Not only did they fall short, however, but the information provided tended to be simplified and concise. For example, the previously mentioned register comments lacked contextual information that determines formality level. While such metalinguistic information has educational value, providing contextualisation and further explanations along with exercises would be more beneficial for learners, especially given the differing perceptions of formality in Arabic and English cultures.

In terms of usage explanations, they were the predominant metapragmatic topic in the textbooks, constituting 68.8% of the information (see Figure 1). These explanations primarily focus on the pragmalinguistic aspects of SAs; they offer information or descriptions to elucidate grammatical issues, making this type different from other metapragmatic information more closely associated with sociopragmatics (see Li, 2018; Vu, 2017). In example of usage is shown in the following excerpt that addresses the construction of the SA for giving advice (*MegaGoal 6*, p. 64):

Modals and Giving Advice in the Present and Future

Use *ought (not) to*, *had better*, and *should (not) to* give advice.

Ali: The candidate for mayor said he would build a sports complex and lower taxes. We **should vote** for him!

Majid: I don’t agree. The news story says that he is not telling the truth. We **ought not to vote** for that candidate. We **had better** vote for someone else.

While such discussions can enhance learners' linguistic awareness, language learning also requires attention to the relevant social and contextual aspects associated with language forms (McConachy & Hata, 2013). Using a linguistic expression without proper consideration of the context in which it might be appropriate hardly signals the ability to use SAs successfully.

The emphasis on usage information in the *MegaGoal* textbooks reflects an emphasis on form rather than function, indicating that these textbooks adopt a grammar-focused teaching approach. These findings contradict the guidelines established by the SELF, which endorse a communicative approach that places great importance on the achievement of communicative competence. That such a grammar-focused approach can foster pragmatic competence is highly improbable (Crandall & Basturkmen, 2004).

Furthermore, the textbook analysis found that illocutionary force, which indicates the degree of strength or intensity of an illocutionary point, was rarely discussed, appearing only three times in one textbook. The provided instructions mainly focused on modals in advice-giving contexts. One instruction stated: “*Ought to* is stronger than *should*. *Might* and *could* are less strong” (*MegaGoal* 1, p. 84). Such pragmatic notes are important as they can initiate discussions in the classroom. They could, however, be enhanced by providing explicit metalanguage that highlights and explains the notion of *strength* in these comments. For instance, students could be taught that using the modal *must* in giving advice carries a stronger tone as it suggests obligation or necessity, while *may* conveys a more permissive tone, allowing the listener to follow the advice or not. The textbooks should have offered more guidance on illocutionary force within and across various types of SAs.

Teachers' Practices and Perceptions

The interview data showed that teachers heavily relied on the textbooks; they followed the content of the textbooks when teaching pragmatics without much modification or supplementation. This practice was influenced by factors including the requirements from the MoE to follow textbooks, exams based on the textbooks, limited class time and resources, heavy workload and low student proficiency. Furthermore, most teachers perceived the quantity of SAs in the textbooks as appropriate; however, they all expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of pragmatic content. They emphasised the need for covering more explicit metalinguistic instructions, and additional contextual and metapragmatic information to enhance SA learning and teaching in Saudi EFL classrooms. Interestingly, teachers' perceptions did not consistently match their practices, as many of them refrained from providing supplementary pragmatic materials even when they recognised the need for them. Additionally, some teachers argued that modifying SA content was not their responsibility but that of the curriculum and textbook designers.

Implications for Practice

This research underscores the importance of incorporating pragmatic competence within language education curricula, aligning with the emphasis on communicative proficiency in Saudi Arabian EFL classrooms. Given the reliance on textbooks for English instruction in many contexts, it is imperative that pragmatic knowledge receives equitable representation alongside other linguistic components. Collaboration among stakeholders—teachers, authors, and policymakers—is essential to devise strategies for promoting pragmatic knowledge acquisition.

Implications for Textbooks Design

To address limitations in existing textbooks, textbook developers should adopt a more intentional and strategic approach when incorporating SAs by considering research-informed insights, the frequency of SAs in natural language, learners' needs and learning objectives. An increasing body of literature exists that can inform textbook design by providing information regarding SA frequency and use in authentic language which can guide the coverage of pragmatics in textbooks (e.g., Cohen & Ishihara, 2013; Rodríguez-Fuentes & Swatek, 2022). Also, different effective frameworks for teaching pragmatics can be referred to (e.g., Martínez-Flor & Uso-Juan, 2012; Nguyen & Cahn, 2019), most of which emphasise the provision of rich and

contextually relevant input in teaching materials and classrooms, the creation of opportunities for practice, and reflective feedback.

Accordingly, strategies such as integrating pragmatics as an organising principle or supplementing current textbooks and teachers' guides with more pragmatics-focused activities should be considered to enhance the incorporation of the pragmatic content in the current textbooks. The inclusion of comparative and reflective activities enabling learners to compare how SAs and other pragmatic issues are constructed and perceived in their own and different cultures can help foster a deeper cross-cultural understanding and awareness. Overall, writers should aim for a comprehensive understanding of pragmatic competence and prioritise socio-cultural aspects alongside grammatical accuracy.

Implications for the Teaching of Pragmatics

The present study shows that language teachers mostly follow the content of the textbooks when teaching pragmatics without much alteration. Nevertheless, teachers should be aware of their role as a source of language and pragmatics input, taking responsibility for helping learners develop pragmatically beyond their level. This includes aiming to supplement and adapt the prescribed textbooks to cater for their students and context. The teachers can utilise existing models and resources to access updated research findings and incorporate them into teaching materials. Online platforms like Amazy, Nearpod, and Twee offer ready-made lessons and activities on various SAs.

Furthermore, teachers should adopt a variety of instructional methods, such as role-plays, reflective discussions, problem-solving exercises, and case studies, to engage students in meaningful classroom activities that enhance their pragmatic skills. This includes exposing learners to pragmatic notions, including politeness and appropriateness, and how they can vary depending on the situational and cultural contexts. Examples of pragmatic-awareness-raising tasks include teacher-led discussions of pragmatic issues, student-led exploration and analysis, translation and cross-cultural activities, and discussions of potentially problematic interactions (see Eslami-Rasekh et al., 2004, for further detail). Language corpora and multimedia resources can be leveraged to provide authentic language samples for practice and analysis. Encouraging learners to think independently about culturally appropriate ways to ask a friend for a favour or greet a teacher can awaken their innate abilities in pragmatic analysis and develop them beyond the classroom.

Implications for the Saudi MoE

As the MoE generally oversees EFL education in Saudi schools, it holds a pivotal role in ensuring the alignment between curriculum guidelines and developed textbooks, promptly updating materials when discrepancies arise. Additionally, the MoE should consider giving teachers more flexibility when working with the prescribed textbooks as they know individual students' needs and capabilities, as well as ensure equipping them with necessary training and resources in pragmatics and material adaptation to effectively supplement textbook content. This could involve organising workshops, discussion groups, and training programs focused on teachers' professional development, integrating empirically validated pragmatic approaches. Such initiatives, as Cohen (2012) suggests, "would ideally result in greater emphasis on [pragmatics] in the L2 classroom" (p. 34).

Conclusion

The findings of the textbook analysis revealed that the textbooks covered a relatively wide distribution and high frequency SAs compared to numbers reported in the literature and considering the SELF guidelines and the students' proficiency level. However, the distribution of SA categories was not proportionally equal. Within these categories, certain SA subtypes received less attention than others, regardless of their frequency in natural language or learning objectives. Giving opinions was the most prevalent, emphasised across the textbooks, while face-threatening SAs such as negotiating, giving commands, refusing, offering, complaining, and promising were much less numerous. Other common SAs were missing from the six textbooks, potentially

leaving learners competent in some SAs but unable to use others effectively.

Additionally, certain complex SAs, like making suggestions, negotiating, and persuading, which are specified as learning objectives in the curriculum and reported in the literature as challenging for Saudi learners even at advanced levels, were mentioned much less frequently in the textbooks. The discrepancies between curriculum objectives, pragmatic literature, and textbook content suggest that the textbooks follow inconsistent guiding principles in SA distribution. It may be an indicative that the textbooks were based on the writers' intuitions, a criticism that has often been made (see Ishihara & Cohen, 2021). However, the reliance on intuition alone in material design can be problematic because intuition about SA realisation often differs from how SAs naturally occur (Ishihara & Cohen, 2021). It appears, therefore, that Bardovi-Harlig's (2001) claim that "textbooks cannot be counted on as a reliable source of pragmatic input for classroom language learners" (p. 25) may hold true.

The inclusion of metapragmatic and contextual information alongside SAs was, furthermore, found to be limited in terms of variety and quantity. Most SAs lacked metapragmatic discussions that could aid comprehension and appropriate usage. As highlighted by Vellenga (2004), this way of presenting SAs "puts learners with little target language exposure at a disadvantage in terms of acquiring pragmatic competence" (p. 12). A dearth of coverage across different types of metapragmatic information, coupled with a disproportionate focus on usage explanations and a disregard for other topics, like politeness, illocutionary force, and culture, indicates that the textbooks emphasise linguistic over sociopragmatic knowledge. These findings raise concerns about the adequacy and effectiveness of pragmatic content in developing learners' competence. As Ishihara and Cohen (2021) concluded, learners whose instruction is based solely on these textbooks may master various linguistic forms, but they risk being unable to accurately select the appropriate ones to convey their intentions.

Limitations and Directions for Further Research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged to ensure transparency and credibility and to identify opportunities for future research. First, the sample size in this study was small, as only nine teachers participated. However, the qualitative nature of the study meant that it sought an in-depth understanding of specific cases over statistical generalisability (Duff, 2012), making the sample appropriate for the study's aims. It remains for future research to include more diverse samples across Saudi Arabia to confirm the generalisability of the findings. Also, the textbooks analysed were aimed at intermediate learners. Exploring pragmatic content in more textbooks for different proficiency levels, such as earlier school grades or university-level courses, would offer further insights. Furthermore, while the study includes teacher interviews, it does not examine how pragmatic content is integrated into classroom practices, as this lies beyond its scope. The primary focus of this study is on analysing the pragmatic content in the textbooks and gathering teachers' opinions and perceptions about it. Future research could delve into the methods and strategies used to teach pragmatics, possibly through classroom observations or more extensive interviews. Involving students in these investigations could also provide a more comprehensive picture of teaching and learning pragmatics.

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