

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

English functions as a global lingua franca that enables people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds to communicate in various fields, including education, technology, business, and diplomacy. In language learning, successful communication is not solely determined by grammatical accuracy or vocabulary knowledge. Learners also need to understand how language should be used appropriately in different situations and with different interlocutors (Taguchi, 2021). Such an ability is commonly known as pragmatic competence and is considered an important component of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972). Pragmatic competence involves understanding what is appropriate to say, how to say it, and when it should be expressed in a particular context (Ishihara & Cohen, 2021). For EFL learners, developing this competence can be challenging because opportunities to engage in authentic English communication are often limited (Wang et al., 2024).

In the Indonesian context, the importance of pragmatic competence can be seen in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes meaningful communication and the use of language in real-life contexts. According to the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of the Republic of Indonesia (Kemendikdasmen, 2024), students at Phase D are expected to perform various interpersonal communication functions, such as greeting, thanking, apologizing, introducing themselves, and asking or responding to questions. To carry out these

functions effectively, students need more than grammatical knowledge. They also need to understand how language should be used appropriately based on the situation and the people involved in the interaction. This expectation is in line with the broader goal of developing students' communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980).

Despite this expectation, English teaching in many EFL classrooms still tends to focus more on grammar and vocabulary than on the social use of language (Lie, 2020). As a result, students may be able to construct grammatically correct sentences but still face difficulties when communicating in real situations. Previous studies have reported that EFL learners often experience challenges in performing speech acts appropriately and applying suitable politeness strategies. These difficulties may lead to pragmatic failure, where the intended meaning is not successfully conveyed even though the language used is grammatically correct (Khasanah et al., 2021; Hasan, 2025).

Research on pragmatic competence has been conducted in various EFL contexts. Al-Shareef (2023), for example, investigated how Iraqi EFL learners realized complaint speech acts, while Cahyaningrum et al. (2025) examined politeness in request speech acts among Javanese female EFL learners. In Indonesia, Erlianingtyas et al. (2025) found that senior high school students encountered several challenges when using English appropriately in speaking activities. These studies have provided valuable insights into learners' pragmatic competence. However, most of them focused on older learners, such as senior high school students, university students, or adult learners.

Meanwhile, studies involving junior high school students remain relatively limited, especially those that examine students' pragmatic competence during actual classroom interaction. This is an important area to explore because junior high school is a stage where learners begin to use English more actively for interpersonal communication (Canale & Swain, 1980). Examining pragmatic competence at this level may provide a clearer picture of how young learners use speech acts and politeness strategies when interacting with others in the classroom (Wang et al., 2024).

This issue is particularly relevant in the Indonesian EFL context, where students are encouraged to communicate meaningfully from the early stages of learning. Without a clear understanding of students' pragmatic abilities, classroom instruction may continue to prioritize linguistic accuracy while paying less attention to the development of contextually appropriate communication (Lie, 2020). Consequently, students may find it difficult to apply their language knowledge effectively when communicating in real-life situations.

Preliminary observations conducted during the researcher's teaching practice at SMP Labschool Jakarta revealed a similar situation. Based on informal classroom observations during teaching practice, most students were able to produce basic grammatical structures; however, difficulties became apparent when they were required to perform communicative functions, such as making polite requests, responding appropriately to teachers, or expressing their intentions in socially acceptable ways. These observations suggest that students' pragmatic competence is still developing and deserves further investigation.

Based on this situation, this study aims to analyze the pragmatic competence of seventh-grade EFL students at SMP Labschool Jakarta during English classroom interaction. Specifically, the study focuses on how students demonstrate pragmatic competence through speech acts and politeness strategies, as well as the challenges they encounter when using English appropriately. It is expected that the findings will contribute to a better understanding of pragmatic competence among young EFL learners and provide insights for developing more context-sensitive English language teaching practices.

1.2 Research Questions

In line with the focus of this study on students' pragmatic competence in English classroom interaction, the research questions are formulated as follows:

1. How do seventh-grade EFL students demonstrate pragmatic competence in English classroom interaction in terms of speech acts and politeness strategies?
2. What challenges do seventh-grade EFL students encounter in using appropriate English expressions during English classroom interaction?

1.3 Purpose of the Research

This study aims to analyze the pragmatic competence of seventh-grade EFL students in English classroom interaction. Specifically, this study seeks to:

1. analyze how seventh-grade EFL students demonstrate pragmatic competence through speech acts and politeness strategies during English classroom interaction, and

2. identify the challenges encountered by students in using appropriate English expressions during English classroom interaction.

1.4 Scope and Limitations of Research

This study focuses on the analysis of pragmatic competence among seventh-grade EFL students at SMP Labschool Jakarta. The scope of the study is limited to students' pragmatic competence as demonstrated in classroom interaction, particularly in terms of speech acts and politeness strategies. The analysis is based on students' responses in Discourse Completion Tasks (DCT), their actual language use during classroom interaction, and their reflections obtained through interviews.

This study is confined to selected communicative functions relevant to classroom contexts, such as requesting, apologizing, thanking, greeting and other communicative functions that emerge during classroom interaction. It does not cover other aspects of pragmatic competence beyond speech acts and politeness strategies, nor does it examine pragmatic comprehension in depth.

In terms of limitations, this study does not investigate other aspects of language competence, such as grammatical accuracy, vocabulary development, or writing skills. In addition, the use of DCT as an elicitation instrument may not fully represent students' natural language use, although it is complemented by classroom observation and interviews to provide data triangulation.

Furthermore, as this study is conducted in a single school and involves a specific group of seventh-grade students, the findings are not intended to be generalized to all EFL contexts in Indonesia. Instead, the study aims to provide a

contextualized understanding of pragmatic competence among junior secondary EFL learners in classroom interaction.

1.5 Significance of the Research

1.5.1 Theoretical Significance

This study contributes to the growing body of research on pragmatic competence in EFL contexts by providing empirical evidence from junior high school learners, a group that has received limited scholarly attention, particularly in the Indonesian context. By focusing on how students demonstrate pragmatic competence through speech acts and politeness strategies in classroom interaction, this study provides additional evidence regarding the application of pragmatic theories (Ishihara & Cohen, 2021). Furthermore, by identifying the challenges students encounter in using appropriate English expressions, it offers deeper insights into the nature of pragmatic development among early-stage EFL learners.

1.5.2 Practical Significance

The findings of this study are expected to provide useful insights for English teachers, curriculum developers, and teacher education programs in supporting the development of students' pragmatic competence. By revealing how learners use language in classroom interaction and the challenges they experience, the study can inform the design of instructional materials, classroom practices, and assessment approaches that emphasize contextually appropriate language use. Ultimately, this study supports the development of more pragmatically oriented English language teaching in EFL classrooms.

1.6 State of the Art

Recent studies have emphasized the importance of pragmatic competence in helping EFL learners communicate appropriately across different social and cultural contexts. Pragmatic competence enables learners to perform speech acts effectively and apply politeness strategies that are appropriate to situations (Ishihara & Cohen, 2021; Roever, 2022). Despite its importance, many EFL learners continue to experience difficulties in using English appropriately in communication. Previous studies have reported challenges related to speech acts, politeness strategies, and pragmatic failure, indicating that grammatical knowledge alone does not necessarily lead to successful communication (Al-Shareef, 2023; Hasan, 2025). Similar findings have also been reported in Indonesia, where learners often struggle to use English in ways that are socially and contextually appropriate (Khasanah et al., 2021; Erlianingtyas et al., 2025).

Although research on pragmatic competence has grown considerably, most studies have focused on senior high school students, university students, or adult learners (Hammouri & Al-Khanji, 2023; Kentmen et al., 2023). Consequently, relatively little is known about how pragmatic competence is demonstrated by junior high school students who are still developing their communicative abilities. In addition, many previous studies have relied primarily on a single instrument, particularly Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs), to investigate learners' pragmatic competence (Al-Shareef, 2023; Cahyaningrum et al., 2025). While DCTs are valuable for eliciting learners' responses to specific communicative situations, pragmatic competence is also reflected in how learners use language during actual

interaction. Therefore, data collected from a single instrument may not fully capture learners' pragmatic behavior in authentic classroom settings.

Another limitation concerns the focus of previous studies, which often examine either learners' pragmatic performance or the challenges they encounter. These two aspects are closely connected and should be examined together to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of learners' pragmatic competence. Based on these considerations, the present study investigates the pragmatic competence of seventh-grade EFL students at SMP Labschool Jakarta through speech acts and politeness strategies while also exploring the challenges they encounter. To provide a richer picture of students' pragmatic competence, this study combines Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs), classroom observation, and interviews as sources of data.

