

PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE IN ACTION: HOW PRIMARY LEARNERS ENGAGE IN AN L2 ENGLISH 'SPOT THE DIFFERENCE' TASK

Dieser Artikel untersucht die pragmatischen Sprachhandlungen von Primarschülerinnen und -schülern während einer englischen 'Spot the Difference' Aufgabe. Unter Bezugnahme auf die Deskriptoren des Gemeinsamen Europäischen Referenzrahmens (GER Begleitband) analysiert die Studie Peer-Interaktionen von Sechstklässlerinnen und Sechstklässlern in der Deutschschweiz. Sie konzentriert sich dabei auf drei Sprechakte: Beschreiben, Zustimmung und Widersprechen. Die Lernenden stützten sich häufig auf dieselben formelhaften Ausdrücke, um die Interaktion aufrechtzuerhalten, während einige auch flexiblere Ausdrucksweisen erprobten. Unabhängig von der jeweiligen Formulierung variierte die grammatische Genauigkeit beträchtlich. Der Artikel hebt das Potenzial interaktionsreicher Aufgaben zur Förderung der pragmatischen Kompetenz im Fremdsprachenunterricht (L2) hervor und zeigt praktische Implikationen für den Unterricht auf Primarstufe.

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Introduction

We often think of 'Spot the Difference' as a light-hearted filler or early finisher activity, but what if it served a more substantial pedagogical purpose?

Recent research (e.g., Savić, 2021; Schauer, 2022) shows that pragmatic competence, understood here as "actual language use in the (co-)construction of text" (Council of Europe, 2020, p.137), is crucial for young learners' foreign language development. Yet we know surprisingly little about children's pragmatic competence, let alone how they develop it in classroom settings that prepare for real-life conversations. Research suggests that interactive gap tasks like 'Spot the Difference' offer a safe, engaging means of practicing pragmatic skills, particularly when supported with targeted phrases (Pinter, 2015).

Except for speech acts like requests and greetings, coursebooks often neglect communicative real-world language

practices, sticking to isolated vocabulary and scripted dialogues instead (Schauer, 2022). As a result, many young learners lack the tools to navigate basic conversations in English; skills that would come in handy, for example, when participating in an L2 group activity on holiday.

Building on this rationale, we report findings from an exploratory, small-scale study of spoken L2 interactions among fourteen students in German-speaking Switzerland at the start of grade 6, the final year of primary school (aged eleven to twelve). Our analysis draws on CEFR Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2020) descriptors related to pragmatic competence and interaction strategies, focusing on propositional precision (here: clear and accurate expression of meaning, p. 141), flexibility (here: adapting simple phrases to new situations, p. 138), turntaking¹ (here: initiating and maintaining dialogue, p. 139), and co-operating (here: confirming understanding, relating own contributions to others, p. 88-89).

¹ The CEFR views turntaking both as an interactive and a pragmatic ability.

Our study – learner data and pragmatic patterns

In our study, we examined how primary school learners performed ‘Spot the Difference’ tasks. These two-way information gap activities, in which both parties² hold slightly different pictures, require learners to describe them and identify differences without showing each other. Our participants were encouraged to speak freely to find the differences but could draw on sample language if needed (only for descriptions), though we did not monitor how often this occurred. In a typical exchange, Student A produced a description (e.g., *I can see a dog*), and Student B either confirmed it (e.g., *Me too*) – henceforward referred to as ‘agreement’ – or offered a contradiction/correction (e.g., *I don’t have a dog/I can see a cat*) – henceforward referred to as ‘disagreement’. Other dialogue features, such as clarification questions or summaries, are not investigated here. The aim of this study was to explore how young learners manage spontaneous peer dialogue to achieve the task outcome, and how the three speech acts description, agreement and disagreement, were realized, both pragmatically and linguistically.

Our analysis drew on six transcripts produced by two or three students from the same class. The remaining eight students undertook other tasks (not investigated here). The teacher reported that the class had not previously done a ‘Spot the Difference’ task in English lessons. Each transcript contained exchanges on multiple picture sets (mean = 2.6). We selected one picture-based exchange per transcript (the two most frequently used picture sets overall): four groups talked about a picture showing a boy and girl in a classroom. Two groups talked about a picture of a girl with two cats in a living room. There were eight differences between the pictures, for instance in object colour, the use of letters rather than numbers, and the number of elements. The selected exchanges contained an average of 54 turns (equivalent to learner utterances), ranging from one to several words per turn. The data, collected in September 2023, formed part of a larger Innosuisse-funded project comprising over 100 hours of recorded, transcribed and annotated English speech by primary learners.

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In this study, each turn was coded for function (speech act) and later analysed for linguistic realisation and accuracy, with CEFR descriptors (Council of Europe, 2020) serving as a reference. Descriptors relating to propositional precision, flexibility, turntaking and co-operating were particularly relevant for identifying how learners formulated their speech during the task.

What follows is a description of the learners’ productions of descriptions (102 moves in total), agreement (88 moves) and disagreement (41 moves). Learners are referred to as basic, intermediate and advanced according to subjective proficiency judgements by the researchers; these labels are not validated measures.

Describing pictures

In this study, picture descriptions were realised in three ways: (1) the expression *I can see X*, (2) the expression *In my picture, there is/are X*, and (3) less formulaic, more flexible language (See Table 1). The expressions *I can see X* and *There is/are X* (but not *In my picture*) appeared on the language support sheet provided for the task. All three, however, can be treated as frame-and-slot patterns, comprising a fixed frame (e.g., *I can see*) and an open slot (*X*) into which learners insert words flexibly.

Learners at basic proficiency relied heavily on the first construction, with two groups using it almost exclusively (e.g., *I can see a pink flower – I can see one boy and one girl – I can see a boy with a green t-shirt* etc.). While the frame *I can see* was consistently accurate, accuracy in the open slots declined as they became longer and lexically more complex, and



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² Group sizes varied between two and three students owing to the data collection design. In triads, two students shared the same picture but were still asked to discuss similarities and differences, so these groups remained in the analysis.

Description realisation types	Examples (accurate)	Examples (inaccurate or L1 use)
<i>I (can) see X</i>	<i>I can see a cat.</i> <i>I can see one boy and one girl.</i> <i>I can see two tables.</i>	<i>I can see a boy with a brown hairs.</i> <i>I see a girl with ausstrecken.</i> <i>I can see a cat toy on the floor left side.</i>
<i>In my picture, there is/are X</i>	<i>In my picture, there's a clock on the red wall.</i> <i>In my picture there is a blackboard with ABC on it.</i>	<i>On my picture it has a pink and yellow cushion.</i> <i>On my picture are the world on the card.</i>
Less formulaic descriptions	<i>The ceiling is white.</i> <i>One is on the sofa and one is playing with a girl.</i> <i>And then under that or should I say, beside that, there's a PC or a computer.</i>	<i>The boy wear a green T-Shirt.</i> <i>And the girl that's making the hand at the top, has an pencil and an paper.</i>

Table 1

Examples of student utterances for descriptions

Agreement realisation types	Examples (accurate)	Examples (inaccurate or L1 use)
(Quasi-)verbatim repetition	<i>I can see two tables – Yes, I can see two tables.</i> <i>In my picture, there's a pink rose in the front – In my picture, there's also a pink rose in the front.</i>	<i>I can see Schränke – Yes, I can see Schränke.</i> <i>The boy has brown hair – The boy has brown hairs.</i>
Elliptical responses	<i>In my picture, the boy has brown hair – In mine, too.</i> <i>Under the PC, there is a shelf – Yeah, same.</i>	<i>The Boden is green – By me too.</i> <i>The girl playing with the cat – Me too.</i>
<i>Yes/Yeah</i>	<i>The girl has yellow hairs – Yes.</i> <i>One of them is on the sofa and one of them is playing with a girl – Yes.</i>	–

Table 2

Examples of student utterances for agreement

Disagreement realisation types	Examples (accurate)	Examples (inaccurate or L1 use)
(Quasi-)verbatim repetition + contrast	<i>I have red flowers – I have yellow flowers.</i>	<i>One of the cat are white and another one is orange – One of the cats on my picture is white and the other one is gray.</i> <i>I can see one country. – I can see many country.</i>
Elliptical response	<i>There are four little green boxes – Well, for me they are yellow.</i>	<i>The hour on my picture is two – No, by me it's ten.</i>
Negation	<i>I can see a dog – I don't have a dog.</i>	<i>In my picture, there's a girl next to the whiteboard – I don't see one in my.</i>

Table 3

Examples of student utterances for disagreement

learners occasionally managed difficulties by inserting German words (e.g., ... *with ausstrecken*). The second construction was mostly used by intermediate and advanced-level learners. Intermediate learners showed inaccuracies in both the frame (e.g., *On my picture, it has*) and the slot (e.g., ...*the world on the card*). More advanced learners produced accurate frames and more elaborate slots, though they were not always filled in accurately, and they also employed noun-verb-object (N-V-O) constructions and referential links (e.g., ...*and under that, there is...*) to build coherence.

Expressing agreement and disagreement

Agreement, in our data, was realised in three ways: (1) (quasi-)verbatim repetition of the previous speaker's statement (with or without *too* and *also*); (2) elliptical responses; and (3) simple *Yes/Yeah*. The first two realisations were often prefaced by *Yes/Yeah* (see Table 2).

Most learner transcripts included a simple *Yes/Yeah* in response to a description. Verbatim repetitions were also used in most transcripts, with the basic level learners relying particularly heavily on this strategy. Errors and German words occasionally carried over from the previous speaker, and new errors sometimes emerged in the repetition. Elliptical responses such as *In mine too* or *Yeah, same* were mostly used by more advanced level learners, and often accurately. When they were used by basic and intermediate level learners, they tended to be inaccurate (e.g., *By me too*, or *Me too* instead of *Mine too*), likely reflecting first language influence or overgeneralization.

Similarly, three realisation types of disagreement emerged in the data: (1) (quasi-)verbatim repetition of the preceding statement (the description) except for the key difference; (2) elliptical responses; and (3) negation of the preceding statement (see Table 3). The preface 'no' was used once in our data.

Negations (*I don't X*) were used across learners of all proficiency levels and were mostly accurate. Inaccuracy increased with more complex negations, but not typically in the verb phrase (see Table 3). (Quasi-)verbatim repetitions, also used at all levels, produced errors in insertions (E.g., *On my picture*) or when learners

changed the response structure (e.g., from singular to plural). In some cases, however, repetitions resolved errors from the preceding turn (e.g., ...*one of the cats...*). Elliptical responses (e.g., with anaphoric reference and epistemic markers) were infrequent and limited to advanced level learners, and they typically contained errors.

“Formulaic expressions played a central role in supporting learners’ pragmatic performance.”

Discussion

In this section, we interpret our findings in light of the CEFR scales (Council of Europe, 2020) flexibility, propositional precision, turntaking and co-operating.

Flexibility refers to learners' capacity to adapt what they have learnt to new contexts and to express their ideas in different ways (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 138). Below A2 there are no descriptors; at A2, learners are expected to “expand learnt phrases through simple recombinations of their elements” and to “adapt well-rehearsed, memorised, simple phrases to particular circumstances through limited lexical substitution” (p. 138). In our study, the use of *I can see X* and *In my picture, there is/are X* (including inaccurate variants), as well as simple negations (*I don't X*), seems to align with A2 performance: basic and intermediate-level learners relied on what we take to be pre-acquired formulaic structures to convey information, and substituted only minimally in the open slots, with longer substitutions resulting in errors. Higher-level learners used a wider range of techniques and attempted more creative formulations or combinations of memorised phrases (e.g., elliptical responses for agreement and disagreement). This suggests an emerging ability to “exploit a wide range of simple language flexibly to express much of what they want,” indicating early B1 competence in flexibility.

Propositional precision is the ability to convey intended meaning accurately. At Pre-A1 and A1, this is limited to (very) basic personal information; at A2, it extends to familiar, routine topics, though messages quickly become inaccurate (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 142). By B1, communication is generally more precise, and ideas are conveyed comprehensibly. In our study, learners spoke about familiar topics. For basic-level learners, this was challenging, and open slots, that is, language not built from memorised (or visualised) chunks were frequently inaccurate, indicating lower A2-level competence. Higher-level learners, however, not only added precision through expansion (e.g., prepositional phrases), but also made fewer errors in frames and open slots. This aligns with the CEFR B1 descriptors for propositional precision (Council of Europe, 2020, p.142).

“More spontaneous and novel language production should be encouraged through a variety of tasks.”

Turntaking concerns the ability to initiate, maintain and end conversations (Council of Europe, 2020, p.88). Descriptions for A1 and below are not available. At A2, learners are expected to “use simple techniques to start, maintain, and end short familiar dialogues”. For **co-operating**, A2 learners are expected only to “indicate when they are following” (p. 89), and there are no descriptors below A2. In our data, full repetitions and simple *Yes/Yeah* responses, which basic-level learners used exclusively, appear to reflect A2-level co-operating and turn-taking competencies. At B1, turntaking additionally involves intervening skills

(not analysed here, p. 88), and learners are expected to “repeat back part of what someone has said” and to “exploit a basic repertoire of language and strategies” to confirm understanding and maintain discussion (co-operating, p. 89). In our study, this seems to be demonstrated by higher-level learners’ use of elliptical responses and their alternation between different realisations of the same speech act.

Summary and conclusion

Overall, all learner groups in our study completed the Spot the Difference tasks, demonstrating the ability to produce comprehensible, and therefore effective, realisations of the speech acts of description, agreement and disagreement. Some showed near-B1 performance with a more varied repertoire of speech act realisations and flexible language use, whereas others relied on simple A1–A2 techniques. That said, the coarseness of the CEFR descriptors for prepositional proposition, flexibility, turntaking and co-operating made detailed analysis challenging. Learners at basic and intermediate levels depended on a narrow set of memorised expressions, potentially drawn from the support sheet. Prior research indicates that formulaic sequences reduce cognitive load in spontaneous communication, enabling more meaning-focused, fluent interaction (Schauer, 2022; Skehan, 2009). However, inaccurate frames in our data (e.g., *On my picture it has*) suggest these sequences were not fully internalised. The results point to a developmental progression from short, inaccurate frame-and-slot patterns to longer, more accurate productions and, eventually, to creative recombination and more flexible collaboration (c.f., Lightbown & Spada, 2021; Council of Europe, 2020).

We acknowledge the limitations of our small dataset and the broad pragmatic categories employed, which may have constrained interpretation. Further, large-scale studies are needed to clarify how young learners develop pragmatic competence (Pinter, 2015; Schauer, 2022; Ellis et al., 2024) and to determine whether, for instance, the limited presence of purported higher-level pragmatic strategies among basic-level learners reflects shared contextual understanding, making such formulations unnecessary, rather than a lack of resources (Schauer, 2022; Ellis et al., 2024).

Implications for teaching

The results of our study point to the importance of providing regular opportunities for meaningful oral interaction in the primary ELT classroom. Interactional tasks such as ‘Spot the Difference’ support the development of pragmatic competence, particularly in areas such as turntaking, discourse collaboration, flexibility, propositional precision and expressing speech acts like agreement and disagreement. These skills and speech acts, as Schauer (2022) remarks, are often underrepresented in coursebooks and classroom discourse, yet they are highly relevant to authentic communication, or what she calls “Survival English” (p. 139).

Formulaic expressions played a central role in supporting learners’ pragmatic performance. Teaching and recycling a variety of chunks like *I can see X*, *In my picture, there is/are X*, *In mine too*, or *Not in mine* provides accessible tools for participation. Modelling and embedding these in classroom routines, with occasional checks for accuracy, can help learners use them more flexibly and confidently. Savić (2021) suggests making such expressions visible, for example on a classroom phrase wall. Both Schauer (2022) and Savić (2021) emphasise that young learners benefit from structured opportunities to notice and reflect on language use in social interaction.

More spontaneous and novel language production should be encouraged through a variety of tasks (e.g., role plays of real-life scenarios, paired storytelling, board games, debates etc.) to prompt learners to experiment with new lexis and language structures. Planning phases can support vocabulary activation, while post-task activities can help draw attention to issues of accuracy.

In conclusion, although pragmatic competence often develops gradually and implicitly (Schauer, 2022), it can be meaningfully supported in the primary classroom through non-textbook materials like interaction-rich tasks, using targeted scaffolding and consistent routines. Encouraging learners to participate actively and experiment with language lays a strong foundation for their communicative development.

Ideas for supporting pragmatic development

- **Teach and display useful chunks**
E.g., “*In my picture, there is/are ...*”, “*In mine too*”, “*Not in mine*”
- **Model and practise interactional routines**
E.g., greetings, closings, agreeing, disagreeing, asking for clarification
- **Use a variety of interaction-rich tasks**
E.g., information gaps (e.g. ‘Spot the Difference’), paired storytelling, role-plays
- **Encourage metapragmatic talk**
E.g., brief discussions on what makes an utterance clear, polite or helpful
- **Supplement textbook input**
E.g., include recordings, dialogues, or video clips that show real-life speech
- **Help learners build and adapt useful expressions for peer talk**
E.g. create a classroom phrase wall or mini-dialogue bank

Figure 1

Practical ideas for the primary English classroom, based on the findings of our study.

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