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The Possibilities of Implementing Pragmatic Instruction with Mental Grounding Techniques in EFL College Students' Context

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Abstract

The use of psychological techniques to deal with language problems is a well-known strategy in the process of teaching foreign languages as learners can sometimes suffer from anxiety and stress, so it is essential to help students overcome the psychological barriers they face to cope with the process of learning. This study attempts to deal with pragmatic problems by using a mix of mental grounding techniques and pragmatic activities (awareness-raising activities). The sample of the study comprised participants from Iraq and the Czech Republic. They were first-year college students. The researchers depended on learning zones to determine the suitable time for the experiment (fear zone). The researchers applied self-report surveys in addition to interviews to determine the students with pragmatic problems. Then, at the end of the experiment, the participants were interviewed again to evaluate the experiment in addition to the same self-report survey. Results showed that the two samples responded positively to the mix of techniques used. Moreover, the division of learning zones seems ideal to be dependent in the present study as it specifies the time of challenge the students experienced. The results also clarified that the mix of the two types of activities (pragmatic and

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grounding activities) demonstrates a kind of remedy that could enhance students' level of pragmatics. In the end, no sharp differences were mentioned in the two contexts of the study (Iraq and the Czech Republic); both gained approximate positive results.

Keywords: Awareness-raising activities, grounding, pragmatic activities, pragmatics, psychology.

1. INTRODUCTION

There can be quite a large amount of stress and anxiety among students when studying English as a foreign language (EFL) that may be imposed during the educational process (Krashen, 1982; Sahin & Tuna, 2022); in addition to that, the circumstances of various measures related to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic can create a stressful learning environment for all the participants of the learning process, both the teachers and the students. One of the main problems that EFL students suffer from is speaking and communication, and this is manifested even more at the time of the pandemic as it seems that it is not sufficient to improve these communication skills and competencies due to the shortage of time devoted to each student and due to the loss of direct contact between the teachers and the students.

The communicative aim, rules, and social components of a language are all referred to as pragmatic language. It can be defined as “the ability to control the complex interplay of language, language users, and language use contexts” (Taguchi, 2011, p. 204). It is the manner where there is a focus on a language, and how it is used to communicate in a variety of settings, rather than on the structure of a language. Being able to understand the cues of the communication with partners and adhering to various conversational rules are crucial aspects of pragmatic language. Another essential point is clarified by Griffiths (2006), who mentioned that if you are dealing with meaning and there is no specific context to depend on, you are dealing with semantics, yet if there is a context to consider, you are dealing with pragmatics. Pragmatics is the study of how to communicate effectively, following particular communication trajectories and strategies, while semantics is the study of the meaning of the symbols used in a language and also their clusters, i.e., words and sentences, as they create utterance and discourse. Depending on that, the communication that occurs in virtual language learning environments is mostly related to pragmatics since it occurs in a specific context, and the difficulties that students face must be dealt with pragmatically. A distinction is made between learning the pragmatic language in the two contexts, i.e., foreign or second language learning. In a foreign-language setting, EFL (English as a foreign language) learners may not use and be provided enough target language material, and they usually lack opportunities to use and communicate in the second language outside the class to train to use second-language pragmatic skills (Eslami et al., 2015).

By contrast, in a developed and advanced learning ESL (English as a second language) context (e.g., by using immersion methodology), learners are surrounded by the target language as much as possible, so this context may very well improve their second language pragmatic ability (e.g., Polat, 2011). As a result, it is plausible to conclude that understanding pragmatics is necessary for foreign language learners to

assist them in recognizing that communicating a message from the speaker to the listener is a complex process that can result in numerous interpretations. However, proper communication with the transfer of correct information and messages is feasible.

Despite all these communication issues in EFL, the present study suggests that using learning zones as a road map may help teachers determine the areas of difficulty and diagnose well the potential times of anxiety and stress that can lead to real difficulties in communication. At the beginning of each grade of college study, the students are forced to leave their comfort zone where they have lived peacefully. It is a place where they know and trust everything around them, but at the same time, they cannot extend this comfort zone as they need to move on. The students begin their journey of the new academic year by feeling rather lost, or at least they are not feeling comfortable in the new environment and with the new situation. They look at classes as something strange and unfamiliar, and the whole college as a new experience that puts them in a stressful environment. They are forced to get out of their comfort zone; thus, their anxiety increases and a stress reaction happens, which could sometimes, however, lead to an improved focus. They may experience various levels of discomfort or anxiety when they leave their comfort zones of what they already know and have experienced for many years, both figuratively and literally, finding themselves within geographical and imaginative boundaries (Breen, 2012). Due to the heightened functioning skills that occur in this zone, it is referred to as the Optimal Performance Zone (White, 2008). Thus, it would be easier to determine the areas of weaknesses the students may suffer through the transition from the comfort one to the learning one and then to the growth zone.

The current study focuses on students' failures in pragmatic competence and spoken communication as they occur in the context of the EFL environment. Though many writers wonder whether EFL learners need to be taught pragmatics, LoCastro (2012) recommends that the development of pragmatic competence in L2 learners must generally take place in instructional settings. Kasper (1997) went beyond and stated that the pragmatic capacity of adult foreign and second language learners has been extensively investigated and it has been proven that learners' pragmatics differs greatly from native speakers. In the same vein, Blum-Kulka et al. (1989, p. 10) assure that "even fairly advanced language learners' communicative acts regularly contain pragmatic errors, or deficits, in that they fail to convey or comprehend the intended illocutionary force of politeness value". Thus, there is a requirement for L2 instruction to focus on the pragmatics of the language, and most academics believe that instruction aimed at improving learners' pragmatic awareness has a positive impact (Derakhshan & Eslami, 2015; Kasper, 1997; Zangoei & Derakhshan, 2014).

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the reasons for advanced EFL learners' pragmatic failure when they attempt to communicate orally as judged by their tutors in two culturally different contexts: Iraq and the Czech Republic. Among the important aspects that have evolved as a result of psychological growth, conditions are the expansion of knowledge of humanistic learning elements (Al-Obaydi, 2021), the empowerment of instructors toward ethical considerations in teaching in addition to the scholars' trials to break the psychological barriers of students in EFL classes. As a result, the goal of this study is to shed light on the cross-cultural disparities in using a mix of mental grounding and pragmatic techniques in EFL classrooms between Iraqi and Czech higher education environments. There is one essential factor that should be

taken into consideration to help the students pass through these steps and to create a highly positive class environment is the teacher (teacher support and the techniques he/she uses in classes) who imposes relaxation and creates a positive atmosphere (Al-Obaydi, 2020; Pishghadam et al., 2021). In this concern, providing a mix of pragmatics and grounding techniques is suggested to be the proper tool that can be used by language teachers in their language classes.

Despite the possibilities and potential importance of the aforementioned aspects, little research has attempted to examine the philosophical and educational underpinnings of self-discovery and self-development of students' pragmatic language depending on their comfort zones and how this matter could be implemented in a foreign language learning context. There is virtually no research dealing with the topic of comfort zones in the context of second language acquisition, therefore, this research attempts to cover this gap.

To cover the gap, the following research questions were formulated to obtain the results to be later analyzed:

1. Can the use of learning zones as a road map help teachers determine the areas of difficulty and diagnose the EFL college students' pragmatic problems?
2. Can the use of mental grounding techniques help EFL college students overcome their pragmatic problems?
3. Can the use of pragmatic activities help EFL college students overcome their pragmatic problems?
4. Is there any difference between the results of using mental grounding and pragmatic activities in the EFL foreign language context in Iraq and the Czech Republic?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Pragmatic Competence

Pragmatic competence, according to Thomas (1983) and Mao (2021), entails both pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic knowledge. The former is concerned with the linguistic resources available to fulfill language tasks (Taguchi, 2011), whereas the latter is concerned with the language user's judgment of the context in which such resources are used (Taguchi, 2011). Because L2 learners must know how to change their socio-pragmatic knowledge into pragma-linguistic forms under the contextual limits of the situation (Roever, 2004, as cited in Mirzaei et al., 2012), the former two types of pragmatic competence appear to be challenging for EFL/ESL learners to acquire (O'Keeffe et al., 2011). One of the main reasons for EFL students' pragmatic problems is mentioned by LoCastro (2012) who states that around the world, classroom environments are often teacher-centered, planned to complete the curriculum with little time during sessions to encourage language practice where learners are involved in comprehension and creation of pragmatic meaning. Furthermore, there are few opportunities to utilize the target language in contexts that resemble real-world communication. Cook (2001) adds another reason for EFL students' pragmatic problems which is the kind of language used. Language is regarded as an object rather than a medium of interaction and communication in EFL classrooms, with few opportunities for socialization among students. Lastly, the EFL teacher is also considered a problem in some contexts as he/she is the only source of

the students' language, unlike the native teacher who can provide students with many language strategies. All these reasons can show the main resources for EFL students' pragmatic failure that can be dealt with in this study by utilizing the learning comfort zone first then testing the students to diagnose their problems, and last suggesting the possible program as remedial work.

2.2 Comfort Zone

The term 'comfort zone' is most commonly associated with studies of outdoor education (Brown, 2008), and pedagogy (Boler & Zembylas, 2003). Bardwick (1991), a management thinker, developed the term "comfort zone" in her book *Danger in the Comfort Zone*. White (2008) stated that a person operates in the comfort zone when they are in an anxiety-free environment and only use a small number of behaviors to produce a consistent level of performance, typically without feeling at danger. It is a form of mental conditioning in which people learn to set and maintain mental limits. Based on different techniques of processing uncertainty, these boundaries range from person to person. Making a decision based on confusing or limited information can be nerve-wracking for some, but thrilling for others. In a broad sense, higher tolerance for ambiguity in decision-making can be associated with the trait of having a 'growth mindset', which is defined as a willingness to learn in areas that are outside of one's comfort zone (Dweck, 2006). However, the concept may also be traced all the way back to behavioral psychology where Yerkes and Dodson (1907) conducted their experiments that show a link between anxiety and performance as in Figure 1. The law of Yerkes and Dodson (Yerkes & Dodson, 1907) seems true not only for more tangible performance such as being assigned a difficult new task at work, but also for many other aspects of life such as understanding ourselves, relating to others, and so on.

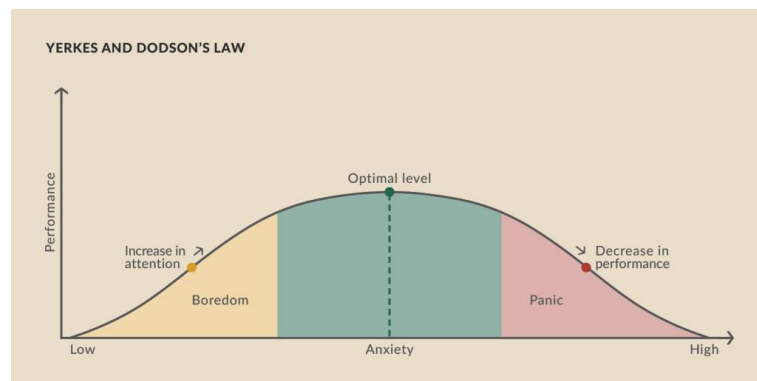


Figure 1. Yerkes and Dodson's law (Yerkes & Dodson, 1907, p. 460).

The students move from their comfort zone in the stage before entering college; for example, see Figure 2. Then, they enter the fear zone which represents the first step of learning where they begin to know the environment around them. It is a period of challenge in learning. In this stage, the students show a lack of self-confidence and fear, and they are affected by others' opinions due to peer pressure to a large extent. In the second stage, the learning zone, the students deal with the new material, the new classroom, and the new peers. They begin to learn new skills and realize how to face challenges and obstacles more systematically or even professionally. The last zone is

the growth zone where the students show their maturation and growth. All these four zones can be applied to one academic year by applying them horizontally.

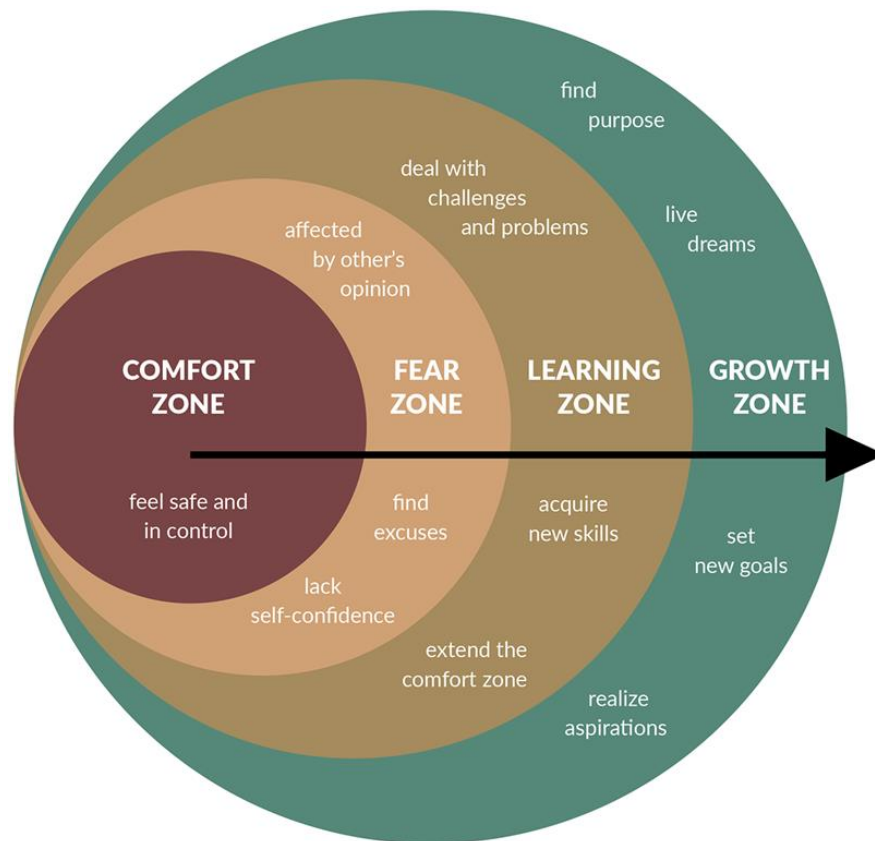


Figure 2. The circle from comfort to the growth zone (Maxwell, 2020, p. 65).

Figure 2 above shows clearly how these four zones can represent consecutive steps toward learning and how the teacher can determine students' failure by mapping the fear zone of the students. The students begin to live their dreams and set their new goals. The circle of learning zones repeats each new academic year attitudinally. It may also apply longitudinally to the four academic years of college study.

2.3 Grounding

Using grounding as remedial work, in addition to pragmatic activities, for pragmatic failure seems ideal as most of the problems that cause language failure are related to psychological sources. Grounding originally is a form of coping method that can be utilized to aid in the healing process after a traumatic event (Eddins, 2020). It is a strategy for keeping oneself in the present moment. Grounding activities assist a person to realign to the present moment. They are enjoyable and calming activities that help to reduce tension and anxiety. A person is out of touch with the current moment when he/she is nervous. Anxious thoughts are focused on the past and the future. These activities help reconnect to the present moment and feel calmer and more secure in it. Grounding skills might help a person cope with overwhelming emotions or worry. They assist someone in regaining mental focus after being in a highly emotional state.

The person can increase his or her awareness of the moment they are now living in by increasing their awareness of their surroundings and body.

Although grounding does not address the problem that is causing the unpleasant emotions, it does provide a temporary solution for gaining control of the feelings and preventing them from worsening. Grounding allows a person to calm down, anchors him/her, and allows him/her to return to the problem that is causing the negative emotions in the first place. Grounding, on the other hand, can be done at any time, in any place, with no one knowing (Eddins, 2020).

Three types of grounding are mentioned: soothing (talking with self in a very kind way), physical (focusing on senses), and mental (focusing on mind) (Eddins, 2020). The latter is the one used in the present study. The goal of mental grounding is to focus a person's thoughts and bring them back to the present moment. Examples are forming self-affirmations, creating a mental space to feel safe, focusing and observing the details, counting up and back down again, singing a song you know well, and playing concentration games.

It is worth mentioning that no study has been found to deal with applying learning zones as a road map to determine the area of difficulty for the students. The use of grounding techniques to solve language problems is also a new idea to exploit psychology in facilitating language learning. The use of mental grounding techniques and learning zones in the context of second language acquisition can bridge the gap that exists in the domain of applied linguistics and can help suggest possible solutions for teachers to deal with pragmatic problems easily (Mao, 2021).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

This study deals specifically with first-grade students from two countries with very different cultural backgrounds, i.e., Iraq and the Czech Republic. The students were recruited from the English Department in the College of Education at the University of Diyala in Iraq, and the students of the Department of Applied Linguistics at the Faculty of Informatics and Management at the University of Hradec Kralove, the Czech Republic, as these two groups could represent an ideal representative sample. The choice of the population of the study occurred depending on two things: being first-year students studying English as a foreign language. The students agreed with their participation in the research and their written consent was obtained from them prior to the research. The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Hradec Kralove no. 2/2021. No personal data about the students were collected.

The researchers applied self-report surveys with first-grade students from the two contexts (Iraqi n=30, Czech n=30) at the beginning of the second semester of their first year in January and February 2022. Before that, the researchers interviewed the students and asked them some questions to check their viewpoints on their new life in college and to check whether they were entering the fear zone or not (see Table 1). Results showed that most students agreed on the existence of difficulties at this time of year specifically as it represented entirely a new life for them. The researchers used students' subjective evaluation of their first year with a particular focus on their

transition from a high school to a university environment. This subjective reflection could bring important insight into the topic of transition and even if it was very subjective, it provided important data to be analyzed. The research was qualitative as it was based on the subjective opinions of the students.

Table 1. Results of students' first interview.

No.	Questions	Iraq			Czech Republic		
		Yes	Somehow	No	Yes	Somehow	No
1.	Do you like the new life in college?	20	8	2	17	13	0
2.	Is it difficult to be a college student?	15	6	9	19	11	0
3.	Does the studying in English department differ from your previous experience of studying in schools?	25	2	3	21	9	0
4.	Do you face difficulties in communication in English in this specific period of the first year?	18	6	6	15	7	8
5.	Does studying in college, specifically in the English department, represent a psychological load to you specifically in this period?	8	18	4	12	13	5

3.2 Instruments

This study collected data and determined the target sample using the subjective evaluation by the students themselves as they are usually aware of their pragmatic language impairments. Their evaluation of the situation is important as it could be analyzed and brought together to see the possibilities for improvement. Thus, all the students in the two contexts were exposed to a yes/no self-report survey that contained many pragmatic problems and allowed them to determine their specific cases. The use of this technique yielded valuable diagnostic information as it was gained directly from the students in a specific area (in the middle of the year where the fear zone begins). The items of the survey were adapted from the literature on repeated cases of pragmatic problems. The survey was initially exposed to specialists in English language teaching and psychology to confirm its validity in the two contexts. Once they all confirmed its suitability to the aim and context of the study, the survey was piloted on seven students to check its suitability and applicability to the students and the contexts of study. As a result, some items were modified and the time allotted was extended.

After determining the sample, the teachers became the facilitator of the improvement process by applying for the suggested program and be a guide to help students in the process of realizing their problems to be better communicators. The major language competence is communication; therefore, all pragmatic language impairments should be eradicated as they pose a threat to proper communication processes.

The students who mentioned more than six items would be included in the sample. Thus, out of 30 students in the class (in Iraq), 12 were mentioned as suffering from pragmatic problems. In the Czech sample, 15 students had pragmatic problems. The diagnosis of the students is based on several symptoms mentioned in the following self-report as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Results of students' self-report before the experiment.

No.	Items	Iraq		Czech Republic	
		Yes	No	Yes	No
1.	I have difficulty sharing and making proper eye contact.	5	25	12	18
2.	I have difficulty initiating and maintaining discussions	12	18	18	12
3.	I have difficulty participating in structured activities with peers	10	20	10	20
4.	I face difficulties while participating in communication games	11	19	9	21
5.	I have a restricted vocabulary.	7	23	22	8
6.	I have poor narrative skills.	8	22	19	11
7.	I prefer to stay alone rather than with other students to avoid communication.	7	23	4	26
8.	I have difficulty understanding emotions and sentiments.	5	25	9	21
9.	I have a negative impression of social interactions.	4	26	6	24
10.	I have unrelated and inappropriate comments during a conversation.	8	22	2	28
11.	I have difficulty taking turns during dialogues.	8	22	6	24
12.	I have an inability to make inferences or understand the meaning of jokes.	11	19	3	27

At the end of the experiment, the students were also interviewed on some questions to evaluate the experiment in addition to using the same self-report survey. The questions were as follows:

1. Do you benefit from this experience?
2. Do you think that there are psychological barriers that may hinder communication abilities in class?
3. Is the use of grounding effective in helping oral communication?
4. Rate the whole experience, please: good, very good, excellent, or not good.

3.3 The Application of the Experiment

After determining the students with pragmatic problems based on the results of the self-report, the training program was conducted with students at the beginning of the second semester (fear zone) of their studies in January and February 2022. The researchers designed a program that mixed between pragmatic and grounding activities. The researchers chose not to isolate the target students from their classes and colleagues, so the experiment was conducted in their classes with a focus on the sample of the study. The details of the program are described below.

The lessons of the program occurred in the last 30 minutes of their lectures or seminars. In each lesson, the researchers in the two contexts divided the students into groups of four or fewer to ensure that the students would interact and socialize with peers. Then, it began with grounding activities, mental grounding specifically, to guarantee that the students were relaxed and able to reduce tension and anxiety. It is worth mentioning that the researchers tried to present a kind of lifelong training that could help the student utilize it in future times. Below is a list of the mental grounding activities used by the researchers at the beginning of each lesson with the students. Ask yourself some of these questions:

1. Where am I?
2. What is today?
3. What is the date?
4. What is the month?
5. What is the year?
6. How old am I?
7. What season is it?
- Notice your breath
Take a deep breath and visualize exhaling forcefully through the soles of your feet as you exhale. Feel your feet firmly planted on the ground. Make three repetitions of this.
- Naming categories
Choose a category (for example, colors, shapes, or textures), then look about the room and list anything that fits into that category.
- Counting
Count to 20 or say the alphabet, very s...l...o...w...l...y.

These were the activities that the researchers chose among many others. They were simple and easy to be used by the students in the class. The researchers trained the students to do one of these activities during each interview before beginning the pragmatic activities. In addition, they were trained to use them when feeling hesitant or confused during communication. They were used as preliminary activities to increase students' pace on one hand and to prepare and motivate them for the upcoming pragmatic activities.

It is essential to mention that the goal of using such activities was to introduce learners to the pragmatic components of language by breaking their fears of using language orally and helping them to make their own generalizations about how to utilize language in different situations. Such pragmatic activities (awareness-raising activities) are important as they are intended to help students become more aware of the variations between native and target language speech acts.

When teaching pragmatic topics to the sample for the first time, familiar examples of speech acts such as apologizing and requesting were given a suitable emphasis. When students were more comfortable with the method, they were given the option of selecting a speech act that they were interested in and observing it in naturalistic or rehearsed contexts. Then, when the students showed more development, the researchers used the literal translation of pragmatic aspects from their first language into English in the two contexts of study. Encouraging the sample to translate pragmatic sentences and phrases from and into their first language would help them understand more and remember each detail of the pragmatic structure used. The researchers used mental grounding techniques again when students showed confusion or fear. After six weeks of training, the researchers tried to collect data by applying the same self-report, in addition, to a set of questions to evaluate the students' experiences.

4. RESULTS

After six weeks of the experiment, the researchers applied the self-report survey again to see if there was any difference in the result. In the second application of the

survey, it was applied only to the samples that were diagnosed with pragmatic problems (Iraq n=12, Czech n=15). The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Results of participants' self-report after the experiment.

No.	Items	Iraq		Czech Republic	
		Yes	No	Yes	No
1.	I have difficulty sharing and making proper eye contact.	5	7	3	12
2.	I have difficulty initiating and maintaining discussions.	3	9	4	11
3.	I have difficulty participating in structured activities with peers.	5	7	2	13
4.	I face difficulties while participating in communication games.	4	8	3	12
5.	I have a restricted vocabulary.	4	8	5	10
6.	I have poor narrative skills.	4	8	5	10
7.	I prefer to stay alone rather than with other participants to avoid communication.	2	10	3	12
8.	I have difficulty understanding emotions and sentiments.	2	10	4	11
9.	I have a negative impression of social interactions.	0	12	2	13
10.	I have unrelated and inappropriate comments during a conversation.	6	6	1	14
11.	I have difficulty taking turns during dialogues.	3	9	2	13
12.	I have an inability to make inferences or understand the meaning of jokes.	4	8	1	14

The results of the Iraqi participants proved that there was a kind of improvement according to the participants' replies. The number of participants with pragmatic problems decreased notably. Item number 9 which reads 'I have a negative impression about social interactions' got zero, which means no one had negative feelings towards social interaction anymore, which was a very good result. Other pragmatic problems decreased to a large extent in the performance of the participants. In addition, six participants still suffered from the problem mentioned in item number 10 which reads 'I have unrelated and inappropriate comments during conversation', which is related to the overall knowledge of language more than to speaking style. The results of the Czech participants showed that it seems that they subjectively evaluated their progress in a very good way as many of their answers tend to be in the spectrum of 'no' answers which indicates that they were aware of some kind of improvement. It seems that their self-reflection could be biased, but it is important to note that subjectively evaluated they felt some kind of improvement after the intervention.

The researchers interviewed the participants after the experiment individually to see their evaluation of the process and the activities used. The results of the two contexts were as follows.

4.1 Benefits from The Experience

Table 4 shows the results of the interviews from the first question: Do you benefit from this experience?

Table 4. Results of the first question of the interviews.

Item	Iraq			Czech Republic		
	Yes	No	Other	Yes	No	Other
Do you benefit from this experience?	7	3	I do not like such activities I feel shy to take part in this kind of program.	11	4	0

Out of 12 Iraqi participants, seven said yes to getting benefits from the experiment, three said no, meaning they did not get any benefits from it, and two others also did not agree for different reasons. The Czech participants' results showed that the majority of them were satisfied with the intervention, and they felt that it was beneficial for them as 11 participants agreed with the statement that they benefited from this experience, while only four participants who did not.

4.2 Psychological Barriers that Hinder Communication Abilities in Class

Table 5 shows the results based on the interviews from the second question: Do you think that there are psychological barriers that may hinder communication abilities in class?

Table 5. Results of the second question of the interviews.

Item	Iraq			Czech Republic		
	Yes	No	Other	Yes	No	Other
Do you think that there are psychological barriers that may hinder communication abilities in class?	10	2	0	14	0	1 (probably yes)

All Iraqi participants agreed on the existence of psychological barriers that prevented them from becoming good speakers of a language. The Czech participants' results showed that almost all of them were aware that some other barriers may hinder communication abilities, and one of the participants expressed that there was probably some barrier but was not able to identify it, while none of the participants expressed there was a barrier at all.

4.3 The Effective Use of Grounding in Helping with Oral Communication

Table 6 shows the results of the interviews based on the third question: Do you think that the use of grounding is effective in helping with oral communication?

Table 6. Results of the third question of the interviews.

Item	Iraq			Czech Republic		
	Yes	No	Other	Yes	No	Other
Do you think that the use of grounding is effective in helping oral communication?	6	5	It enhances my psychological acceptance of communication but does not improve it.	11	0	4 (not sure, maybe, probably yes)

Only six Iraqi participants agreed on the positive role of grounding in enhancing communication abilities; five participants said no; and one other participant

commented saying “It enhances my psychological acceptance of communication but not improve it”. Czech results on the other hand showed that again the majority of the participants (11) believed that grounding techniques can be efficient; none of them said no, but four stated that they were not sure.

4.4 Rating the Experience

Table 7 shows the results from the participants rating the whole experience.

Table 7. Results of the fourth question of the interview.

	Good	Very good	Excellent	Not good
Iraq	8	3	1	0
Czech Republic	10	1	0	0

The results of the last question of the interview demonstrated that only one Iraqi participant felt it was an excellent experience, eight participants were good, three participants very good, and no participant expressed not good. The Czech participants’ results, on the other hand, demonstrated that they were all satisfied, but they did not overrate their experience with this technique. It was not excellent for anyone, not good for anyone, and very good only for one participant. On the other hand, 10 participants expressed their satisfaction by stating that it was good.

5. DISCUSSION

The results of the present qualitative study showed that there is a certain level of success when implementing a mix of mental grounding techniques with the use of pragmatic activities to deal with the pragmatic problems of EFL college students. The experiment generally proves very good results with the Czech students and good results with the Iraqi students. The results obtained can be discussed concerning each question of the study as follows. The first research question dealt with the analysis of the use of learning zones as a road map to help teachers determine the areas of difficulty and diagnose the EFL college students’ pragmatic problems. The results showed that the use of the mentioned learning zones as a road map and a guide for teachers and researchers proved to be helpful as it allowed the participants to be more accurate in choosing a suitable time for dealing with class challenges and to be aware of the existence of psychological barriers that need to be dealt with. This aspect is crucial as it could help the participants with their time management, which can be a serious issue in the first year of university studies.

The researchers asked the participants several questions to identify whether they suffer from the transition of their high schools first, and then from the accumulation of new study material in their new academic life. This information was important to set a solid ground upon which further research could be conducted. Results showed that most students suffer in the fear zone of the academic year which leads to encouraging teachers and researchers to do their investigations during this specific period. The transition of the student’s academic life, in addition to the accumulation of study materials during their first year at a university, exerts significant psychological pressure on students which could potentially lead to the existence of more anxiety and

stress in conversation classes as it was specified and confirmed by [White \(2008\)](#). Therefore, the division of learning zones seems ideal to be used in the present study.

The second research question focused on the idea of whether the use of mental grounding techniques can help EFL college students overcome their pragmatic problems. As the results of the present study show, the use of grounding as a technique to treat confusion and anxiety leads to a lack of fluency and in turn affects the pragmatic ability of the students; most participants in the two contexts responded positively to using it, where Czech students were again slightly more positive towards it than Iraqi students. But all in all, both groups of participants agreed on the effectiveness of using grounding exercises in the development of oral communication skills, which is a very good result because the participants subjectively agreed with the potential benefits of the technique. As is supported by vast research, the use of psychological techniques to deal with pragmatic and speaking problems seems essential ([Qureshi et al., 2020](#)), as many EFL students experience such a kind of problems due to various cognitive and psychological factors that form a kind of serious pressure on their academic and language performance. This issue is also supported by [Thornbury \(2005\)](#). Among these factors could be making mistakes ([Ariyanti, 2016](#)), shyness ([Al Nakhalah, 2016](#)), anxiety ([Gopang et al., 2018](#)), lack of confidence ([Al-Hebaish, 2012](#)), lack of self-esteem ([Braine, 2018](#)), and lack of motivation ([Harmer, 2007](#)). As a result, using psychological techniques to solve students' problems seems acceptable and successful due to the positive results that were gained in the two culturally different learning contexts, Iraq, and the Czech Republic, which can show a shred of evidence that the psychological treatment of the students' problems can give positive or even very positive results despite the fact where the students are based.

The use of mental grounding specifically, among other kinds of grounding, works on focusing the participants on their thoughts and bringing them back to the present moment, which is also supported by research into mindfulness, mediation, and mindfulness cognitive-based therapy. Nowadays, the technique of mindfulness is also implemented in management studies and other professions that have to make decisions under pressure; therefore, it is already considered a very powerful tool to improve decision processes and subjective well-being. Moreover, this procedure seems effective with most students specifically those who face psychological barriers that prevent them from speaking fluently. Other students who were not responding positively to these techniques suffered from language problems other than psychological ones such as stammering, dyslexia, or others. Thus, the use of mental grounding to deal with pragmatic problems seems rather successful and very justifiable as these techniques can bring enormous benefits for students, but further research is still needed.

The third research question evaluated if the use of pragmatic activities helps EFL college students overcome their pragmatic problems. The use of instructional strategies in teaching pragmatics is not a new idea in EFL contexts ([Derakhshan et al., 2021](#); [Malmir & Derakhshan, 2020](#); [Tajeddin & Malmir, 2015](#)), and most strategies used were successful and gained very good results which are in agreement with the results of the present study. What is new and not usually dealt with in pragmatic studies is the use of psychological techniques, such as grounding, in addition to pragmatic strategies inside the class to deal with pragmatic problems. The mix of these two types of activities demonstrates a kind of remedy that could be developed and used for a widespread segment of students who suffer from pragmatic and language problems as

supported by Hilari et al. (2010, 2012) and Feeney et al. (2012). The positive results of the present study show that mixing psychological treatment with language activities can potentially yield long or even lifelong training that can be used by students almost anytime during their professional lives.

The findings of using explicit pragmatic activities with students positively related to previous studies on the positive influence of instruction on learners' pragmatic development (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Kasper & Roever, 2005; Martínez-Flor, 2016; Zangoei et al., 2014). The use of awareness-raising activities with students indicated that multiple teaching modalities were effective in dealing with students.

An important issue to be mentioned is what is reported by the researchers of the healthy students (those who did not suffer from any pragmatic problems and who also took part in the experiment) who showed very good performance, and their pragmatic competence enhanced notably as well. After some questions with them about the experiment and how they can evaluate it, they stated that it was benefiting them to a large extent and they rated it as excellent. This result may lead to an important fact that such a kind of experiment could be used with whole classes and it is recommended not to isolate the target students only as both groups viewed it positively, and it probably brought certain psychological benefits to both groups. Such kind of activities can help to promote engagement in class by using instant feedback (Al-Obaydi et al., 2023).

Finally, the last research question enquired is whether there is any difference between the results of using mental grounding and pragmatic activities in the EFL foreign language context in Iraq and the Czech Republic. Students' responses to this kind of training were very good in the two contexts (Iraq and the Czech Republic) as they showed positive interaction and engagement with their teachers in both groups. Though these two contexts may culturally differ, both deal with English as a foreign language. Thus, the approximate positive results in the two contexts may be justifiable. However, it was not the aim of this research to prove and explain the differences between these two culturally very different contexts.

Students' rate of the experiments in the two contexts varied between good and very good which is a high rating degree. This refers to the overall acceptance of students of such kinds of activities that are interspersed with psychological treatment. Therefore, it is recommended to use positive psychology in addition to mindfulness techniques when needed. In addition, teachers' knowledge and professionalism in this aspect need to be increased and sharpened to solve such urgent cases in class.

6. CONCLUSION

The use of psychological techniques in addition to language activities proved to be a very good mix that helps EFL college students overcome their challenges in learning. The atmosphere of relaxation and stability that was created by using grounding is worth studying by other researchers in different pivots in relation to English language teaching contexts as it affects students' psychological state decreasing their language anxiety and stress to a large extent. Generally, implementing various techniques, such as mindfulness, motivational strategies, anxiety reduction methods, etc., can dramatically help students improve their concentration, reduce stress, and thus improve their learning experience.

This research is a pilot study and it has several limitations, namely, the research sample was not large enough to allow coming to generalizations about the whole population. However, as a pilot study, it provides some important findings that could be further verified on a much larger scale. This research is just an attempt and impetus to focus on a topic that seems relevant and that could bring certain positive aspects into the learning process in the EFL context.

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