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Development of pragmatic skills among 3-4 years old preschooler children in rural region of Gurugram District of Haryana: An Exploratory study

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Abstract

This study investigates on the pragmatic skills development in preschoolers of rural region. A total of 67 participants were the preschoolers of rural region school. Based on the school records, children of nursery grade level in the age groups of 3 to 4 years were considered. Pragmatic parameters using PPT assessment tools check for speech acts, presuppositions, conversational interactions, and non-verbal signals. The results have shown component wise responses on pragmatic profile test: communication functions, response to communication, interaction and conversations, and contextual variations. Children with in naturalistic contexts learn more accurate representations of their pragmatic abilities. Future research should explore these dynamics of pragmatic development, considering the influence of environment and familiarity on children's social communication skills. Teacher in schools also tries to provides more language advancing input and are usually more supportive to language learning for like preschool children.

Keywords: *language development; pragmatic skills; preschooler children*

INTRODUCTION

In the human sociality, language is selected from environment for interactional skills and cognitive development (Enfield & Levinson, 2020) also claimed over all human languages that they differ in form across cultures, and in common they are grounded in universal properties of human interaction like speech-acts and turn-taking (Falkum, 2019). Language in real life situations and its use in context is pragmatics (Dey, 2023) and there is a risk that participation of parents of children at risk of communicative disorder in any index test designed to identify pragmatic skills will be particularly low. On the contrary, its exceptional in generating knowledge of child language from large populations, special populations, and children from different language communities (Eriksson, 2023).

Development of pragmatics is in three major aspects: Sociality for interaction (Ninio & Snow, 2018), communication responses (Bogal-Allbritten, 2023; Roever & Ikeda, 2020), and communicative functions (Krulatz, 2019; Pouscoulous, 2023). Children learn language to communicate (Nikolaus & Fourtassi, 2023; Nikolaus et al., 2022) and develop the pragmatic competence and that mainly relies on their cognitive abilities (Alshehri &

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Aljamal, 2025). In children with typical development of cognitive capacities on verbal and non-verbal language learning, research suggests as many genetic influences associated and individual differences overlapping in assessment scores on standardized tests (Cabana-Domínguez et al., 2024; Malanchini et al., 2021; Pingault et al., 2022).

Development of conversational skills depend on children's social parameters of talk; and learning extended discourse genres like narratives, explanations, definitions (ASTA CEKAITE). In language it is the development of phonological, lexical, semantics, grammatical knowledge and pragmatics skills through context of shared knowledge and past discourse. The skills are acquired progressively. Conversations are through knowledgeable and cooperative partners provided through privileged settings. Pragmatics is defined as the speaker's ability to modulate their utterances to the communicative needs of their listener (Falkum, 2019). Pragmatic inference plays a major role in verbal comprehension, in deriving both explicit and implicit utterance content. More specifically, it is the speaker's intention, speaker's implicatures having important role in human communication and these communicative needs and utterance situations are in line with preferences and abilities (Falkum, 2019). Pragmatics is based on relationship between linguistic knowledge and principles governing language use. Pragmatics refers to study of the use of language in real with contextual variation and in experience with various life (Dey, 2023).

Papafragou (2018) also separated the pragmatic aspects of language into an interactional component which denotes to relevance, cohesion and coherence to content of discourse. Like any other language parameter, development of pragmatic skills is important for linguistic, cognitive and academic development. Developmental psychology relates to pragmatic to children's cognitive abilities about mental states and controlling mind processes like working memory. These approaches are pragmatic profiling of special population like individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder that are known to face social and communicative challenges (Papafragou, 2018). Adults' conversational participation supporting children is like scaffolding children's competent and equal conversational performance. Peer interactions of children evolves the pragmatic abilities in unaided conversational situations. Along with family members, class-teacher are very important who monitor and promotes pragmatic skills in preschooler children. Pragmatic teaching and learning are followed specific instructional methods of classroom teaching. A planned pedagogical action could be directed toward the acquisition of select pragmatic feature (Bogal-Allbritten, 2023; Serrano, 2020).

In a study, on Receptive and Expressive Language in Hindi speaking children, it was noted that language learning outcomes would not be impacted by demographic-related issues, such as gender, family income, and parental education (Kumar & Mehta, 2021). The incidental learning of new vocabulary in the context of one to a few encounters like fast mapping or quick incidental learning is also related to associative learning processes and prior experiences, words and concepts which organize into larger units (Kumar & Sanju, 2017). However, every individual teacher makes a difference with continuous support and encouragement like a sustained reflective practice, rigorous process-oriented training on instructional techniques coupled with a contextualized and speech training practices-focused coaching models may be vital for honing teacher-child interaction skills (Chew, 2012).

Teachers can also note vigilance of classroom children referred to the readiness to respond to a stimulus for evolving child interaction skills (Kumar & Mehta, 2021). It requires observer to maintain and remain alert to specified stimuli for prolonged periods of time Further enhancement of pragmatic skill development may be beneficial to conduct

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assessments in more familiar environments, such as home settings, where children might feel more comfortable and confident. Engaging with children in naturalistic contexts could lead to more accurate representations of their pragmatic abilities. Even legitimate conclusion is that digital learning tools and their learning outcomes are yet to be observed in classroom environment on early education and pragmatics skills development (Papadakis, 2020; Papadakis et al., 2022).

The positive role of teachers always learning support and else, pragmatics can be challenging for learners to acquire on their own (Cohen, 2016). The developmental challenges which teachers should search for pedagogy and practices to strengthen their professionalism should include addressing diversity in their classrooms for pragmatics learning (Guðjónsdóttir & Óskarsdóttir, 2016). As 'expert members', teachers are pragmatic models for very young students, being politeness as per norms and a variety of pragmatic strategies they do follow (Barón et al., 2020). Papadakis et al. (2022) revealed that parents were seeking support for their child's learning at home via mobile devices more frequently and parents lacked knowledge about app developmentally appropriateness and needed further guidance. Degotardi (2017) also reported that social interactionist approaches to language and cognitive development are proposals that for joint attention may only afford significant current and future potential for young children's learning wherein parental support and guidance from classroom teachers can also be supported by speech and language stimulation early critical language developmental age.

In preschool setting, a teacher spends around four to six hours with a group of students by engaging in various classroom activities. Teacher provides more language advancing input progress and are usually more supportive to language learning (Dickinson & Porsche, 2011). Children's behaviour with purpose of eliciting and maintaining conversation are also minutely monitored by the class teacher (Hoff, 2013). Pragmatic development is also associated with the achievement of literacy. During preschool stage, a child learns linguistic competency, oral skills, learning skills, literacy skills, grammar, vocabulary, culture, personal factor, empathy for other students, role models & enjoyment (Albritton & Johnson, 2023; Bruce et al., 2023; Callahan & Del Corral Winder, 2024). Children learn the pragmatics means that they are full verbal and situationally sensitive of previously acquired communicative intents and verbalization of justifications, promises, prohibitions, challenges, apologies, explanations, refusals, and disagreements (Ninio & Snow, 2018).

Children's conversations are complex combination of skills: children's mastery of turn-taking process, initiation and development of relevant topics, and ability to recognize and repair breakdowns in mutual understanding (Abbot-Smith et al., 2023; Wieczorek et al., 2025). Therefore, the early native language learning is dependent to pre-school teachers. Pragmatic profiling of each child is warranted as it is extremely important to actively involve every child in the higher level of language learning process initiated by a pre-school class teacher. It includes communicative functions, attention on given instructions and following commands, interaction with teachers and peers, sharing of knowledge, speech-language comprehension and expression. Instructions and teaching methodology also demands higher level of pragmatic competency for linguistic and academic learning. Playful linguistic learning is relevant to development of pragmatic. Pragmatic parameters using assessment tools check for speech acts, presuppositions, conversational interactions, and non-verbal signals.

The assessment of young language learners' development must be a success to mention the distinctive characteristics of pragmatics into account like requests,

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interactional performances mentioned in this study and such assessments must be compatible with these attributes. The language educators and researcher's studies also mention individual differences in the rates of development and that there is often inconsistency balance between cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and moral development (Ishihara & Chiba, 2014).

The language assessment of young learners should include the recommendation for assessment which should be aligned with the pedagogical dynamic principles at work, of familiar content and tasks, and performed by familiar adults, and should be based on multiple measures. The informal, in-class assessments, such as teacher's observation and notes on student's performance, are generally beneficial (Stoynoff, 2013), and interlocutor support during assessment can encourage learners to engage in the given tasks too (McKay, 2006). In Pre-school, the regular instructional contexts, and the interactive formative assessment of young learners in classroom-based interactional assessments have the potential to support learners' development everyday (Fox, 2008).

Children aged 3-4 years, who typically thrive on social interaction, often find themselves in environment that limit their opportunities for meaningful communication and social engagement. In contemporary society, the shift towards nuclear family structures has significantly impacted children's development, particularly in the realm of pragmatic skills. This study can contribute valuable insights to the existing literature by providing a nuanced understanding of how family dynamics and environmental factors influence the acquisition of pragmatic skills in early childhood. Moreover, this research focuses on rural schools, where a lack of awareness about the importance of pragmatic skills may further exacerbates the issue. By exploring the development of these skills within this context, we aim to highlight the challenges faced by children and emphasize the need for targeted interventions to foster essential communication abilities. It also offers evidence-based recommendations for parents, educators, and policymakers to enhance awareness and support the development of these critical skills in rural settings. Ultimately, our finding could inform future research and interventions aimed at promoting effective communication in young children, bridging the gap between pragmatic competency and its practice.

METHOD

This exploratory study on 67 preschool children was conducted in a rural school setup. The selected age range included in the study within the age range of 3-4years and mean age 3.7 years± 5 months. The selected participants belonged to the critical period of the language development with components like phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic and even pragmatic, as essential for effective social interaction. The study was carried out in the rural region, Panchagaon of Gurugram district of Haryana between August 2024 and February 2025. Preschool children from a rural region Govt. Public School were the participants in this study.

The communication behaviour of these children may show problems in young childhood age group in everyday living created by their families. Parents are always seeking opportunity to know assessments of their child's behaviour from their language background and this turns up as a source of frustration to them. Pragmatic component of child's language development, the Profile provides a general perspective on the child's communicative abilities and needs and mostly covers every area of pragmatic development, the Profile does provide information on a broad range of aspects of the development of

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pragmatics – including the range and form of expression of communicative intentions, response to communications, manner of participating in conversation and the impact of situational context on the child's communication skills.

Children's pragmatic skills were evaluated using Pragmatic Profile Test given by Dewart and Summers (2020). The pragmatic profile evaluates four key domains of pragmatic skills: a) Communicative Functions b) Response to communicate c) Interaction and communication and d) Contextual variation. Data were collected from a rural govt primary school of Gurgaon district of Haryana. Permission and consent from the school administration was obtained. Based on the school records, children of nursery grade in the age range of 3 to 4 years were shortlisted. One-to-one session with the respective class teacher of children in the age range of 3 to 4 years was arranged. Pragmatic profile test was implemented for every eligible child. Teacher has at least six month of interaction history with the child. This approach ensured a comprehensive evaluation of each child's pragmatic skills in a naturalistic setting, allowing for rich qualitative insights into their development. The obtained score was compared with the norms provided by Dewart and Summers (2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The aim of this research study was to explore the development of pragmatic skills in 67 subject participants to establish the opportunity for these toddlers/ preschoolers to learn meaningful communication. The main objective of this study was to perform parito chart analysis for 4 different pragmatic developmental scales on the subject participants.

Data collected, coded and stored in the excel sheet from Pragmatic Profile test given by Dewart and Summers in 2020 administered on 67 preschool children belonged to 3 to 5 years of age group, participated in this study. Children are undergoing classroom learning in Prenursery and KG in rural government public school. The test procedure and objectives of questionnaire of PPT, 2020 was explained to the class teacher who monitored the student for at least six hours every day since a minimum of six months. Component wise responses were obtained for communication functions, response to communication, interaction and conversations, and contextual variations. Communicative functions were evaluated also using the descriptive analysis and it was found that 69% children responded verbally by saying yes mam etc, while remaining 31% used non-verbal communication functions such as eye contact, shouting and move around.

Secondly, response to communication was analysed and it was found that 36% children responded through verbal mode while remaining 64% communicated using gestures signs or through pointing. Thirdly interaction to conversation was explored and it was noted that 31% children actively participated in group activities and took active participation in activities they were involve, however 69% children preferred withdrawn or being passive listener or preferred one to one interaction. Lastly, contextual variations were examined, and it were found that 61% children were actively involved in conversational repaired and they correctly responded to contextual variation.

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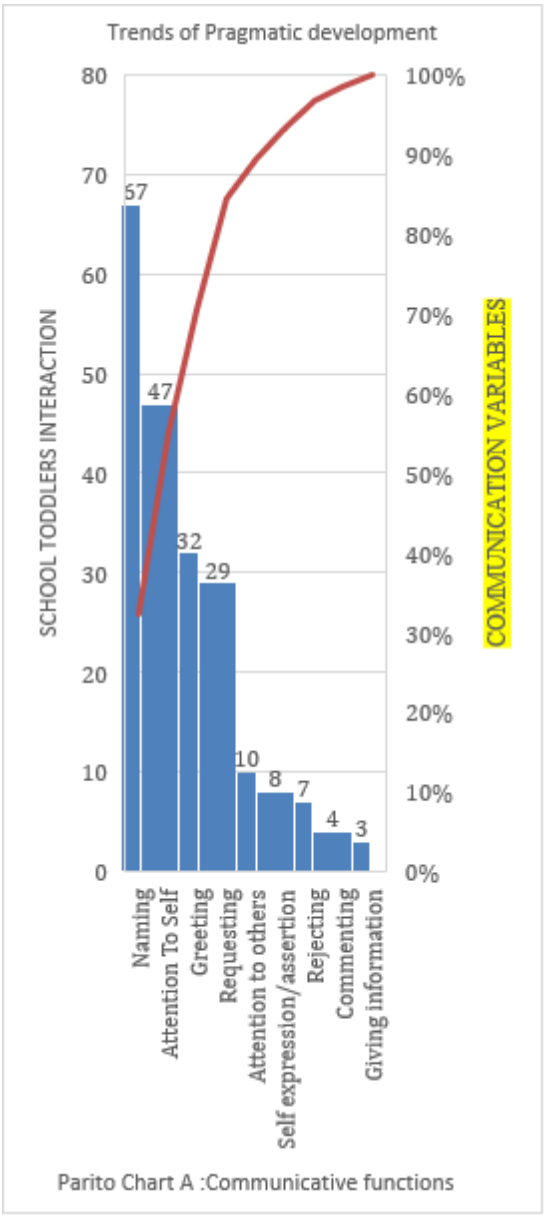

Figure 1. Communicative functions

From Figure 1 on chart of the communicative functions, it shows that the frequency scores on naming responses, attention to self, requesting and greeting together account for more than 80 % of the variables for language learning through classroom interaction. The remaining of the communicative functions which the toddlers learn in classroom environment, is basically to communicate and to interact together. For effective communication, either the child should share meaning and understanding between teachers and other children (Nurani, 2017) or they should learn to express thought, feeling, and information by learning to communicate (Gooden & Kearns, 2013). Early Childhood Education and classroom interactions are mostly verbal oral-face-to-face formal or informal mode of communication (Bubikova-Moan, 2019). Limited preschoolers reported with scores of less than 20% responses, were those who engaged in mentalizing self-talk.

In another study, Fernyhough (1997) reported possible self-regulatory private

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speech used by 4-year-olds and children's mentalizing (theory of mind) skills. Thus, children were more aware of themselves as mental agents who may use more self-regulatory or developmentally mature forms of self-speech, though Fernyhough (1997) noted that the direction of this effect was unclear. These were less scores as found also because Fernyhough (1997) reported that, unlike 3-year-old children, whose private speech in the naturalistic setting of the preschool class room appeared across many different situations and settings, 4-year-old children's private speech appeared more systematically as a function of their goal-directed task activities and social context.

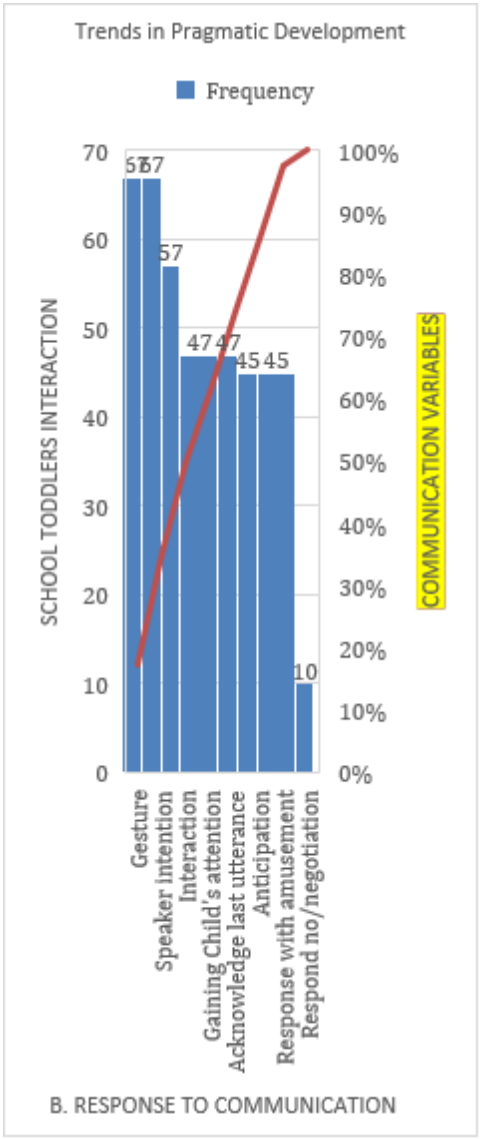

Figure 2. Response to communication

Figure 2 on response to communication, more than 80% scores are found for variables like speaker's intention, interaction and gaining child's attention. Siraj-Blatchford (2009) explained the importance of sustained shared thinking in the pedagogical interaction in the high-quality preschool classrooms which revolves around because of the joint activity and with exchange of ideas and knowledge. Rather only the non-verbal interaction or gestures are the variables on pragmatic developmental scale as noted with

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100% responses for all participants. On Chart B, similarly, good responses were noted on variables of gaining child attention, acknowledgement of last utterance, anticipation, response with amusement. Responses as negotiation were only 10% scores reported.

The educator being more than an instructor to deliver knowledge. He/she is like scaffolder (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009) supporting, motivating children to actively search for higher understanding (Whitebread & Coltman, 2003). They proposed that interactions take place through teaching techniques. These techniques are both verbal and non-verbal and through them, children's learning is therefore assisted, encouraged, supported and shaped.

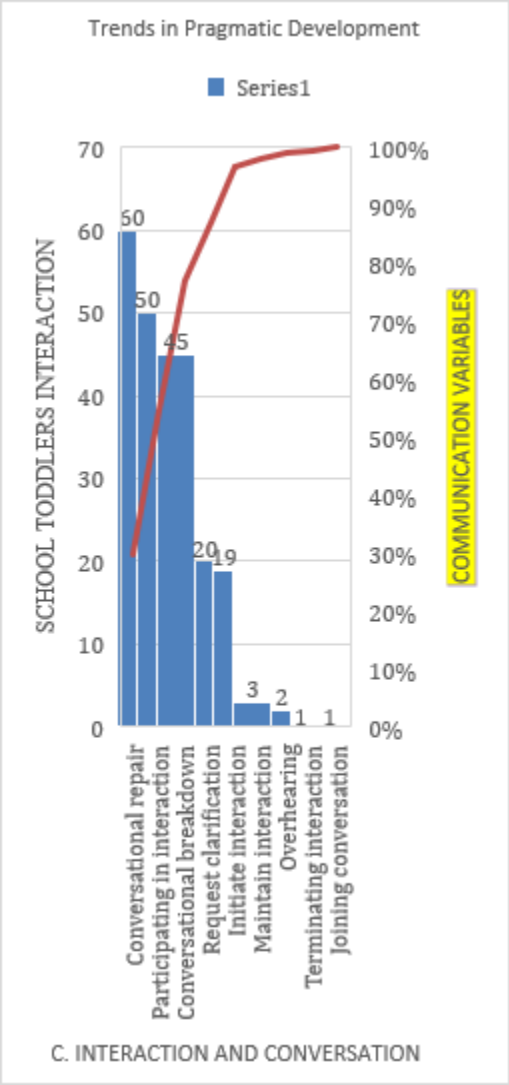

Figure 3. Interaction and conversation

On interaction and conversation, Figure 3 shows that 80% scores were noted for conversational repair in around 60 participants. In a study to measure the use of conversational repairs on preschoolers by Stockman et al. (2008), it was mostly the repair strategies that were reported for the pragmatic use of language by those typically developing children who are as young as 2-years. Also mentioned in the same research that a more fine-grained analyses exposed developmental differences among children who were

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around 3-6years, like those in this current study. More than 20 % scores were reported on initiating topic interaction, coping with conversational breakdown or request for clarifications in preschoolers in research group. Other studies reported characteristics of preschoolers who frequently initiated interactions with teachers were identified with good scores on social competence as well as rated on behavioural problems received initiations from teachers and they were more anxious and shier (Paschall, 2023; Knott et al., 2024).

It is also observed from the Parito chart analysis (Figure 3) that maintain interaction, overhearing, topic terminating and joining conversations were very poor scores reported on few pre-schoolers study participants. Social factors in the classroom (such as interactions with peers and teachers, talk, observation of others, and presence of peers and teachers) influence the engagement of preschoolers. A research study noted from Test and Cornelius-White (2013) like observational study of 12 preschoolers, ages 2–5 years, findings were that the Teacher interactions with children function as a bridge into and out of engagements but it was little sustained engagement, whereas peer interactions and self-talk sustained like ongoing engagements. Implications for encouraging engagement in preschool classrooms were considered.

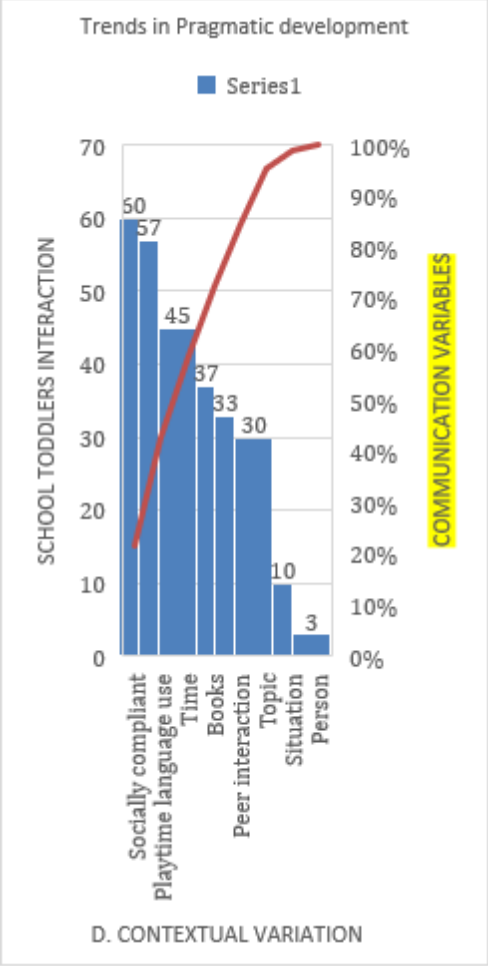

Figure 4. Contextual variation

On the analysis of Figure 4 for contextual variation in pragmatic use of language, more than 80% scores noted on socially compliant and playtime language use subjective

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questionnaire analysis, challenging behaviour of serious concern in young children (Levin & Ducharme, 2013). Challenging behaviour is exhibited due to typical development process, and many children conduct problems but during the pre-school years, children acquire language, social, and problem-solving skills (Morfoniou, 2020; Kelley, 2018). In the young children, severe non-compliance is like pre-cursor to the development of later conduct problems (Kallitsoglou & Repana; 2021) and increased risk of later socialization, school, and vocational difficulties (Gustafsson et al., 2018). Within day care settings, around 20% of children between the ages of two and five years were found to exhibit problem responses like destruction, temper tantrums, and noncompliance.

In schools, studies reported 85% of the participant teachers mentioned children's difficult behaviour, highlighting the need for classroom-based interventions that can be easily implemented by child care teachers (Buck & Ambrosino, 2004). The development of a child's behavioural repertoire, influenced by both child characteristics and environmental variables including characteristics of the home and school environments such as teacher's poor classroom management skills, a controlling parenting style, harsh discipline practices, and conflictual parent-child interactions (Bosquet & Egeland, 2006). Child variables such as language, cognitive, and social skills, and characteristics develop within a child's environment if warm, responsive parenting, stimulating high quality child care, and positive relationships with others, can serve as protective factors mediating the effects of exposure to psycho-social stressors on children's adjustment (Chen et al., 2024; Davet & Ata, 2025). Children scores were average good on time specific communicative abilities, interactions over books and with peers, topics specific of teacher's interaction or related to their family variables, favourite toys or TV cartoons etc. The young child with self-talk has knowledge of private speech and this could conceivably play a role in the internalization of language, their capacity to use speech for behavioral self-guidance, and metacognitive development (Manfra & Winsler, 2006).

CONCLUSION

Development of pragmatic skills among 3-4-year-old children in rural settings reflects a commendable achievement, with scores ranging from 60% to 70% on the pragmatic scale. However, these scores suggest room for growth, and several factors may contribute to the observed performance levels. The context of task administration, particularly the involvement of teachers, may introduce an element of anxiety or unfamiliarity, potentially impacting children's responses. Additionally, children's natural wariness of strangers could further inhibit their performance in structured settings. It requires observer to maintain and remain alert to specified stimuli for prolonged periods of time Further enhancement of pragmatic skill development may be beneficial to conduct assessments in more familiar environments, such as home settings, where children might feel more comfortable and confident. Engaging with children in naturalistic contexts could lead to more accurate representations of their pragmatic abilities.

Future research should explore these dynamics of pragmatic development, considering the influence of environment and familiarity on children's social communication skills. A study on the acquisition of vigilance in Kannada-English speaking children provided age specific distributions of vigilance performance and findings showed consistent with the hypothesis that cognitive inhibition develops during the primary school years and also would relate to advancing pragmatic developmental scores with increasing age of school going children. There is fun/enjoyment and motivation proven benefits also of tablets over other teaching tools. There are advantages in better learning outcomes

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compared to the use of other digital tools, i.e. computers and webpages. Furthermore, the use of tablets resulted in clearly better learning outcomes compared to printed material (as the tablets' group outperformed the printed material group in all cases), while the use of computers and webpages also produced good results (as the computers' group outperformed the printed material group in research study cases).

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

All authors significant contribution would be acknowledged in writing the article.

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APPENDIX I

A. COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTIONS	B. RESPONSE TO COMMUNICATION	C. INTERACTION AND CONVERSATION	D. CONTEXTUAL VARIATION
Type of input typically responded to For example: touch; gesture; sign; words in context; questions; direct requests; indirect requests; idiom; jokes and puns. Nature of child's response For example: no reaction; face and body movements; gestures; jargon; verbal comments; questions.	Child's contribution to initiating and maintaining interaction Interactional style For example: attends; takes lead; appears withdrawn; responds with interest; prefers one-to-one; takes listeners; needs into account.	Child's contribution to initiating and maintaining interaction Interactional style For example: attends; takes lead; appears withdrawn; responds with interest; prefers one-to-one; takes listeners; needs into account.	How communication varies with time, topic, situation and partner
Attention directing: a) To Self How does (child's name) usually get your attention? N=47 repeating their own name to get your attention	9. Gaining Child's Attention If you want to get (child's name) attention, how do you do it? N=47 Written, class activities followed, Command following	17. Participating in Interaction When you and (child's name) are playing or interacting together, how does (he/she) take part? N= 50	26. Person Are there people that (child's name) likes to be with or talk to more than others? N=3
b) To Events, Objects, Other People If you and (child's name) were going along the street or walking in a park and (he/she) saw something interesting, what would (child's name) be likely to do? N= 10 shouting	10. Interest in Interaction If you are sitting close to (child's name) and talking to (him/her) how does (he/she) generally respond? N=10 social peer-interaction N=47 liked one to one interaction	18. Initiating Interaction If (child's name) ever starts up a conversation or a little game with you, how does (he/she) do it? N=19	27. Situation Are there situations in which (child's name) is more communicative? N=10 social interaction in playground
2. Requesting a) Request for Object If you were in the kitchen and (child's name) saw something (he/she) wanted to eat that was out of reach, how would (he/she) let you know? N=10 shouting N=19 begin to talk	11. Understanding of Gesture If you point to something you want (child's name) to look at, what does (he/she) usually do? N=67	19. Maintaining an Interaction or Conversation When a conversation or game gets started, how does it keep going? N= 3 overtalking	28. Time At what times of day is (child's name) most likely to be communicative? N=45 play time
3. Rejecting If (child's name) is at the table and you are giving (him/her) some food that (he/she) doesn't want, what is (he/she) likely to do? N=7 shouting, crying, water spill over, torn notebooks, fighting, slapping, tiffin steal, scoldings	12. Acknowledgement of Previous Utterance When you are speaking to (child's name), how do you know that (he/she) realizes that you are speaking to (him/her)? N=47	20. Conversational Breakdown When a conversation between you and (child's name) gets into difficulties, what is the usual reason for it? N=45	29. Topic a) What things does (child's name) like to talk about? N= 10 family N= 5 toys N= 15 TV N= 37 teacher's topic
4. Greeting a) Greeting on Arrival If a familiar person comes to your home, how does (child's name) usually react? N= 19 begin to talk N= 13 eye contact	13. Understanding of Speaker's Intentions a) Response to Request for Action If you give (child's name) an instruction, such as 'Go and get your shoes', then how does (he/she) respond? N= 13 eye contact N= 54 begin to talk, gestures, pointing	21. Conversational Repair If (child's name) is trying to tell you something and you haven't understood, what does (he/she) do about it? N= 60	30. Books as a Context for Communication How does (child's name) respond to books? N= 37

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5. Self-Expression and Self-Assertion a) Expression of Emotion Pleasure If (child's name) is enjoying something, how does (he/she) show it? N=8	14. Anticipation How does (child's name) react to something like 'Round and round the garden' or a favourite action-rhyme? N=45	22. Request for Clarification If (child's name) doesn't understand something that is said to (him/her), how does (he/she) show it? N=20 slow-written, mostly silent	31. Use of Language in Play When (child's name) is playing, what kind of talking goes on or what kind of sounds is (he/she) making? N=57 playtime
6. Naming When (child's name) identifies something (he/she) recognizes, how does (he/she) give it a name? N=67	15. Responding with Amusement What kind of things make (child's name) laugh? N=45 move out to playground	23.Terminating an interaction How does an interaction between you usually end? N= 1	32. Peer Interaction When (child's name) is with other children, how does (he/she) take part? N= 11 group interaction N= 21 one to one interaction
7. Commenting a) Comment on Object If you are putting things away and (child's name) sees something (he/she) is interested in, what type of comment might (he/she) make? N= 4 shouting, fighting, crying	16. Response to 'No' and Negotiation a) If you have to say 'no' to (child's name) how does (he/she) usually respond? N=10 silent students	24.Overhearing Conversation How does (child's name) react to conversations that (he/she) overhears? N=2 overtalking	33. Compliance with Social Conventions To what extent does (child's name) show an awareness of needing to be polite and fitting in with social conventions to do with talking? N=60
8. Giving Information If something happened while you weren't around (for example, something got broken, someone got hurt), how would (child's name) let you know about it? N= 3 over- talking, Talk too much to teacher only		25. Joining a Conversation If (child's name) ever tries to join in a conversation that other people are having, how does (he/she) go about it? N=1	