

Pragmatic Skills in Tamil Speaking Children with Intellectual Disability

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ABSTRACT

Language is a set of arbitrary symbols (mainly conventional) used by a group of people for the purpose of communication. The major components of language are further sub divided into phonology, morphology, semantics, syntax and pragmatics. The study of relationship between language and content is called pragmatics. Some of the pragmatic rules that govern a social interaction include preparing and maintaining conversation, correcting errors, sharing information, opening and closing conversation, changing topics, turn taking, understanding the listener and the context etc. The aim of the study was to assess the pragmatic skills in Tamil speaking Children with Intellectual Disability (CWID). The study was carried out in 30 Tamil speaking children with Intellectual Disability (ID), mental age (MA) 4-6 and 20 typical developing (TD) children of age range 4-6 years. The results revealed that Tamil speaking CWID with MA 4-6 years had poor pragmatic skills compared to TD children with age range 4-6 years. Thus the present study emphasizes the importance of creating awareness largely among parents, Speech Language Pathologist (SLP's), teachers, special educators about pragmatic skills and its purpose on communication and also serves as a baseline for TD children and for assessment, therapeutic intervention of pragmatic skills in Tamil speaking CWID.

Keywords: Intellectual Disability, Pragmatic Skills, Typical Developing, Children With Intellectual Disability.

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I. Introduction :

Communication is the active process of exchanging information and ideas. Communication involves both understanding and expression. Forms of expression may include personalized movements, gestures, objects, vocalizations, verbalizations, signs, pictures, symbols, printed words, and output from augmentative and alternative devices. Language is the main vehicle for communication. Language is a set of arbitrary symbols (mainly conventional) used by a group of people for the purpose of communication. Language essentially has the same function as that of communication. Just like communication which has different modes, the language has different parts such as content (what to say), use (when to say), and form (how to say a word or a sentence) which helps to communicate efficiently. The major components are further sub divided into phonology, morphology, semantics, syntax and pragmatics. The study of relationship between language and content is called pragmatics. It includes particularly conversational exchange, where two or more participants take turns to construct a text (Mc tear, 1985). Communicative intent and means of expressing that intent are the main channels in the study of pragmatics.

Pragmatics is defined as the ability to deal with meaning as communicated by a speaker (or writer) and interpreted by a listener (or reader) and to interpret people's intended meanings, their assumptions, their purposes or goals, and the kinds of actions (e.g., making a request) that they are performing when they speak or write" (Yule, 1996). Pragmatic skills includes politeness/impoliteness, speech acts (greetings, thanks, requests, compliments, apologies, complaints, etc.), conversational style, humour, sarcasm, teasing, cursing, discourse

markers, conversational implicature (i.e., the implied meaning as interpreted by listeners based on the context of an utterance and their knowledge of how conversation works), and deixis (i.e., words and phrases that cannot be fully understood without additional contextual information - e.g., nominal pronouns like “she” and demonstrative pronouns like “this”).

Pragmatic Profiling is an informal interview carried out to explore a child’s communication in everyday interactions. It asks questions about how the child usually reacts in each of a series of situations. (Dewart, 2012).

According to Westby and Cutler (1994), pragmatic communication skills are fundamental for successfully completing academic and non academic tasks (Leonard et al.,2011).Bierman (2004) stated that children who use appropriate pragmatic communication skills usually have successful social interactions with peers, family, and teachers.

Shetty (2016) analysed language and communication in 30 verbal autistic children with 4-5 years mental age(MA)and MA matched typical developing (TD) children and found overall delay in language development in children with verbal autism .The analysis among verbal autistic children showed a different pattern of pragmatic skills usage compared to TD children. The comparable skills were response to labelling and request to objects . Aspects of smiling , gaze exchange and eye contact were expectedly low. More frequent use of response to labelling and joint attention in verbal autistics were obtained which could be due to nature of training in speech language therapy.

The most recent edition of the American Psychiatric Association’s(APA) Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) recommends someone be diagnosed as having an ID if they: 1) have deficits in intellectual functions that can be measured by psychometric tests; 2) have deficits in adaptive functioning that result in a failure to meet developmental and sociocultural standards for personal independence and social responsibility; and 3) if these deficits began during the developmental period of life—i.e. before the age of eighteen (APA, 2013).

One of the major shifts in the early 1980s was a move toward person-first language, reflecting the idea that the disability does not define the person. Terms like individuals with ID have replaced the older terms of mentally retarded (MR) persons . Rosa’s Law, a federal law enacted in 2017, changed all prior references to “mental retardation” in federal law to “Intellectual Disability”. Also, absolute IQ cut-offs no longer define severity; mild, moderate, severe, or profound, ID is now classified by level of adaptive functioning within a range of IQ scores. Adaptive functioning encompasses 3 domains:

- the conceptual domain, which includes language, knowledge, and memory;
- the social domain, which includes empathy, social judgment, and rule-following ability; and
- the practical domain, which includes self-care, organization, and daily living skills.

Regardless of the level of disability, the language and communication domain is the most influenced developmental domain among individuals with ID (Alev, 2011).Because pragmatic competence relies on a complex integration of skills across these domains, pragmatic skills are frequently impacted in ID (Roberts et al., 2008). However, some studies reported that children with intellectual disability (CWID)acquire important pragmatic skills, such as appropriately repeating and revising utterances in response to requests for clarification (Johnston & Stansfield, 1997).

Elliot et al., (2002) suggested that, for mild to severe ID who attend school, pragmatic deficits usually become most noticeable during the transition process in their final years of school, a time when they are preparing for life after school.

Silc, et al., (2017) examined the pragmatic skills of children with 60 mild ID aged 7 to 9, who attend special school were assessed using the storytelling test. The research results revealed that considerable progress of the older group in vocabulary, whereas the progress in grammatical and substantive structure was less substantial. When comparing achievements of children with mild ID according to the vocabulary, grammatical and substantive story structure, no gender differences are determined. A comparison of pragmatic skills of younger and older groups of children with mild ID and TD children showed minor deviation of the younger group.

Gupta et al., (2019) assessed the pragmatic skills in Malayalam speaking 30 CWID within the age range of 8-13 years (MA: 4-5 & 5-6 years) and 20 TD children of age range (4-5 years and 5-6 years) and reported that Malayalam speaking CWID with the MA 4-5 and 5-6 years performed poorly compared to TD children with age range 4-5 and 5-6 years. Pragmatic skills such as smiling, conversational repair, response for request of object/action, eye contact, gaze exchange and request of object/action were poorer in CWID when compared to MA matched TD children in the age range of 4-6 years.

Kumaraswamy et al., (2022) examined the Pragmatic skills in Kannada Speaking 30 TD Children of age range 4-6 years and 30 CWID in the MA of 4-6 years and revealed that the Kannada Speaking CWID had difficulties in using pragmatic skills related to usage of language in the context. Refusal and request for object

and /or action were seen in 172 about 50% of children. Topic change was observed to be difficult for all children in the study. Children appeared to use few pragmatic skills but used them consistently.

1.1 NEED OF THE STUDY

From the above literature, various contributions on pragmatic skills are from western context(Silc et al., 2017) and a few or limited studies about pragmatic skills were carried out in Child Language Disorders(CLD) such as children with verbal autism (Shetty,2016), Malayalam speaking CWID (Abraham et al.,2019), and Kannada speaking CWID(Kumaraswamy et al.,2022) in South Indian population .

Research on pragmatic skills especially in Tamil speaking CWID is limited. The present study is therefore an attempt to assess the pragmatic skills in Tamil speaking CWID and to compare these findings to the communicative behaviours in TD children in order to help in assessment, management and improving the quality of life in Tamil speaking CWID.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Aim and Objective

The study aims at profiling pragmatic skills in Tamil speaking CWID (MA 4-6 years) and to compare the findings with mental age matched TD children for assessment and management purposes.

B. Participants with Inclusive and Exclusive Criteria

Participants included 30 Tamil speaking CWID with the age range of 8-13 years (MA 4 - 6 years) and 20 TD children of age range (4-6years).All the participants had Tamil as their native language. Children who attended special school for a atleast 3-4 years in theMA 4-6 years were chosen. All the children were suggested by teachers who identified the best suited for the study as Tamil speaking CWID. Children with physical handicap and history of any speech and /or language deficits, any reading and /or writing problems, any history /complaint of acquired hearing loss, complaints of cognitive deficits such as poor memory, attention deficits, organizational and /or sequencing issues, any transfer from more than one school, any shift in the medium of instruction and any academic failures were excluded from the study. Consent was obtained from the parents of children before data collection.

C. Stimuli Used

Picture description and general conversation were used to elicit responses from the children.

D. Procedure

The study aimed to obtain an audio & videotaped conversational sample of Tamil speaking TD and CWID group. Thus, obtained sample was transcribed,analysed and profiled to find different parameters used for pragmatic skills such as response for eye contact, smiling , response for gaze exchange , response for joint attention, response for request of object and/or action. response for labelling , answering questions, response for negation , response for turn taking , response for conversational repair , response for topic maintenance , response for comment/ feedback and response for adding information. For the analysis of pragmatic skills, only the presence or absence of a unit of analysis was noted and marked present or absent respectively.

E. Analysis

Conversation sample was recorded from all the children in a well illuminated soundless room in a school environment. The setting was within the familiar environment of the school. The conversation sample collection was based on the study by Subbarao,(1995).The initial 15 minutes comprised of spontaneous speech or free conversation and next 15 minutes elicited responses were obtained. The session audio was recorded using Praat6.2.17 version (Boersma & Weenick,2022)and Ipad(MW792AE/A). The Recorder was placed at a distance of three foot from the setting. Thus,the obtained sample was transcribed andanalysed.

F. Statistical Analysis

The collected sample was transcribed and analysed using the Z testwhich was used to determine the significant differences on cross comparison. The findings are expected to improve linguistic profiling of Tamil-speaking CWID.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The most intensive period of language development in children is between 3-5 years of age, during which TD childrenmaster the basic components of language (Tager-Flusberg& Sullivan, 1998). Around that time, CWID are still at the early stage of learning language and are prone to develop higher risk of some

type of speech and language disorder. It is only recently , research on verbal CWID in Indian population is emerging .

Thus , the present study was an attempt to find out the pragmatic skills in Tamil speaking CWID and compare it with MA matched TD children . The results of the study are discussed below .

* S – Significant , HS – Highly Significant, NS – Non Significant

(n = 50)		TD 4-6 years		CWID MA 4-6 years		p value	Significance
		n	%	n	%		
Eye contact	Present	20	100	18	60	0.000	HS
	Absent	0	0	12	40		
Smile	Present	20	100	20	66.6	0.000	HS
	Absent	0	0	10	33.3		
Gaze exchange	Present	18	90	12	40	0.000	HS
	Absent	2	10	18	60		
Joint attention	Present	16	80	14	46.6	0.009	S
	Absent	4	20	16	53.3		
Request	Present	12	60	7	23.3	0.004	S
	Absent	8	40	23	76.6		
Labelling	Present	19	95	19	63.3	0.004	S
	Absent	1	5	11	36.6		
Answering questions	Present	18	90	19	63.3	0.017	S
	Absent	2	10	11	36.6		
Negation	Present	19	95	23	76.6	0.043	S
	Absent	1	5	7	23.3		
Turn taking	Present	15	75	9	30	0.000	HS
	Absent	5	25	21	70		
Conversational repair	Present	18	90	13	43.3	0.000	HS
	Absent	2	10	17	56.7		
Topic initiation	Present	15	75	15	50	0.039	S
	Absent	5	25	15	50		
Topic maintenance	Present	13	65	7	23.3	0.001	HS
	Absent	7	35	23	76.6		
Comment / feedback	Present	17	85	19	63.3	0.049	S
	Absent	3	15	11	36.6		
Adding information	Present	18	90	18	60	0.010	S
	Absent	2	10	12	40		

Table 1: showing percentage scores of comparison of pragmatic skills between TD children and CWID in 4-6 years .

IV. DISCUSSION:

From the above table it is evident that the Tamil speaking CWID with MA 4-6 years had poor pragmatic skills compared to TD children with age range 4-6 years. There washighly significant differences in responses obtained for eye contact(p=0), smile(p=0), gaze exchange(p=0) ,turn taking(p=0), conversational repair(p=0) and topic maintenance(p=0) whereas significant differences in responses were noted for joint attention(p=0.009) , request(p=0.004), labelling(p=0.004) , answering questions(p=0.017) , negation(p=0.043),

topic initiation($p=0.039$) , comment/ feedback ($p=0.049$) and adding information($p=0.010$) when compared with Tamil speaking CWID and TD children in the study.

The results of the present study reveal that over all TD group have well developed pragmatic skills by 4 to 6 years whereas Tamil speaking CWID group showed less developed skills which is in agreement with the previous studies done in other South Indian languages like Malayalam (Abraham et al.,2019) and Kannada (Kumaraswamy et al.,2022).

As language problems are generally associated with delays in language development. CWID shows delayed functioning on pragmatic skills , such as turn taking, selecting acceptable topics for conversation, knowing when to speak knowing when to be silent, and similar contextual skills. Thus, the results of the present study reveals the characteristics of pragmatic skills of Tamil speaking CWID which can provide insights to Speech Language Pathologists (SLP's), teachers, special educators in considering profiles of individuals that are taken as a basis for designing assessment, intervention programs and serves as a baseline for TD children .

V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Language is foremost a means of communication, and communication almost always takes place within some sort of social context. Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that investigates the ways language is tied to the contexts in which it is used. It encompasses phenomena including implicature, speech acts, relevance and conversation. Language disordered children deviate in pragmatic skills when compared to TD children. To mention , CWID do acquire basic pragmatic skills, although more subtle aspects of conversational competence are less commonly displayed. Thereby , the aim of the current study was to examine the pragmatic skills of 30 Tamil speaking CWID with MA 4-6 years and to compare with 20 MA matched TD children and found that Tamil speaking CWID had poor pragmatic skills compared to TD children. Thus the present study indicates the importance of creating awareness largely among parents, SLP's, teachers, special educators about the contribution of pragmatic skills and its purpose on communication and also serves as a baseline for TD children and for assessment, therapeutic intervention of pragmatic skills in Tamil speaking CWID.

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