==========
Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 25:11 November 2025
==========

Pragmatic Skills in Gujarati Speaking Children with Intellectual Disability

Shiv Shankar Kumar
Ph.D. Scholar
Annamalai University,
Annamalai Nagar – 608002, Tamil Nadu
ss222kumar@gmail.com

Dr R Saranya, Ph.D.
Professor of CAS in Linguistics
Annamalai University,
Annamalai Nagar – 608002, Tamil Nadu
drsaranyaraja@gmail.com

==========

Abstract

Pragmatics is defined as the ability to understand meaning as conveyed by a speaker and interpreted by a listener. It involves recognizing the speaker's intended meaning, assumptions, goals, and the types of communicative actions being performed through speech or writing. Pragmatic skills include aspects such as politeness and impoliteness, speech acts, conversational style, humor, sarcasm, teasing, cursing, discourse markers, conversational implicature and deixis. The aim of the present study was to assess the pragmatic skills in Gujarati Speaking children with intellectual disabilities by comparing with MA matched TD children in the age range of 4-6 years. This study describes the pragmatic skills provided by 4–6-year-old typically developing children based on caregiver child interaction, describing the performance on pragmatic skills by 4–6-year-old mental age children with intellectual disability with what is the comparison of the performance of the two groups

Introduction

Communication is an active process through which information and ideas are exchanged. It includes both understanding and expression. Expression can take many

forms, including movements, gestures, objects, vocalizations, verbalizations, signs, pictures, symbols, printed words, and outputs from augmentative or alternative communication devices. Language serves as the primary medium of communication. It is a system of arbitrary, largely conventional symbols shared by a group of people to facilitate interaction. In essence, language performs the same function as communication. Just as communication operates through various modes, language consists of different components — content, use and form that contribute to effective communication.

The key elements of language are further divided into phonology, morphology, semantics, syntax, and pragmatics. The study of the relationship between language and its contextual use is known as pragmatics. It focuses particularly on conversational exchanges, where two or more individuals take turns constructing a dialogue. Pragmatics primarily explores communicative intent and the methods used to express that intent.

Pragmatics is defined as the ability to understand meaning as conveyed by a speaker and interpreted by a listener. It involves recognizing the speaker's intended meaning, assumptions, goals, and the types of communicative actions being performed through speech or writing. Pragmatic skills include aspects such as politeness and impoliteness, speech acts, conversational style, humor, sarcasm, teasing, cursing, discourse markers, conversational implicature and deixis.

Literature Review

The use and development of pragmatic language in daily life play a crucial role in discussions about the quality of life for individuals with intellectual disabilities. The quality of life framework suggests that services should aim to enhance people's lives across a broad spectrum of domains. These domains encompass emotional well-being, interpersonal relationships, material well-being, personal growth, physical health, self-determination, social inclusion, and rights (Schalock, 1996).

Numerous studies have shown that a lack of essential life skills is a major factor contributing to the challenges faced by individuals with intellectual disabilities in

community settings (Paraschiv & Oiley, 1999). Furthermore, Albert Bandura's social learning theory can serve as a valuable framework for helping children with intellectual disabilities acquire social skills. This theory highlights the importance of learning through observing others and imitating their attitudes, behaviors, and emotional reactions. Bandura also emphasized that social interactions play a crucial role in shaping an individual's cognitive development (Heller, Hsieh, & Rimmer, 2006).

Kapalkova and Monika (2018) conducted a study on receptive language skills in Slovak-speaking children with intellectual disabilities (CWID). Their findings support the idea that receptive language development in CWID follows a similar developmental path to that of typically developing (TD) children. This suggests that language development is a resilient process that remains consistent despite delays associated with intellectual disabilities.

Elliot et al. (2002) noted that for students with mild to severe ID, pragmatic deficits often become more evident during their final school years, a period marked by preparation for post-school transitions.

Silc et al. (2017) investigated the pragmatic abilities of 60 children with mild ID, aged 7 to 9 years, who attended special schools. Using a storytelling assessment, the study found significant vocabulary improvement among the older children, though progress in grammatical and structural aspects of storytelling was less pronounced. The results showed no gender differences in vocabulary, grammar, or story structure. When comparing children with mild ID to typically developing (TD) peers, only slight deviations were observed in the younger group with ID.

Similarly, Gupta et al. (2019) evaluated pragmatic skills among 30 Malayalam-speaking CWID aged 8–13 years (with mental ages of 4–5 and 5–6 years) and compared them with 20 TD children of matching age groups (4–5 and 5–6 years). Their findings indicated that CWID performed significantly worse than TD children, particularly in skills such as smiling, conversational repair, responding to requests, maintaining eye contact, gaze exchange, and initiating requests for objects or actions.

Kumaraswamy et al. (2022) examined pragmatic abilities in 30 Kannada-speaking TD children aged 4–6 years and 30 CWID with equivalent mental ages. The study revealed that CWID had difficulty using language appropriately within different contexts, especially in making refusals and requesting objects.

Shilpashri (2010) investigated the pragmatic skills of children with ASD. The study found that, out of 14 pragmatic skills initiated by caregivers, only a few children with ASD had fully mastered the skill of responding to labeling. The findings indicated that the percentage of responses from children with ASD to caregiver-initiated or self-initiated pragmatic skills did not follow a consistent or linear pattern across different ages when compared to typically developing children.

Swetha and Gupta (2023) evaluated the pragmatic skills of 30 Tamil-speaking children with intellectual disabilities (CWID) aged between 4 and 6 years in mental age (MA). Their findings indicated that Tamil-speaking CWID within this MA range exhibited weaker pragmatic skills compared to typically developing (TD) children matched for mental age.

Kumar, S S and Saranya R (2025) assessed the pragmatic skills in 30 Gujarati speaking children with autism and reported that Gujarati speaking children with autism had poor pragmatic skills when compared to MA matched TD children.

Need For Study

Pragmatics involves studying how the use of language affects and shapes communication. Review of literature showed that children with intellectual disabilities often display differences in pragmatic abilities compared to their typically developing peers. However, research examining pragmatic skills especially among children with intellectual disability is limited or no study in the Gujarati language.

Aims of This Study

The aim of the present study was to assess the pragmatic skills in Gujarati Speaking children with intellectual disabilities by comparing with MA matched TD children in the age

range of 4-6 years. This study describes the pragmatic skills provided by 4–6-year-old typically developing children based on caregiver child interaction, describing the performance on pragmatic skills by 4–6-year-old mental age children with intellectual disability with what is the comparison of the performance of the two groups

Inclusion Criteria

1. Gujarati as a mother tongue
2. Children who were attending special school for at least 2-3 years and with a MA 4-6 years.
3. No history of any delay in Speech, Language, Cognition and neurological abnormality in normal population.

Methodology

The data was collected by using toys, pictures, picture description and general conversation. Sample collection was done with reference to the study done by Subbarao, 1995. All the subjects were engaged in play/ interactive sessions. The 20-30 minutes of interaction was recorded and later transcribed. Transcriptions were subjected to analysis for pragmatics in different areas.

Participants

20 Gujarati speaking children with intellectual disability with the age range of 8-13 years (MA 4-6 years) 20 normal subjects for the reference group with age group range of 4-6 years were part of this study. The subjects were attending Gujarati medium schools in and around Ahmedabad.

Parameters of pragmatics skills namely included 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 initiation,

response for topic maintenance, response for comment/ feedback, response for adding information were based on the study done by Subbarao, 1995.

Results and Discussion

This study attempted to find out the pragmatic skills in Gujarati speaking children with intellectual disability and compare with mental age matched normal children.

Pragmatic particulars		Group-I Normal Children (4-6 yrs)		Group-II CWID MA (4-6 years)		P value	Significance
		n	%	n	%		
Eye Contact	Present	20	100	12	60	0.000	HS
	Absent	00	00	08	40		
Smiling	Present	20	100	20	100	--	--
	Absent	00	00	00	00		
Gaze exchange	Present	17	85	09	45	0.000	HS
	Absent	03	15	11	55		
Joint attention	Present	15	75	04	20	0.000	HS

	Absent	05	25	16	80		
Request	Present	11	55	09	45	0.000	HS
	Absent	09	45	11	55		
Labelling	Present	18	90	11	55	0.004	S
	Absent	02	10	09	45		
Answering Questions	Present	18	90	12	60	0.015	S
	Absent	02	10	08	40		
Negation	Present	18	90	08	40	0.000	HS
	Absent	02	10	12	60		
Turn taking	Present	16	80	07	35	0.000	HS
	Absent	04	20	13	65		
Conversational repair	Present	17	85	08	40	0.000	HS
	Absent	03	15	12	60		
Topic Initiation	Present	14	70	07	35	0.002	S
	Absent	06	30	13	65		
Topic maintenance	Present	12	60	04	20	0.000	HS
	Absent	08	40	16	80		

Comment /Feedback	Present	16	80	06	30	0.002	S
	Absent	04	20	14	70		
Adding Information	Present	18	90	03	15	0.000	HS
	Absent	02	10	17	85		

Table A: Shows percentage scores comparing pragmatic skills between typically developed children and children with intellectual disability, S for Significant, HS for Highly Significant.

The above table results show that subjects with Gujarati speaking CWID with mental age 4-6 years had poor pragmatic skills compared to normal children. The results show that there were highly significant differences in obtained responses for eye contact, gage exchange, joint attention, request, negation, turn taking, conversational repair, topic maintenance and adding information in Gujarati speaking children with intellectual disability when compared to Gujarati speaking children with normal children. Also, significant difference was noted in labelling, answering questing, topic initiation and comments/feedback.

Summary and Conclusion

Language serves as a fundamental pillar of communication, which almost always occurs within a social framework. Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that examines how language use is influenced by context. Children with language disorders often show deviations in pragmatic skills compared to normal children. These differences in pragmatic abilities may also impact the development of other language components. The present study emphasizes the need to increase awareness especially among parents, speech-language pathologists, teachers, and special educators regarding the crucial role of pragmatic skills in fostering effective communication. Furthermore, it offers a valuable reference point for typically developing children and establishes a foundation for

evaluating and implementing therapeutic interventions aimed at enhancing pragmatic skills in Gujarati-speaking children with intellectual disabilities. Current research suggests that therapeutic interventions for children with intellectual disability should prioritize improving pragmatic skills, as this can significantly enhance their overall quality of life.

References

1. Caplan, D. (1992). Language: Structure, processing, and disorders. The MIT Press
2. Diken, O. (2014). Pragmatic language skills of children with developmental disabilities: A descriptive and relational study in Turkey. Eurasian Journal of Educational Research, 55, 109-122. http://dx.doi.org/ 10.14689/ejer.2014.55.7
3. Gupta, A.V., Abraham, S.S., Kumaraswamy, S. (2019) Pragmatic Skills In Children With Intellectual Disability.
4. Hatton,C. (2009) Pragmatic language skills in people with intellectual disabilities: A review Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disability 23(1):79 -100. DOI:10.1080/13668259800033601
5. Kumaraswamy,K.,T,Abhilash.,S,Rakshitha.(2022) Pragmatics in Kannada Speaking Normal Children and Intellectual Disability.International Journal for Research in Applied Science and Engineering Technology.
6. Kapalkova.S.,Monika (2018) Receptive language skills in Slovak- Speaking children with Intellectual Disability. Journal of speech, Language, and Hearing Research
7. Kumar,S.S & Saranya R (2025) Pragmatic Skills in Gujarati Speaking Autistic Children.
8. Memisevic,H.,Hadzic,S. (2013)Speech and Language Disorders in Children with Intellectual Disability in Bosnia and Herzegovina.DOI: 10.5463/DCID.v24i2.214

9. Ricks, D. M., & Wing, L. (1975). Language, communication, and the use of symbols in normal and autistic children. Journal of autism and childhood schizophrenia, 5(3), 191-221.

10. Shetty,R. (2016) Language and communication analysis in children with verbal autism.

11. Silc,M., Schmidt,M., Kosir,S,. (2017)Pragmatic abilities of pupils with mild intellectual disabilities Journal Of Special Education And Rehabilitation; 18(1–2),55–73.

12. Hirschberg, J., & Manning, C. D. (2015). Advances in natural language processing. Science, 349(6245), 261-266.

13. Swetha., Gupta (2023) Pragmatics skills in Tamil speaking children with intellectual disability.

14. Shilpashri, H, N (2010) Development of pragmatic skills in Autism Spectrum Disorder.