

# Pragmatic Skills In Typical Children Speaking Malayalam

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## Abstract

Pragmatic language skills are essential for effective social communication during early childhood and involve the appropriate use of language in different social contexts. The present study examined the development of pragmatic language skills among typical children aged 2–3 years and aimed to establish age-related normative patterns within the local sociocultural context.

A total of 60 typical children speaking Malayalam participated in the study who were further divided into two age groups: 2–2.11 years and 3–3.11 years. Pragmatic skills were assessed using the Test of Pragmatic Skills developed by Thankam J. Mathew (2002). The test examined multiple pragmatic domains, including greeting, stylistic variation, labelling, referential communication, requesting, turn-taking, negation, closing conversation, affirmation, eye gaze, proximity, and repair or revision. Descriptive statistics, chi-square analysis, and independent sample t-tests were used to statistically analysis the data

The results indicated that appropriate verbal and nonverbal responses were higher than inappropriate responses across most pragmatic domains. Strong performance was observed in greeting, labelling, eye gaze, proximity, and turn-taking, whereas comparatively lower performance was noted in more complex skills such as requesting and repair or revision. Age-wise comparison revealed statistically significant differences across all pragmatic domains ( $p < .05$ ), with children aged 3–3.11 years demonstrating higher percentages of appropriate responses than children aged 2–2.11 years. For example, appropriate verbal greeting increased from 33.3% in the younger group to 56.7% in the older group, and labelling increased from 40% to 60%.

Total score comparison further showed that children aged 2–2.11 years obtained a significantly higher mean score ( $M = 29.93$ ,  $SD = 1.91$ ) than children aged 3–3.11 years ( $M = 24.53$ ,  $SD = 2.98$ ), with a statistically significant difference ( $t = -8.36$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Overall, the findings indicate clear age-related development in pragmatic language skills between 2 and 3 years of age. The study provides culturally relevant normative data for Malayalam speaking preschool children and highlights the importance of age related maturation and social interaction in the development of pragmatic competence. These findings may support clinicians in the early identification and assessment of pragmatic language difficulties in young children.

**Keywords:** pragmatic language skills, preschool children, social communication, Kerala, early childhood development

## 1. Introduction

Communication plays a fundamental role in defining humans as social beings and functions as a process of exchanging information between individuals. It involves both verbal and nonverbal components including speech, gestures, facial expressions and prosody which together contribute to the effective transmission of meaning. Language serves as the primary tool for social interaction, relationship building and regulation of communication. The study of language use in context is referred to as pragmatics which focuses on how individuals use language appropriately in different social situations, considering factors such as the listener setting and communicative intent (McTear, 1985).

Pragmatic language skills include a wide range of abilities such as initiating and maintaining conversation, taking turns appropriately, using language for different communicative functions (e.g., requesting, informing, questioning), understanding and using nonverbal cues and repairing communication breakdown. These skills are essential for successful social communication and are closely linked to a child's overall linguistic, cognitive and social development.

Development of pragmatic skill begin early in life through interaction with caregiver and the surrounding environment. According to sociocultural theory language acquisition occurs through social interaction with more knowledgeable individuals who provide support and scaffolding that facilitate the child's communicative development (Vygotsky, 1978). Caregiver child interaction plays a crucial role in shaping early pragmatic abilities by modelling appropriate language use, conversational rules and social norms. Children who are exposed to rich and responsive linguistic environments tend to develop stronger pragmatic competencies (Hoff, 2013).

Early childhood, particularly the ages of 2 to 3 years, represents a crucial stage for the development of pragmatic language skills. During this time, children increasingly use language with intention to communicate their needs, express emotions, and participate in social interactions. By approximately three years of age, most children can initiate and sustain simple conversations, demonstrate turn-taking, and respond appropriately in familiar contexts. They also begin to manage communication breakdowns with support and show emerging ability to modify their language based on the listener and situation (Paul & Norbury, 2012).

Nonverbal behaviours such as eye gaze, gestures, facial expression and body posture play a significant role in pragmatic development alongside verbal communication. These behaviours enable children to convey meaning, interpret social cues and regulate interactions effectively (Owens, 2014). The integration of verbal and nonverbal communication is essential for achieving communicative competence.

Extensive research on pragmatic development has primarily focused on Western populations while only a limited number of studies in the Indian context have examined languages such as Malayalam, Hindi and others. Cultural and linguistic factors significantly influence communication styles, conversational norms, politeness strategy and expectation of social interaction. Consequently normative data derived from

Western contexts may not be directly applicable to Malayalam speaking children. This highlights the need for region specific research to better understand pragmatic language development in this population.

Bates (1976) emphasized that pragmatic competence develops through social interaction and contextual language exposure rather than in isolation. She highlighted the importance of caregiver child interactions in fostering early communicative functions such as requesting, protesting, commenting and responding which form the foundation for later pragmatic development.

Paul and Norbury (2012) stated that preschool children gradually learn to modify their language according to the listener's needs and situational context, resulting in improved pragmatic competence. They further emphasized that pragmatic development during the preschool years significantly influences later academic achievement and social participation

Owens (2014) reported that typically developing preschool children demonstrate increasing mastery of speech acts, conversational rules, politeness strategies, and nonverbal cues, all of which are essential for effective interpersonal communication.

Karant and Prema (2023) focused on the development and validation of pragmatic assessment tools for Indian preschool children and emphasized the need for culturally sensitive evaluation methods. Their findings indicated that sociocultural factors, parental interaction styles, and educational exposure significantly influence pragmatic language development in Indian children.

Sarin, Meena, and Yadav (2025) investigated pragmatic skill development in typically developing preschool children aged 3–4 years in rural Haryana. The authors reported significant age-related improvements in communication functions, interaction skills, and conversational abilities. The study further emphasized the importance of environmental stimulation and social engagement in promoting pragmatic competence.

## **NEED OF THE STUDY**

Pragmatic language skill plays a significant role in the social, emotional and academic development of preschool children. Early childhood particularly between 2 and 3 years of age represents a critical period for the development of conversational abilities communicative intent and appropriate use of verbal and nonverbal behaviours. Accurate identification of typical and atypical pragmatic development requires clearly established normative patterns. However, few studies have explored pragmatic language development in typical children speaking Malayalam. Most available normative data are derived from Western populations and may not be directly applicable due to cultural, linguistic and socio-communicative differences. Variations in conversational norms, parental interaction styles and sociocultural expectations may influence pragmatic development within the Kerala context. Therefore, there is a need to establish age specific normative data for pragmatic language skills in typically developing children aged 2 to 3 years to support culturally appropriate assessment early identification and evidence-based intervention in speech language pathology practice.

## **METHODOLOGY**

**Aim:** The present study aimed to investigate the progression of pragmatic language skills among in typical children who speak Malayalam with specific focus on conversational skills, communicative functions, turn-taking, topic maintenance and the influence of sociocultural factors on early pragmatic development.

## **PARTICIPANTS SELECTION**

A total of 60 typical children in the age range of 2–3 years were participated in the study. The participants were native speakers of Malayalam. The children were divided into two groups based on age: Group A consisted of children aged 2 to 2.11 years, and Group B consisted of children aged 3 to 3.11 years.

**Test used:** The test of pragmatic skills by Thankam J Mathew (2002). This test examines the different aspects of pragmatic skills under the following

aspects

- Greeting
- Stylistic Variation
- Labelling
- Referential communication
- Requesting
- Turn taking
- Negation
- Closing conversation
- Affirmation
- Eye gaze
- Proximity
- Repair/Revision

## **Tasks**

The tasks employed to elicit various aspects of pragmatic language are described below:

**Greeting:** The child is required to recognize, initiate, or appropriately respond to a social greeting or salutation.

## **Speech Acts**

**Labelling:** The child is expected to correctly name an object or action presented by the examiner.

**Requesting:** The child is required to verbally or non-verbally indicate a need or request a specific object or action from the examiner.

**Negation:** The child is expected to appropriately reject or deny in response to a polar (yes/no) question.

**Affirmation:** The child is required to confirm or agree when responding to a polar (yes/no) question.

**Referential Communication:** This refers to the child's ability to select and verbally describe the distinguishing attributes of an object or entity in a manner that enables the listener to accurately identify it.

**Turn Taking:** This is defined as the child's ability to engage in reciprocal interaction by appropriately alternating turns during verbal or non-verbal communication.

**Closing Conversation:** This refers to the child's ability to appropriately terminate or bring a conversation to a meaningful conclusion.

## **Scoring**

Scoring was done using a 4-point scale as follows:

- 3 – Appropriate verbal response based on cultural and situational context
- 2 – Appropriate non-verbal response based on cultural and situational context
- 1 – Inappropriate response
- 0 – No response

## **Statistical analysis:**

The collected data were summarized by using the Descriptive Statistics: frequency, percentage; mean and Standard deviation . The Likelihood ratio / Chi square test were used to compare pragmatic language skills; between the age groups: 2 to 2.11years, and 3 to 3.11years. The Independent sample “t” were used to compare the cumulative scores pragmatic language skills between the age groups. The p value < 0.05 was considered as significant. Data were analysed by using the SPSS software (SPSS Inc.; Chicago, IL) version 29.0.10

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The aim of the present study was to analyse the pragmatic skills of typically developing Malayalam-speaking children aged 2–2.11 years and 3–3.11 years across different communicative contexts, and the results obtained are discussed below.

*Table 1*  
*Comparison of pragmatic language skills between the age groups*

Pragmatic language skills		Groups				Likelihood ratio / Chi square	P value	Significance
		Age: 2 to 2.11years		Age: 3 to 3.11years				
		n	%	n	%			
Greeting	Appropriate verbal response based on cultural and situational context	10	33.3	17	56.7	8.91	0.012	S
	Appropriate non-verbal response based on cultural and situational context	15	50.0	13	43.3			
	Inappropriate response	5	16.7	0	0			
Stylistic variation	Appropriate verbal response based on cultural and situational context	15	50.0	11	36.7	17.46	< 0.001	S
	Appropriate non-verbal response based on cultural and situational context	7	23.3	19	63.3			
	Inappropriate response	8	26.7	0	0			
Labelling	Appropriate verbal response based on	12	40.0	18	60.0	12.48	0.002	S

	<b>cultural and situational context</b>							
	<b>Appropriate non-verbal response based on cultural and situational context</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>33.3</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>40.0</b>			
	<b>Inappropriate response</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>26.7</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>			
<b>Referential communication</b>	<b>Appropriate verbal response based on cultural and situational context</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>30.0</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>46.7</b>	<b>12.01#</b>	<b>0.002</b>	<b>S</b>
	<b>Appropriate non-verbal response based on cultural and situational context</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>36.7</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>53.3</b>			
	<b>Inappropriate response</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>33.3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>			
<b>Requesting</b>	<b>Appropriate verbal response based on cultural and situational context</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>33.3</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>50.0</b>	<b>16.91#</b>	<b>&lt; 0.001</b>	<b>S</b>
	<b>Appropriate non-verbal response based on cultural and situational context</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>23.3</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>50.0</b>			

	<b>Inappropriate response</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>43.3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>			
<b>Turn taking</b>	<b>Appropriate verbal response based on cultural and situational context</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>23.3</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>36.7</b>	<b>13.47#</b>	<b>0.001</b>	<b>S</b>
	<b>Appropriate non-verbal response based on cultural and situational context</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>40.0</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>63.3</b>			
	<b>Inappropriate response</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>36.7</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>			
<b>Negation</b>	<b>Appropriate verbal response based on cultural and situational context</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>43.3</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>40.0</b>	<b>14.19</b>	<b>0.001</b>	<b>S</b>
	<b>Appropriate non-verbal response based on cultural and situational context</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>30.0</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>60.0</b>			
	<b>Inappropriate response</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>26.7</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>			
<b>Closing conversation</b>	<b>Appropriate verbal response based on cultural and situational context</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>36.7</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>56.7</b>	<b>14.17</b>	<b>0.001</b>	<b>S</b>

	Appropriate non-verbal response based on cultural and situational context	10	33.3	13	43.3			
	Inappropriate response	9	30.0	0	0			
Affirmation	Appropriate verbal response based on cultural and situational context	8	26.7	16	53.3	14.03#	0.001	S
	Appropriate non-verbal response based on cultural and situational context	11	36.7	14	46.7			
	Inappropriate response	11	36.7	0	0			
Eye gaze	Appropriate verbal response based on cultural and situational context	16	53.3	14	46.7	11.17	0.004	S
	Appropriate non-verbal response based on cultural and situational context	8	26.7	16	53.3			
	Inappropriate response	6	20.0	0	0			

<b>Proximity</b>	<b>Appropriate verbal response based on cultural and situational context</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>40.0</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>60.0</b>	<b>13.51#</b>	<b>0.001</b>	<b>S</b>
	<b>Appropriate non-verbal response based on cultural and situational context</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>23.3</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>40.0</b>			
	<b>Inappropriate response</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>36.7</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>			
<b>Repair/Revision</b>	<b>Appropriate verbal response based on cultural and situational context</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>23.3</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>50.0</b>	<b>18.41#</b>	<b>&lt; 0.001</b>	<b>S</b>
	<b>Appropriate non verbal response based on cultural and situational context</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>30.0</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>50.0</b>			
	<b>Inappropriate response</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>46.7</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0.0</b>			

*Fig 1*  
*Comparison of pragmatic language skills between the age groups*

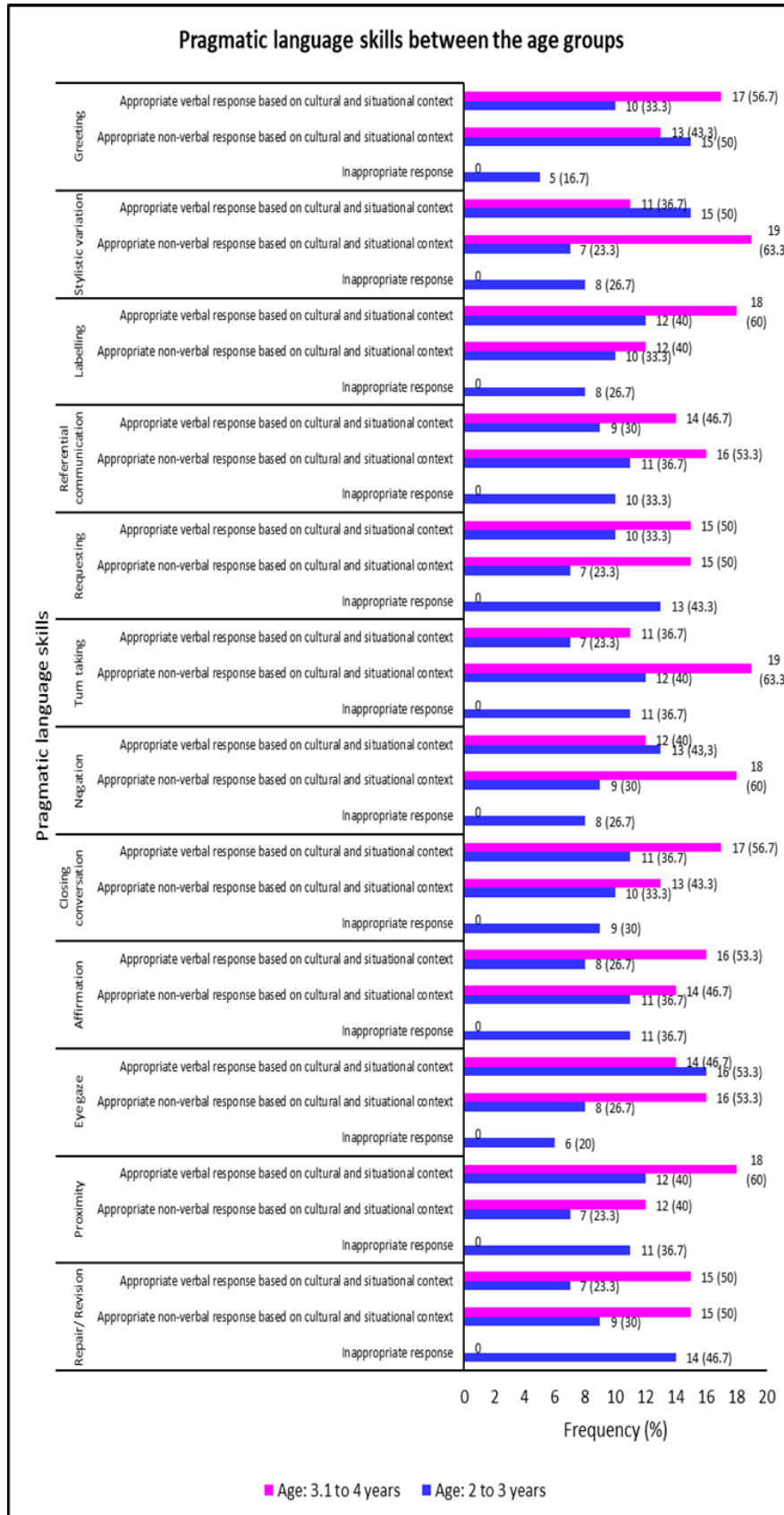


Table 1 and Fig 1 show the Comparison between age groups revealed statistically significant differences across all pragmatic domains. Children aged 3-3.11 years consistently demonstrated higher percentages of appropriate responses compared to children aged 2-2.11 years. For example, appropriate verbal greeting responses increased from 33.3% in the younger group to 56.7% in the older group. Similarly, appropriate verbal labelling increased from 40% to 60%, and appropriate verbal repair increased from 23.3% to 50%. Inappropriate responses were predominantly observed in the 2-2.11-year age group whereas the older group showed minimal to no inappropriate responses. Chi-square analysis revealed statistically significant differences across domains ( $p < .05$ ) indicating that improvements in pragmatic skills were associated with age.

**Table 2**  
*Comparison of pragmatic language skills (Total score) between the age groups*

		Mean	S.D.	Mean difference	"t"	p value	Significance
Pragmatic language skills (Total score)	Age: 2 to 2.11 years	24.53	2.98	-5.40	-8.36	< 0.001	S
	Age: 3 to 3.11 years	29.93	1.91				

**FIGURE 2**

*Comparison of pragmatic language skills (Total score) between the age groups*

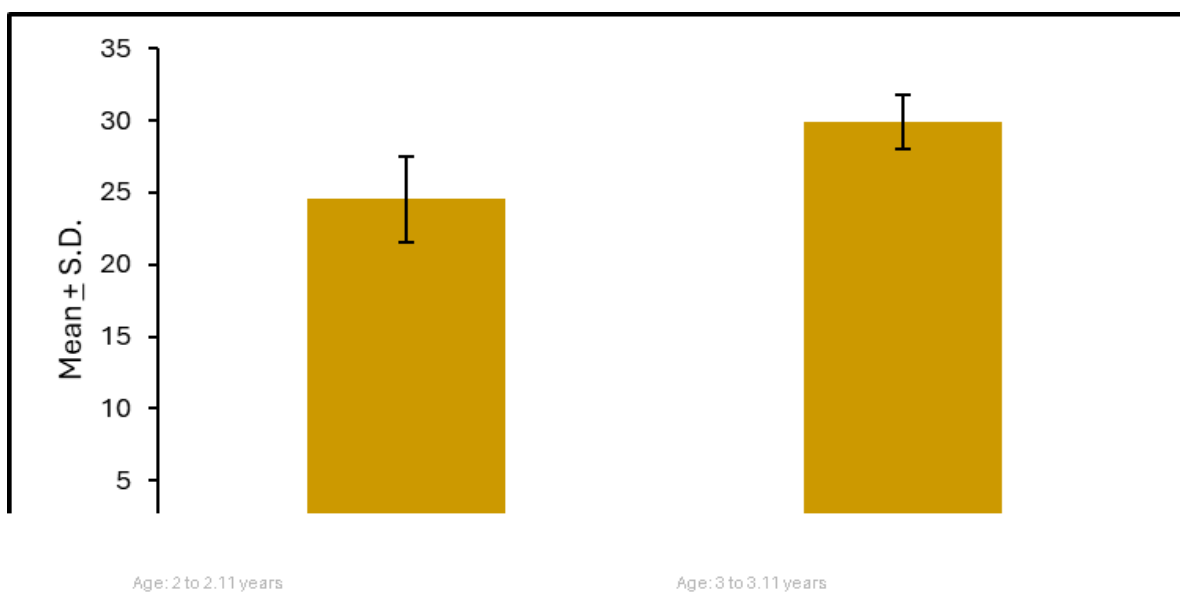


Table 2 and Figure 2 show the total score comparison further supported these findings. Mean pragmatic language score for children aged 2–2.11 years were 24.53 (SD = 2.98) whereas children aged 3–3.11 years obtained a mean score of 29.93 (SD = 1.91). Independent samples t test revealed a statistically significant difference between groups,  $t = -8.36$ ,  $p < .001$ . These findings indicate substantial developmental progression in pragmatic language skills between 2 and 3 years of age.

Overall results of the present study support the view that pragmatic language development progresses significantly during the preschool years with older children demonstrating stronger verbal and nonverbal pragmatic competence compared to younger children.

## DISCUSSION

The present study examined the development of pragmatic language skills in typical children aged 2 to 3 years and established age related normative patterns. The overall findings indicated that appropriate verbal and nonverbal responses were higher than inappropriate responses across most pragmatic domains. Appropriate responses ranged from 30% to 51.7%, whereas inappropriate responses ranged from 8.3% to 23.3%. Strong performance were observed for greeting (45% appropriate verbal; 46.7% appropriate nonverbal; 8.3% inappropriate), labelling (50% appropriate verbal; 36.7% appropriate nonverbal), eye gaze (50% appropriate verbal; 40% appropriate nonverbal; 10% inappropriate), proximity (50% appropriate verbal), and turn-taking (51.7% appropriate nonverbal). Moderate performance was observed in stylistic variation (43.3% appropriate verbal and nonverbal), referential communication (45% appropriate nonverbal), requesting (41.7% appropriate verbal; 21.7% inappropriate), negation (45% appropriate nonverbal), closing conversation (46.7% appropriate verbal), and affirmation (41.7% appropriate nonverbal). However, repair or revision showed comparatively lower appropriate responses (36.7% verbal; 40% nonverbal) and the highest inappropriate responses (23.3%), indicating that more complex pragmatic abilities continue to mature during the preschool years.

The comparison between age groups revealed statistically significant differences across all pragmatic language domains ( $p < .05$ ). Children aged 3–3.11 years consistently demonstrated better pragmatic performance than children aged 2–2.11 years. For example, appropriate verbal greeting increased from 33.3% in the younger group to 56.7% in the older group, labelling increased from 40% to 60%, and repair responses increased from 23.3% to 50%. In contrast, inappropriate responses were mainly observed in the 2–2.11-year age group and were minimal in the 3–3.11 year age group. The total score comparison further supported developmental progression where younger children obtained a mean score of 24.53 (SD = 2.98) and older children obtained a higher mean score of 29.93 (SD = 1.91), showing a statistically significant difference ( $t = -8.36$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These findings indicated a clear developmental improvement in pragmatic language competence with increasing age.

The findings of the present study were consistent with earlier literature. Bates (1976) reported that pragmatic competence develops through social interaction and contextual language exposure, particularly through caregiver child interactions that support early communicative functions such as requesting, responding and commenting. Similarly, Paul and Norbury (2012) stated that preschool children gradually learn to adapt their language according to the listener and situational context, which results in improved pragmatic competence during early childhood.

The developmental pattern observed in the present study was also supported by Owens (2014), who reported that typical preschool children demonstrate increasing mastery of speech acts, conversational rules, politeness strategies and nonverbal communication cues with age. Furthermore, Karanth and Prema (2023) emphasized the importance of culturally sensitive pragmatic assessment tools for Indian preschool children and reported that sociocultural factors, parental interaction styles, and educational exposure significantly influence pragmatic language development.

Overall, the findings of the present study supported previous research and demonstrated that pragmatic language skills develop progressively during the preschool years. The study also provided culturally relevant normative data for Malayalam speaking preschool children in Kerala which may assist clinicians in the clinical assessment and early identification of pragmatic language difficulties in young children.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The Present study was conducted to examine the development of pragmatic language skills in typically developing children aged 2 to 3 years and to establish normative data within the local sociocultural context. Total sample consisted of 60 children equally divided into two age groups: 2 to 2.11 years and 3 to 3.11 years. Pragmatic skills assessed included greeting, stylistic variation, labelling, referential communication, requesting, turn-taking, negation, closing conversation, affirmation, eye gaze, proximity and repair or revision. Descriptive analysis revealed that appropriate verbal and nonverbal responses were generally higher than inappropriate responses across domains. Stronger performance was observed in foundational skills such as greeting, labelling, eye gaze, proximity and turn-taking whereas comparatively lower performance was noted in more complex skills such as requesting and repair or revision.

Age wise comparison demonstrated statistically significant differences across all pragmatic domains ( $p < .05$ ), with children aged 3 to 3.11 years consistently outperforming children aged 2 to 2.11 years. Total score comparison further indicated significant developmental progression, with older children obtaining higher mean scores than younger children ( $p < .001$ ). Findings confirmed that pragmatic language skills improve substantially between 2 and 3 years of age and highlighted the role of age related maturation in social communication development.

## LIMITATION

Sample size was limited to 60 typically developing children, which may restrict generalizability of findings.

Participants were selected from a specific region of Kerala; therefore, results may not represent the entire Malayalam-speaking population.

Study included only children aged 2 to 3 years; developmental patterns beyond this age range were not examined.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Future studies may include larger and more diverse samples across different districts of Kerala to improve generalizability.

Longitudinal research is recommended to examine developmental progression of pragmatic skills over time.

Studies may investigate the impact of sociocultural factors, parental interaction styles and educational exposure on pragmatic development.

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