Enhancing Second-Language Learners' Pragmatic Competence: Underlying the Performance of Speech Acts

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Abstract

This study draws attention to a growing area of interest in second language acquisition research, especially pragmatic ability. It focuses on a subfield of pragmatics known as speech acts and examines the mechanisms that underpin their execution. The researcher used a test as an instrument for data collection. The results of this test reveal that the respondents' answers were semi- native patterns close in comparison to those of the native speakers, who also have varied ones. It has been observed that students resort to their own cultural norms because of their imperfect knowledge of the target culture. In other words, they have little knowledge of what expressions to use in what situations. The students need to know how and when politeness strategies are realized appropriately in L2. The findings mentioned above call for an urgent need to reconsider the teaching of speaking skills at the university. If one of the main objectives of any English program is to make learners effective communicators, it is necessary to build up a syllabus. including pragmatic aspects with the aim of developing learners' pragmatic competence.

Keywords: Pragmatic competence, EFL learners, performance, speech acts

Introduction

Foreign language (FL) learners need to acquire not only verbal proficiency but also strategic aptitude to communicate successfully in difficult circumstances. Because language and culture are interwoven, FL

learners should understand appropriate ways of dealing with situations in a target culture (Hashimoto, 2000). It is suggested that non-native speakers who grew up in circumstances that are distinct from the target culture struggle to make sense of many of the experiences in the new culture because environments may affect how people think. People often want to grasp not just the literal meaning of written or spoken language but also the intended meaning of those words. Because textbooks are written for a global readership, it is challenging to provide concrete recommendations for enhancing pragmatic input in textbooks. Boxer and Pickering (1995) stress the need to base classroom materials on students' natural speech patterns rather than on the sometimes-misleading intuitions of native speakers. Exposing students to real materials in the classroom, such as recordings of native speaker conversations, social media may help them improve their pragmatic competence (Ahmed, 2018). one facets of meaning are not entirely obtained from the definitions of the words used in phrases and sentences. People often attempt to comprehend not just what words imply but also the message that the author or speaker of these words meant to communicate when they read or hear written or spoken language. Given that textbooks are written for a worldwide readership, it might be difficult to provide specific recommendations for enhancing pragmatic input. (Boxer and Pickering, (1995) stress the need to produce instructional materials based on spontaneous speech rather than relying on native speaker instinct, which may be deceptive in some instances. In order to help students, build their pragmatic competence, real-world resources and even recordings of native speaker dialogues, may be included in the classroom curriculum. Thus, the researcher traced whether students majoring in English at Um-Al-Qura University produce some speech acts in a native-like manner and produce pragmatically correct sentences. The study also aims to trace ways of developing the students' pragmatic competence. The researcher would like to verify these hypotheses:

1. Pragmatics differs from grammar in that it is essentially good-directed.
2. Speakers of English as a foreign language often lack the necessary pragmatic competence.
3. There are cross-language differences in the distribution of speech acts.
4. Learners rarely use the word 'please' when offering something or replying to thanks.
5. There may not be enough material for EFL students to acquire the requisite level of pragmatism from textbooks.

To obtain information on how to develop pragmatic competence, an experiment will be carried out involving students who will be given a test to see to what extent they use appropriate language in terms of speech acts. Data analysis will be both qualitatively and quantitatively.

Literature Review

Depending on how linguistics is seen and how pragmatics is positioned within it, the application of pragmatics may be described in a variety of ways. "An abstract characterization will focus emphasis on pragmatics either as a 'component' of linguistics (like phonology, syntax, and semantics) or as a 'perspective' saturating the components and giving them a pragmatic "accent," says Mey (2007: 11). Based on what is mentioned above, pragmatics takes its prominent role from the traditional problems that linguistic research has caused and for which pragmatics provides reasonable solutions.

There are two distinct meanings that the word "pragmatics" is often used in. The term "pragmatics" in linguistic discourse refers to the techniques that language users employ to connect the dictionary and grammatical meaning of utterances to their communicative value in context (Deda, 2013; Alinezhad, 2015; Bardovi-Harlig, 2017). These techniques include the use of common information, assumptions about communicative purpose, etc. In this view, pragmatics pertains to all language usage and deals with information that is not encoded in language (Swan, 1985). The gap between native and non-native speakers may be closed by acquiring pragmatic competence in a foreign language. (Thomas, 1985) is one of the linguists who linked the efficient use of language and comprehension of the linguistic environment to important signs of improving learners' pragmatic ability. EFL students have trouble producing or even understanding speech acts unless they are exposed to the target culture or language. One of the underlying principles of interlanguage pragmatics is that learners rely on L1 social and cultural conventions when performing speech activities in a target language, which often results in intercultural misunderstanding (Thomas, 1985). The likelihood that a certain L1 pragmatic approach will be transmitted in comparison to another linguistic strategy is known as pragmatic transferability (Taguchi, 2019). The learners' opinion of what constitutes a language-specific or universal problem affects the transfer of L1 pragmatic knowledge; if the learners believe a pragmatic trait to be language specific, they will not transfer it to L2. The opposite is also accurate (ibid).

According to Crystal (2003), pragmatics is the study of language from the perspective of users, particularly with regard to the decisions they make, the limitations they face while using language in social interaction, and the impacts their language usage has on other people who are also

involved in the communication process. The study of human interaction in relation to diverse cultures and communities is known as pragmatics. Speech actions (such as apologizing, complaining, praising, and asking), various forms of discourse, and participation in speech events of variable duration and complexity all fall under the umbrella term "communicative action." Pragmatics has two distinct components: grammatical pragmatics and illocutionary pragmatics. The former pertains to the linguistic resources inherent in a language that facilitate the expression of certain illocutionary acts. Sociopragmatics, however, pertains primarily to the field of sociology and encompasses what Leech (1983) has referred to as the social aspect of pragmatics. Sociopragmatics deals with the quality of appropriate linguistic behavior, which depends on a given context or culture. There are numbers of activities that are useful for pragmatic competence development. Certain exercises are specifically created to enhance students' understanding of how language forms are utilized effectively in different contexts (Kasper, 1997).

By engaging in these activities, students gain sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge. Students possess knowledge of the strategies used for issuing apologies in both their primary language (L1) and secondary language (L2). The objective is to familiarize learners with the field of language pragmatics, including both first language (L1) and second language (L2), and equip them with the necessary analytical abilities to independently determine how to effectively use language within certain contexts (Mazulfah, 2019; Ahmed, 2020; Barron, 2020). Teachers of foreign languages at the time, like teachers of foreign languages today, were frustrated by their students' lack of ability to apply what they had learned about linguistic structures in meaningful contexts, and the idea that they could remedy this by imparting a skill set known as "communicative competence" was appealing (Swan, 1985). The framework provided an interesting counterpoint to Chomskyan linguistics' focus on a more formalized kind of language proficiency. The statement made by Hymes (1971: 278) on the existence of "rules of use" that are essential for the meaningful application of grammar, gained significant attention and became a rallying point for applied linguists during that era. Two types of meaning should be taught, yet this notion is so well-known that it is easy to see how this may be problematic. It is well known that an utterance's precise meaning in communication may vary from the apparent meanings of the words and grammatical structures used. While urging instructors to address both "meaning and use" in grammar, Larsen-Freeman (2003) acknowledges that for certain structures, it might be difficult to distinguish between the two. Different speaking communities have different expectations for polite behavior. Different linguistic communities stress various purposes and express certain functions in various ways. For instance, how to welcome individuals in other linguistic groups, show thanks

for a meal in a foreign culture, and decline an offer. There are several classification schemes for speech functions, according to Holmes (2008). The following is a summary of them:

1. I'm feeling fantastic today, for example, are expressive statements that convey the speaker's sentiments.
2. Directive statements make an effort to persuade a listener to do an action, like "Clear the table."
3. Referential expressions provide knowledge, for example, "At third stroke, it will be precisely four o'clock."
4. Metalinguistic expressions provide comments on language, for example, "Hegemony" is not a frequent term.
5. Poetic expressions, such as poems, rhymes, and Peter Piper's choice of pickled peppers, emphasize the aesthetic aspects of language.
6. Phatic speech expresses unity and empathy with others, as in "Hello, how are you, isn't today a great day?"

In conclusion, the pragmatic method of analyzing language stresses the importance of context when determining meaning. Politeness, friendliness, and impoliteness are all relative terms that are actively negated by individuals within certain social and cultural settings. It's possible for people to arrive at diverse conclusions from a shared encounter.

Methods

The population of this research is composed of students majoring in English from Umm Al-Qura University. This population consists of a considerable number of students at the Department of English Language, College of Social Sciences. The process of sample selection involves choosing individuals from the whole population of students who are representative of the population within the department. The population and sample size of the study are presented as follows:

Table (4.1): The Population and the Sample Size

Subject	Numbers	Population	Sample size
Students (Males)	196	594	150
Students (Females)	398		

The statistical data mentioned above was taken from the Department of English at Umm Al-Qura University, KSA, in November 2025.
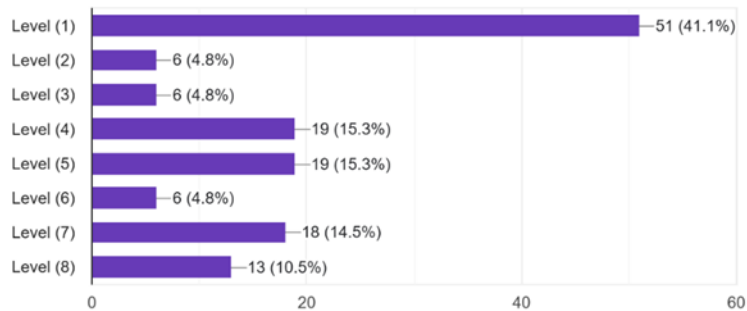
The researcher used a test as a suitable instrument through which the appropriate data for this research was collected. This test was given to students majoring in English in order to find out whether they produced requests in a native-like manner.

Results
Level Percentage

Part (I): Personal Information Level
124 responses

Based on the information presented on the chart above, (124) participants were classified into eight levels, and their frequency and percentage distribution are shown in the horizontal bar chart.

(4.2) Levels Frequency

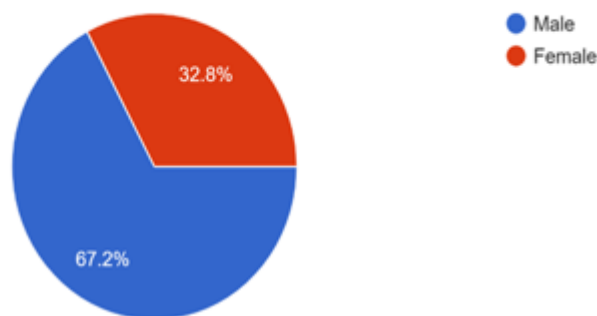| Level	Frequency (Number of Participants)	Percentage %
Level (1)	51	41.1 %
Level (2)	6	4.8 %
Level (3)	6	4.8 %
Level (4)	19	15.3 %
Level (5)	19	15.3 %
Level (6)	6	4.8 %
Level (7)	18	14.5 %
Level (8)	13	10.5 %
Total	**124**	**100 %**

1. It seems that level 1 has the largest group with 51 participants, representing 41.1 % of the total sample. This indicates that a large portion of respondents belong to the beginning or first level. Levels 4, 5, and 7 show moderate participation, each ranging from 14.5 % to 15.3 %. These three levels together represent approximately 45 % of the total sample, suggesting a balanced middle group. Levels 2, 3, and 6 each have only 6 participants (4.8 %). This means that higher or intermediate levels are under-represented compared to the beginner and mid-range groups. Combined, Levels 2, 3, and 6 account for only 14.4 % of total responses, showing a noticeable decline at those stages.

2. The data are not evenly distributed- the chart shows a clear concentration at Level 1, followed by a secondary cluster at mid-levels (4–7). Mode (most frequent category): Level 1 (41.1 %). Median level: Between Levels 4 and 5 (since cumulative frequency up to L4 = 82, midpoint around 62 → median ≈ Level 4/5 region). Range: 1–8 (all possible levels represented). Skewness (qualitative): Strong positive (right) skew toward lower levels, meaning most participants fall into early levels.

3. In brief, out of 124 participants, 41.1 % were in Level 1, making it the largest group. Levels 4 and 5 each represented 15.3 %, while Level 7 accounted for 14.5 %. Levels 2, 3, and 6 had the fewest participants (4.8 % each), and Level 8 included 10.5 %. The distribution shows a strong concentration at the lower levels and a gradual decrease toward higher ones, indicating an unbalanced but expected participation pattern across levels.

(4.3) Gender

Gender
134 responses

Gender	Frequency (No. of participants)	Percentage (%)
Male	90	67.2 %
Female	44	32.8 %
Total	**134**	**100 %**

1. Based on this pie chart, 67.2 % of the respondents are male. This means roughly two out of every three participants are male. In real numbers, there are about 46 more males than females (90 males − 44 females). 32.8 % of the sample are female. This indicates that slightly less than one-third of the sample identifies as female. There is a significant imbalance in gender representation. The male proportion (67.2%) is more than double the female proportion (32.8%). This should be considered if gender might influence

outcomes (e.g., attitudes, performance, or responses), since male views may dominate the overall results.

2. The pie chart visually emphasizes that the larger blue segment (Male, 67.2%) occupying about two-thirds of the circle. The smaller red segment (Female, 32.8%) occupying about one-third. This visual contrast reinforces the numerical imbalance in gender participation.

3. In summary, out of 134 participants, 90 were male (67.2 %) and 44 were female (32.8 %). The sample therefore shows a predominance of male respondents, with males being roughly twice as many females. This imbalance should be considered in interpreting findings, as gender representation could influence the generalizability of the results.

The researcher used qualitative analysis for the collected data. Thus, since the data are written, open-ended answers to situational speaking tasks, the analysis combines quantitative summaries, linguistic observations, and interpretation of communicative competence.

(4.4) Overview of the Dataset

Type of data	Open-ended written responses to practical communication situations (functional speaking tasks).
Number of items	20 situational questions.
Respondents per item	Between 125 – 136 participants (undergraduate students of English).
Focus	Use of appropriate English expressions in social, academic, or professional contexts.

(4.5) Quantitative and Content Analysis by Questionnaire Item

Item	Situational Task	Number of Responses	Common Structures / Key Phrases	Evaluation of Appropriacy	Overall Competence (%)
1	Introduce your cousin to your teacher	135	"This is my cousin..." / "Hello teacher..." / "I'd like to introduce you..."	High appropriacy; simple sentence forms dominate.	90% appropriate
2	Ask your roommate to help move a heavy table	136	"Can you help me move this table?" / "Could you help me…?" / "Would you mind…?"	Very good use of polite request forms (can, could, would).	92% appropriate
3	Speak to a receptionist about an appointment with a manager	136	"Hello, I have an appointment with the manager."	Correct formal register with polite greeting.	88% appropriate

4	Ask teacher to repeat something	136	"Could you please repeat that?" / "Sorry, I didn't catch that."	Excellent use of politeness markers, good awareness of classroom interaction.	95%
5	Order main course and drink	135	"Can I have…?" / "What do you recommend?"	Functional language used appropriately; some errors in spelling and plural forms.	85%
6	Suggest going somewhere on day off	136	"How about we go to…?" / "Let's go…"	High variety of correct suggestion forms; informal tone suitable.	90%
7	Ask directions to cafeteria	136	"Excuse me, where is the cafeteria?" / "Could you tell me how to get to…?"	Clear, grammatically correct, polite structures.	95%
8	Expression when not understanding directions	136	"Sorry, I didn't understand." / "Could you say that again?"	High recognition of repair strategies and clarification requests.	93%
9	Congratulate officemate on promotion	134	"Congratulations on your promotion!"	Correct preposition "on"; expressions sincere and context-appropriate.	98%
10	End a long phone conversation politely	134	"I have to go now, talk to you later." / "Sorry, I'm busy."	Effective polite closings; pragmatic awareness strong.	90%
11	Express excitement (teacher omitted chapters)	132	"Really? That's great news!" / "No way! That's amazing!"	Emotionally suitable responses; natural exclamations.	95%
12	Advise brother on money management	130	"You should save your money." / "Make a budget." / "Don't waste money."	Good command of modal should for advice; vocabulary accurate.	92%
13	Refuse invitation to a film politely	130	"Sorry, I can't go. I don't understand the language."	Most responses tactful; a few too direct; good use of excuses.	88%
14	Ask classmate to return library books	129	"Could you please return my library books for me?"	Polite requests, proper modals; some spelling issues.	90%

15	Interrupting a meeting professionally	126	"Excuse me for interrupting, but the boss is on the phone."	Very strong pragmatic control; natural business English tone.	94%
16	Apologize for stepping on someone's foot	128	"I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to step on your foot."	Thorough understanding of apology forms.	96%
17	Express frustration with noisy neighbor's dog	126	"I'm really frustrated; I've told you many times…" / "If you don't solve this, I'll call the police."	Accurate expression of frustration; tone sometimes too harsh.	80%
18	Apologize for forgetting a meeting again	125	"I'm really sorry. I completely forgot again."	Natural apology forms; shows understanding of responsibility.	93%
19	Respond to opinion about TV being a waste of time	127	"I see your point, but…" / "I respect your opinion, but…"	Excellent use of disagreement politely; strong pragmatic awareness.	94%
20	Respond to compliment about English improvement	127	"Thank you." / "Thank you, that means a lot."	Native-like closure and gratitude expressions.	100%

Qualitative Linguistic Analysis

1. Grammar and Syntax Accuracy

- Generally strong control of basic sentence structure (SVO order, correct modals, prepositions).
- Most frequent minor errors:
a) Spelling (e.g., "manger" for *manager*).
b) Missing auxiliary verbs ("Can help me…").
c) Capitalization and punctuation inconsistencies.

2. Pragmatic Competence

- Respondents consistently demonstrate awareness of social context, politeness conventions, and tone adjustment.
- Polite forms (Excuse me, please, could you, I'm sorry) dominate the dataset, showing mature communicative awareness.
- Contexts involving frustration or refusal show more variation—some informal or aggressive phrasing noted (e.g., "get rid of your dog"), indicating a need for refinement in tone.

3. Lexical Range

- Vocabulary is largely functional.
- Frequent repetition of core verbs (help, go, come, return, show).
- Occasional incorporation of sophisticated vocabulary ("appointment," "promotion," "responsibility").
- Need for expansion of adjectives and connectors (because, however, although) to enrich expression.

4. Politeness and Sociolinguistic Awareness

- High use of softeners and modal verbs in requests and apologies.
- Recognition of contextual appropriateness:
- Formal situations → formal greetings and modals.
- Informal settings → casual tone (Hey, wanna go…).
- Indicates understanding of code-switching between formal and informal English.

(4.6) Aggregate Statistics Across the Questionnaire

Aspect Evaluated	Mean Performance (%)	Interpretation
Grammar and sentence accuracy	85 %	Mostly correct, few structural issues
Vocabulary diversity	78 %	Functional but basic; needs enrichment
Pragmatic appropriateness	91 %	Proper tone and politeness strategies
Task relevance / Context fit	94 %	Clear understanding of social roles
Overall communicative competence	≈ 90 %	Upper-Intermediate functional proficiency

Discussion

1. Students possess strong practical communication skills in English. The majority can produce context-appropriate, grammatically sound responses to common daily, academic, and professional interactions.
2. Politeness and formality are well mastered. Particularly in classroom and professional contexts (Items 3–4 & 15).
3. Emotion expression and empathy are apparent. In apology, congratulation, and gratitude responses, participants showed natural emotional engagement (*That's great news!*, *I'm so sorry!*).
4. As the results of the male's and female's responses indicate, the majority of the learners are aware of how some functions are performed in the target culture, as in items (1), (9), (11), (12), (14),

(15), (16), and (20), which test the speech act of making different functions.

5. Weaknesses and Common Errors
- Spelling and Capitalization:
  Frequent errors such as *manger → manager*, *Im → I'm*.
- Missing Auxiliary Verbs or Articles:
  e.g., *Can help me…*, *Excuse me, where cafeteria?*.
- Limited Vocabulary:
  Heavy reliance on core verbs (*help, go, come, take, make*).
- Tone in Emotional Situations:
  Some expressions in frustration or refusal contexts were too direct or impolite (e.g., *"Get rid of your dog"*). Politeness strategies could be reinforced.
- Sentence Complexity:
  Most utterances are short and simple clauses. Students rarely used connectors (*because, although, if*), which limits fluency and cohesion.

6. Areas for improvement:
- Avoid overuse of repetitive formulas (*Can you help me...*) by introducing variety (*Would you mind helping me...?*, *Could I ask you to...?*).
- Correct minor spelling and preposition errors.
- Balance emotional expression with polite tone in stressful situations Items 17 and 13).

Hypotheses Testing

1. **The first hypothesis:** 'Pragmatics differs from grammar in that it is essentially good-directed'. Some items in the questionnaire are directed toward using specific forms in order to respond correctly. In item (8), saying "you don't understand if you don't understand your partner's direction", one can use:
- I don't understand, I' m confused.
- I don't get it.
- I didn't catch that.
- I'm not following you.

Also, in item (10) one can use the following expressions to indicate that (s)he wants to end the conversation:
- It was nice talking to you.
- I'll talk to you soon.
- Thanks for calling.

Based on these items and others, this hypothesis could be accepted, and pragmatics differs from grammar, in that it is essentially good-directed.

2. **The second hypothesis:** 'Learners of English as a foreign language often lack enough 'pragmatic competence.' Requests are discussed as a kind of communication in literature review. They are some kinds of speech acts that cause problems for students since they are of different types and involve the use of various requesting strategies, largely depending on the context. Ordering a main course is such a speech act that has been tested in item (5). The responses obtained demonstrates the validity of the proposed hypothesis.

3. **The third hypothesis:** 'There are cross-language differences in the distribution of speech acts'. As for the deficiencies in the respondents' responses, they were due to different reasons. First, they have resorted to their own cultural norms because of a lack of knowledge of those of the target culture. This is the case chiefly when behaviors are not similar across the two cultures. It has been noted that students mostly revert to their native language when uncertain about how to say something. However, in certain cases, students' deviations were the result of their lack of proficiency in the target language.

4. **The fourth hypothesis:** 'Learners rarely use the word "please" when offering something'. This hypothesis is related to the previous one. It probably results from such behaviors, which are not similar across the two cultures.

5. **The fifth hypothesis:** There may not be enough material in textbooks for EFL students to acquire the requisite level of pragmatism. It is worth mentioning that the majority of the questionnaire items are found in secondary textbooks as well as in the syllabus of the first-year spoken English course. The respondents got high scores in several. These results and others indicate the acceptance of this hypothesis.

Pedagogical implication:

Instruction should focus on expanding students' lexical repertoire, developing cohesion in longer utterances, and practicing nuanced emotional language in formal communication. In brief:

- Practice polite refusals, disagreements, and expressions of frustration in balanced tone.
- Incorporate synonyms and functional vocabulary beyond core verbs.
- Peer review for capitalization, punctuation, and auxiliary consistency.
- Encourage students to use linking words (*however, by the way, actually*) to attain conversational fluency.
- Use role-plays and oral scenarios to transfer written competence into spoken accuracy.

Conclusions

The analysis of 20 questionnaire items with over 2,600 responses reveals that students demonstrate a high level of situational and pragmatic competence in English functional communication. They effectively use appropriate forms for apology, request, suggestion, refusal, and gratitude. The responses reflect upper-beginner to intermediate (A2–B1) proficiency, with over 90 % of answers communicatively acceptable. The observation that linguistic politeness most often passes unnoticed has led researchers to think of politeness as a normative underlying behavior that is adequate in context (Barron, 2020; Mohammad & Ahmed, 2021; Abdullah, 2022). This study set out to explore whether the students of English Language Department produce and respond to various types of speech functions such as expressions of gratitude, responses to compliments, greetings and partings, apologies, and complaints in a native-like manner. It has also been noted that the respondents' answers were very limited in comparison to those of the native speakers, who have varied patterns. Students of the language need to know that native speakers of the language employ different terms to achieve the same goal in different contexts. (Taguchi, 2019; Cresti, 2020; Morady Moghaddam & Mirfendereski, 2020).

The majority of grammars have been structure-oriented; they describe the appearance and (occasionally) the meaning of grammatical structures in isolation. They have not explained how people really use these forms and meanings in conversation and writing. (Bardovi-Harlig, 2017). Language in use has been taught in some form or another from the very beginning of language study (see, for example, Howatt & Widdowson, 2004). Four studies (House, 1996; Rose & Kasper, 2001); Billmyer, 1990; House, 1996) found that learners' pragmatic abilities improved with communicative practice. Therefore, classroom role-playing exercises should be expanded. Role-

playing activities sometimes call for spontaneous conversation, but they don't necessarily show how students put their pragmatic knowledge to use.

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