

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

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[Doi:10.19044/esj.2026.v22n5p43](https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2026.v22n5p43)

Submitted: 17 January 2026
Accepted: 09 February 2026
Published: 28 February 2026

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Cite As:

Nadhreen, B. (2026). *Enhancing Second-Language Learners' Pragmatic Competence: Underlying the Performance of Speech Acts*. *European Scientific Journal, ESJ*, 22 (5), 43. <https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2026.v22n5p43>

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 20 situational prompts targeting routine pragmatic functions (e.g., requests, apologies, refusals, advice, disagreement, and responses to compliments) as an instrument for data collection. The results of answering these twenty prompts reveal that the respondents' answers (English majors (90 male, 44 female) who yielded over 2,600 written responses) were semi-native patterns close in comparison to those of the native speakers, who also have varied ones. Quantitative results indicate a generally high level of pragmatic performance, and qualitative analysis shows that learners reliably employed politeness markers and modal. Overall appropriacy across tasks was approximately 90%, with mean scores of 91% for pragmatic appropriateness, 85% for grammatical/sentence accuracy, and 78% for vocabulary diversity. 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; speech acts; politeness; discourse completion test

Introduction

One constant constraint in EFL contexts is that textbooks are frequently designed for global audiences. It may not provide practical input for specific cultural contexts to global audiences. Boxer and Pickering (1995) stress that instructional materials should reflect authentic communicative patterns rather than relying on native-speaker intuition, which can be incomplete or misleading. Classroom exposure to authentic materials (e.g., recordings of interactions or carefully selected media) can support learners' development of pragmatic competence (Ahmed, 2018).

Because language and culture are interwoven, EFL learners often face difficulty selecting suitable expressions for particular situations, roles, and degrees of formality (Hashimoto, 2000). It is said 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, one persistent challenge in EFL contexts is that textbooks are frequently designed for global audiences and may provide limited pragmatic input for a specific cultural context. 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. Classroom exposure to authentic materials (e.g., recordings of interactions or carefully selected media) can support learners' development of pragmatic competence (Ahmed, 2018). This study examines whether English majors at Umm Al-Qura University can produce pragmatically appropriate speech-act responses in a range of everyday, academic, and professional scenarios, and it identifies areas requiring instructional support.

The researcher would like to verify these hypotheses:

1. Pragmatics differs from grammar in that it is essentially goal-directed.
2. EFL learners often lack sufficient pragmatic competence.
3. There are cross-language differences in the distribution/ realization of speech acts.
4. Learners rarely use the word 'please' when offering something or replying to thanks.
5. Textbooks may not provide enough material for EFL learners to acquire adequate pragmatic competence.

2. Literture Review

Interlanguage pragmatics highlights that learners frequently rely on L1 sociocultural conventions when delivering speech in L2, and this can result in pragmatic transfer, where learners apply L1 standards to L2 situations (Taguchi, 2019). The ability to transfer pragmatic concepts to other languages is influenced by learners' perception of whether a pragmatic feature is language-specific or universal.

The concept of pragmatics has been interpreted as both a component of linguistic theory and a perspective that permeates various aspects of language (Mey, 2007). Pragmatic competence in applied linguistics is defined as the ways in which language users connect grammatical meaning to communicative value in context (Deda, 2013; Alinezhad, 2015; Bardovi-Harlig, 2017). This skill can help bridge the gap between native and non-native speakers, which can prevent misunderstandings caused by different sociocultural norms (Thomas, 1985).

According to Crystal (2003), pragmatics is the field that examines language from the user's point of view, emphasizing their choices, contextual constraints, and how language influences others. This corresponds to the differences between pragmalinguistics (language forms that accomplish tasks) and sociopragmatics (social evaluations of appropriateness) (Leech, 1983).

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).

Different linguistic communities emphasize different purposes and express certain functions in different ways. For instance, how to welcome individuals in other linguistic groups, show thanks for a meal in a foreign culture, and decline an offer (Iman et al., 2025).

The pragmatic approach to analyzing language emphasizes the significance of context when determining meaning. Politeness, friendliness, and impoliteness are all relative terms that are actively denied by individuals in certain social and cultural settings. Individuals can draw different conclusions from a shared experience.

3. Methods

3.1 Design

This study employed a descriptive mixed-method design combining:

1. Quantitative summaries (frequencies and approximated appropriacy rates by item and dimension), and
2. Qualitative content analysis (patterns of pragmalinguistic choices, politeness strategies, and notable deviations).

3.2 Participants, Setting, and Ethical Considerations

Participants were students majoring in the English language at Umm Al-Qura University. Overall of 134 students took part in the analytic process, including 90 males and 44 females. The participants were chosen by convenience sampling among students enrolled in the relevant course, and their test scripts were obtained from the official course evaluation (they were not recruited as independent volunteers). In an exam-style setting, the task was carried out by participants in accordance with the course assessment context's time delimitation.

Note: Institutional statistics on the broader department population were used for background description; however, the final sample analyzed in this study comprised students who completed the pragmatic test with usable responses (N = 134).

It is worth noting that the study was approved by the Biomedical Research Ethics Committee at Umm AlQura University (*reference approval # HAPO-02-K-012-2025-12-3043*). The committee approved the request after a thorough review of the research procedures and data collection instruments, and after ensuring the protection of participants' rights and well-being (voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and potential for harm).

3.3 Instrument: Situational Pragmatic Test (DCT)

A written DCT containing 20 situational prompts was used. Students wrote what they would say in a social, academic, or professional context, which was described in each prompt.

Outcome criteria (appropriacy): Responses were evaluated based on:

1. Sociopragmatic fit (role relationship, power/distance, level of formality)
2. Pragmalinguistic appropriateness (use of conventional forms/strategies)
3. The degree of grammar acceptability is dependent on sentence-level accuracy for meaning.
4. Lexical adequacy/diversity is related to the range and suitability of vocabulary.

3.4 Data Selection and Handling

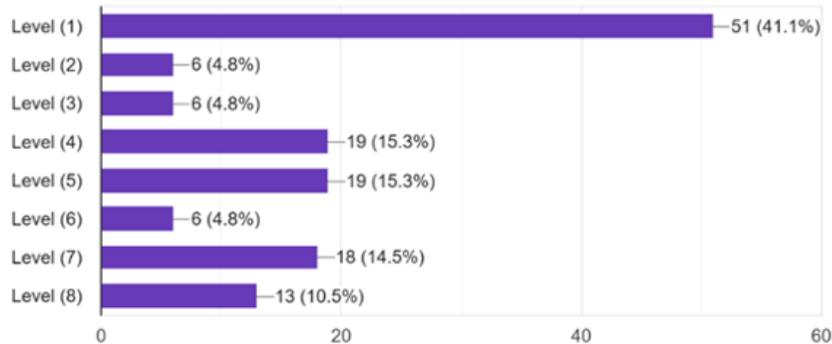
- Responses were included if they were legible and clearly addressed the scenario.
- Missing/blank responses were excluded item-by-item, which explains minor variation in responses per item (approximately 125–136).

4. Results

4.1 Participant Levels

Part (I): Personal Information Level

124 responses



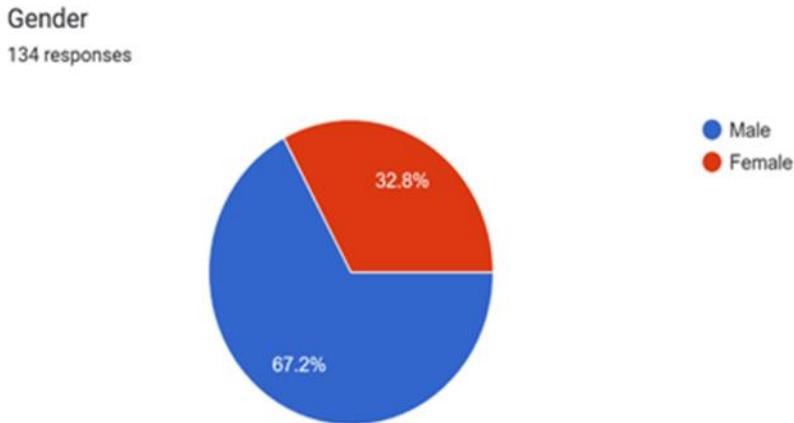
Based on the information presented on the chart above, (124) participants were classified into eight levels, and their frequency and percentage distribution are shown in the horizontal bar chart.

(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 %

Eight proficiency levels (as recorded in the dataset) were used to categorize 124 participants. Level 1 represented the largest group (41.1%). (Level distribution table retained as in the dataset.)

4.2 Gender Distribution



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

The analyzed sample involved **90 males (67.2%)** and **44 females (32.8%)**, indicating a male predominant part.

4.3 Item-Level Performance Summary

Across 20 items, most scenarios showed high appropriacy (often 88–100%). Requests, apologies, and polite closings were particularly effective, but lower performance was observed in emotionally charged contexts like frustration (Item 17) and some refusals (Item 13), which suggests a higher variation in tone management.

4.4 Aggregate Performance (Across the Questionnaire)

Aspect	Mean Performance	Interpretation
Grammar and sentence accuracy	85%	Mostly correct; minor structural issues
Vocabulary diversity	78%	Functional but basic; needs enrichment
Pragmatic appropriateness	91%	Strong politeness and context awareness
Task relevance/context fit	94%	Clear understanding of roles and context
Overall communicative competence	≈ 90%	Upper-intermediate functional performance

5. Qualitative Analysis (Key Patterns)

5.1 Grammar and Form Issues

The majority of replies adhered to acceptable sentence structure with appropriate modals and polite formulas. Spelling errors (“manger” for manager), omissions (“Can help me...”), and punctuation/capitalization inconsistencies were the main mistakes.

5.2 Pragmatic Strengths

Learners showed consistent ability to:

- Pick request forms that are politely worded ('Could you please, please?')
- Utilize repair strategies ('Sorry, I didn't catch that. Could you repeat it?').

5.3 Pragmatic Vulnerability in Emotional Contexts

In situations where frustration or refusal arise, certain responses can become excessively direct, like threats or blunt commands. This suggests a need for instruction in mitigation, softening strategies, and graded politeness under emotional pressure.

5.4 Lexical Range

The responses were functional, but they were heavily reliant on a few commonly used verbs (such as "help", "go", "come", and "return"). Also, learners used fewer connectors (such as "although", "however", and "assume"), which led to a decrease in complexity and cohesion.

Discussion

In general, the results reflect distinctive situational pragmatic competence in written responses, especially for normal speech acts such as requests, apologies, thanks, and professional disruptions. This clarifies the point that learners can develop pragmatic knowledge through exposure and instruction, even in an EFL context (House, 1996; Rose & Kasper, 2001).

The findings also show a divergence between pragmatic targets and linguistic diversity. In brief, students commonly selected suitable strategies; their lexical variety and syntactic complexity were limited- an outcome consistent with EFL contexts where a stereotyped manner is learned earlier than variable pragmatic variation.

Revisiting the Hypotheses

- H1 (goal-directed pragmatics vs grammar): Supported conceptually by the way correct performance depends on context-sensitive choices rather than only grammaticality.

- H2 (EFL learners lack pragmatic competence): Partially supported. Learners performed strongly overall, but weaker tone control in frustration/refusal indicates incomplete pragmatic mastery.
- H3 (cross-language differences): Plausible and consistent with observed directness in some items; however, the study did not include a comparative L1 dataset, so this claim is interpretive rather than directly tested.
- H4 (rarely using “please”): Not supported strongly here; many request items showed frequent use of politeness markers, including *please*.
- H5 (insufficient textbook material): Partially supported. Learners performed well on routine school-like prompts, but limited variation and emotional mitigation suggest that richer pragmatic input is still needed.

Pedagogical Implications

The objective of instruction should be transformable and applicable, which develops students from "polite and correct" to "polite, flexible, and context-sensitive." Suggested processes:

1. Use adaptable techniques (downtoners, softeners, indirectness) for complaints, rejections, and discontents.
2. Build up lexical-functional repertoires, such as synonyms, markers, and polite domains.
3. Work on lengthier answers that use reason connectors (because, thus, although) and connections.
4. To translate textual pragmatic skills into spoken conversation, use role-plays and oral simulations.

Conclusions

This study examined Saudi EFL learners' pragmatic performance using a 20-item situational test with over 2,600 written responses. Results reveal high pragmatic relevant use with overall ($\approx 90\%$), mainly in requests, apologies, gratitude, and professional interaction direction. At the same time, learners displayed limited lexical variety and occasional over-directness in subjectively demanded contexts (frustration/refusal), pointing out the need for instruction in declined strategies and richer pragmatic input.

Limitations

1. The study is based on written DCT responses, which may not completely stand for real-time spoken interaction.
2. The sample is taken from one educational institution, limiting generalizability.
3. Gender distribution is uneven, which may affect representativity.

4. Some hypotheses (e.g., cross-language divergences) implicate directive L1/L2 or native-speaker preliminary data for clear testing.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies are expected to include oral role-plays, interviews, or recorded interactions, match performance to native-speaker levels, and consider pragmatic development within a long-term framework.

Conflict of Interest: The author reported no conflict of interest.

Data Availability: All data are included in the content of the paper.

Funding Statement: The author did not obtain any funding for this research.

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