LIBERAL JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE REVIEW
An International Double-Blind Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-3175 | ISSN (Print): 3006-3167
Volume 5, Issue 8 October, 2026

PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING: AN APPLIED LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF SECOND-LANGUAGE LEARNERS' USE AND UNDERSTANDING OF ENGLISH

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23560327

Keywords
pragmatic competence; interlanguage pragmatics; sociopragmatics; pragmalinguistics; English language teaching; intercultural communication; speech acts

Article History
Received: *12 July 2026*
Accepted: *03 October 2026*
Published: *19 October 2026*

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Abstract

Pragmatic competence enables second-language learners to interpret intended sense and select socially and interactionally appropriate expressions. This critical integrative review analyzes the relationship between language competence, pragmalinguistic resources, sociopragmatic judgments, speech-act performance, pragmatic transfer, and the teaching and assessment of English pragmatics. Foundational accounts of communicative competence and speech acts are read alongside research syntheses on instructed pragmatics, English as a lingua franca, and performance assessment. Rather than treating native-speaker conformity as the sole criterion of success, the analysis argues that pragmatic effectiveness depends on the interactional purpose, participants, institutional setting, and capacity to negotiate misunderstandings. Published meta-analytic evidence supports the value of instruction and also reveals variation by treatment duration, learning context, and measurement format. The authors present a context-sensitive instructional framework that combines noticing, guided comparison, situated rehearsal, feedback, and reflective transfer. The paper identifies consequences for classroom materials, teacher education, and assessment, while distinguishing conceptual synthesis from new empirical evidence. It concludes that pragmatic competence is teachable, dynamic, and inseparable from the social organization of language use.

1. Introduction

English proficiency is often described in with respect to vocabulary size, grammatical control, pronunciation, and the ability to read or write extended texts. These capacities matter, but they do not, by themselves, explain why a formally correct utterance may cause discomfort, confusion, or unintended offense. A learner who says "I want your report tomorrow" may communicate a clear proposition while failing to attend to the institutional relationship, urgency, and expectations of the addressee. Conversely, a succinct and explicit request can be entirely appropriate among familiar collaborators. Pragmatic competence concerns this situated relation between language choices and the meanings participants make of them.

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The expansion of English-medium education, transnational work, and online communication increases the range of settings in which learners encounter divergent expectations. A learner may interact with a teacher in a formal classroom, a colleague through messaging, and an unfamiliar speaker in an international online community during the same day. Each setting demands attention to roles, medium, shared knowledge, and communicative purpose. The challenge is not simply to memorize courteous expressions but to judge when particular forms achieve particular social actions.

This review asks how pragmatic competence should be conceptualized, what obstructs its development, which instructional approaches existing scholarship supports, and how assessment can avoid reducing communicative success to a single cultural norm. Its central argument is that effective pedagogy must connect linguistic options to context-sensitive interpretation and opportunities for negotiated interaction.

2. Review Design and Scope

This article adopts a critical integrative review rather than a systematic review or meta-analysis. It draws on recognized theoretical works and selected published research syntheses to develop a coherent account of pragmatic competence in English learning. The sources are used purposively for conceptual relevance, methodological insight, and the breadth of the debates they represent. The article does not claim an exhaustive database search, PRISMA screening, a predetermined study count, or independent effect-size estimation.

The interpretive procedure has four stages: identifying foundational constructs; comparing explanations of pragmatic development; evaluating instructional and assessment claims against published syntheses; and deriving a pedagogical framework. Distinctions among theoretical propositions, results reported by previous authors, and recommendations developed here are maintained throughout. Because the evidence base is selected rather than exhaustive, read the conclusions as a reasoned synthesis, not a pooled estimate of all available studies.

This purposive approach grants close conceptual comparison but limits claims of comprehensive coverage. Interpretations are therefore restricted to the cited scholarship and should not be taken as a systematic assessment of all studies published during a particular period.

2.1. Analytical Procedure and Evidence Boundaries

This article's unit of analysis is the published theoretical argument or research synthesis, not an individual learner or an independently extracted primary-study effect size. The discussion first defines pragmatic competence, then groups claims under development, speech acts, multilingual variation, instruction, and assessment. Comparisons emphasize the research question addressed, evidence type, measurement approach, and scope of inference. This is an explicit interpretive organization of selected sources; it is not represented as a systematic screening protocol.

The evidence base combines foundational theoretical publications with selected empirical and methodological syntheses. Selection prioritizes relevance to the constructs and pedagogical questions considered here. Because sources were not identified through an exhaustive search, the discussion does not estimate the prevalence of findings across the field.

2.2. Documented Supplementary Literature Search

A supplementary, targeted source-identification exercise informed this critical integrative review. The review used combinations of terms relating to second-language pragmatics, pragmatic competence, instruction,

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assessment, interactional competence, computer-mediated communication, empirical studies, and meta-analysis. We consulted publisher records and bibliographic sources to check selected works. Because we did not retain a complete database-by-database search log, dated exports, deduplication record, or screening counts, this account does not claim a reproducible systematic search or comprehensive coverage. Consequently, the present review is selective, and the sources are used for particular conceptual and methodological comparison.

We considered works for inclusion when they addressed L2 pragmatic learning, instruction, performance, or assessment and provided sufficient publication and design information for meaningful appraisal. We included foundational theoretical texts regardless of publication year; we selected contemporary empirical studies and syntheses for relevance to the questions examined. The review distinguishes primary findings, secondary syntheses, and the author's pedagogical interpretations. No independent participant-level analysis, pooled effect estimate, formal risk-of-bias rating, or PRISMA screening was undertaken.

2.3. Evidence Appraisal and Analytical Contrast

Each contemporary source was compared along four dimensions: research design (experimental, observational, synthesis, or conceptual), the construct measured (formula selection, pragmatic inference, or interactional management), context (institutional setting, proficiency, and communication medium), and limits of transfer beyond the first tasks. Findings were not pooled or treated as commensurable simply because they addressed pragmatic competence. The distinction between written discourse-completion tasks and interactive role-play is especially important: the former can efficiently elicit conventional speech-act formulations, while the latter provides evidence about timing, sequential responsiveness, and repair (Youn, 2020; Roever, 2025).

The appraisal treated task validity as a central concern. Written discourse-completion responses can reveal whether learners recognize a conventionally appropriate formulation, but they cannot show how a speaker repairs misunderstanding after an unexpected reply. Role-plays can elicit sequential choices and uptake, although simulated encounters also constrain the kinds of risk and interpersonal consequence found in naturally occurring talk. These limitations affect how strongly each study can support claims about transferable competence.

We did not impose an explicit evidence hierarchy because the sources answer different questions. Experimental interventions offer stronger grounds for causal claims about particular teaching treatments; observational interaction studies describe features of performance; reviews synthesize findings subject to their own inclusion and measurement choices; and theoretical accounts specify constructs rather than test treatment effects. The paper compares these forms of evidence without treating them as interchangeable.

3. Conceptual Foundations

Hymes (1972) redirected attention from an idealized knowledge of grammatical rules to the social conditions under which utterances become meaningful. Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983) subsequently placed sociolinguistic and managerial resources within more comprehensive models of communicative competence. Bachman (1990) distinguished organizational and pragmatic components of language ability. These models share a concern with use, but they vary in the boundaries they draw between linguistic knowledge, social conventions, and calculated performance.

Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) demonstrate that an utterance can be evaluated as an action as well as a sentence. "It is cold here" may report a temperature, justify closing a window, or indirectly request another

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LJLLR
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person to act. Interpretation depends on what participants mutually recognize as relevant. Grice (1975) adds an account of conversational inference: listeners often recover more than the literal proposition by considering cooperation, relevance, and contextual expectations. These accounts explain why grammar-focused tests cannot entirely capture pragmatic understanding.

Brown and Levinson (1987) describe ways speakers manage threats to face, including indirectness and mitigation. Yet a universal ranking of expressions from direct to polite is inadequate. Watts (2003) emphasizes that courtesy judgments arise within particular social practices. Learners therefore need interpretive flexibility: indirectness can be considerate, evasive, ambiguous, or even irritating depending on the activity and relationship. A useful theory of teaching pragmatics must present alternatives rather than treating one formula as invariably superior.

Kasper and Rose (2002) position pragmatic development within second-language learning, where learners acquire both the expressions that realize actions and the contextual knowledge needed to deploy them. The former is commonly called pragmalinguistic knowledge; the latter, sociopragmatic knowledge. Their relationship is reciprocal: linguistic choices make social stances visible, while social interpretation determines which choices seem reasonable.

4. Pragmatic Knowledge and Learner Development

Pragmalinguistic knowledge includes conventional request frames, apology expressions, discourse markers, hedges, address terms, and prosodic patterns. Sociopragmatic knowledge includes judgments about entitlement, obligation, social distance, institutional authority, and what a particular community considers routine. A learner may know "Would you mind...?" but use it in a setting where an unambiguous direct instruction would be more efficient. Another may accurately infer the speaker's intention though lack the lexical or prosodic means to respond naturally. Table 1 summarizes the principal instructional dimensions.

Pragmatic competence is not simply a function of general proficiency. Greater lexical and grammatical resources enable refined expression, but recognizing social implications also requires exposure, noticing, interaction, and feedback. Roever and colleagues (2023) examine the relationship between proficiency and L2 pragmatic ability, illustrating why proficiency matters without collapsing the two constructs into one. Teachers should therefore diagnose pragmatic needs even among grammatically advanced learners. A construct-oriented approach to assessment likewise requires separating observed language performance from the interpretation placed on it (Laughlin et al., 2015).

Pragmatic transfer occurs when learners apply interpretations or conventions familiar from an additional language to an English interaction. Transfer can be facilitative when expectations overlap and problematic when participants interpret the same strategy differently. It should not be framed as an intrinsic deficit of the learner's first language. The relevant question is whether interlocutors share assumptions about a communicative action and whether they can repair divergence when it becomes noticeable.

Identity and agency also mediate development. Learners may understand a convention yet choose not to adopt it because it conflicts with their preferred social positioning. A learner who avoids exaggerated deference may be making a deliberate interpersonal choice rather than displaying ignorance. Teaching should distinguish informed choice from unrecognized pragmatic risk.

Table 1. Components of pragmatic competence

Dimension	Illustrative ability	Teaching focus
Pragmalinguistic repertoire	Choose request or apology formulations	Form–function alternatives

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Sociopragmatic inference	Interpret role, distance and imposition	Contextual comparison
Interactional adaptability	Clarify, reformulate and repair	Open-ended dialogue

4.1. Pragmatic Development: Exposure, Agency and Interaction

Pragmatic development should be distinguished from accumulating polite expressions. The same utterance can be interpreted differently when the participants change, when a conversation moves from a classroom to an institutional encounter, or when a message is transmitted through a digital platform. Learners therefore require experience interpreting communicative intentions in sequences of interaction, rather than simply identifying a speech act in an isolated sentence. This distinction matters because performance on an untimed written task may show knowledge of conventional forms without showing whether the learner can recognize an unanticipated turn, revise a formulation, or repair a misunderstanding in real time.

Exposure is necessary but not sufficient. A learner may hear indirect requests frequently yet attend principally to their literal content. Instruction can make the relationship between form, function and context salient through guided noticing, comparison and explanation. In a classroom activity, students might hear three versions of a request, describe the apparent relationship between participants, and justify why each speaker chose a particular formulation. The pedagogical value lies in making interpretations discussable rather than presenting one answer as universally correct. Taguchi (2011) reviews pedagogical issues surrounding the explicit teaching of pragmatics, while Taguchi (2016) considers the opportunities and difficulties associated with learning in study-abroad contexts.

Learner agency creates a further complication. Some speakers knowingly depart from an expected convention to project solidarity, professional authority, urgency, or personal identity. Such choices should not automatically be marked as errors. A useful distinction is between an unrecognized pragmatic risk and a deliberate choice made with awareness of its likely effects. Teachers can assess this distinction by asking students to explain their choices and consider alternatives, while recognizing that self-reports are not perfect measures of actual communicative ability.

Interaction also provides feedback that static examples cannot supply. When a request is misunderstood, speakers may reformulate it, provide background, ask clarification, or acknowledge an alternative interpretation. Successful repair shows adaptable communicative ability, even when the first formulation is unconventional. This perspective shifts attention from isolated utterance accuracy to the co-construction of understanding across turns.

5. Speech Acts and Contextual Interpretation

Requests clearly illustrate the interaction between linguistic form and social setting. “Send the slides” may be appropriate between close teammates coordinating a deadline; “Could you send the slides when you have time?” may better fit a less familiar relationship. Neither expression is intrinsically correct for all situations. Teachers can ask learners to compare the speaker’s entitlement, the size of the imposition, the urgency, and the cost of ambiguity. Table 2 presents constructed contrasts for four speech acts.

Apologies are similarly multifunctional. “I am sorry” may express remorse, sympathy, or a routine recognition of inconvenience. An effective excuse for a missed appointment might include responsibility and a remedy plan, while an excessive excuse for a minor interruption could distract from the task. Refusals also require sensitivity to expectations: an immediate “No” can be admirably clear in some contexts and unnecessarily abrupt in others. Learners should analyze how explanations, alternatives, and timing change the interaction.

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Disagreement and feedback are especially consequential in academic environments. A student saying "That is wrong" may intend intellectual precision but be heard as challenging another participant's standing. Alternatives such as "I interpret the evidence differently" can preserve the substantive disagreement while modifying its interpersonal framing. Yet teachers must avoid implying that students should always soften disagreement; critical inquiry sometimes requires direct and explicit correction.

Implicatures, humor, irony, and indirect criticism pose comprehension challenges because the listener must integrate utterance meaning with context. A teacher's "That is one way to do it" may function as praise, hesitation, or criticism depending on intonation and the preceding exchange. Exposure to authentic audio and video, with discussion of multiple plausible interpretations, is therefore valuable.

Table 2. Illustrative speech-act contrasts (constructed examples)

Speech act	Expression A	Expression B	Interpretive issue
Request	Send the file.	Could you send the file today?	Urgency and relationship
Refusal	No, I cannot.	I cannot today; perhaps Friday.	Clarity and alternatives
Disagreement	That is incorrect.	I read the evidence differently.	Directness and institutional role
Apology	Sorry.	I apologize for the delay; I will resend it.	Responsibility and repair

5.1. Extended Speech-Act Analysis and Pragmatic Inference

Requests illustrate how the grammatical form of an utterance does not uniquely determine its social meaning. An interrogative such as "Can you send the document?" may conventionally perform a request rather than ask about physical ability. Yet even this familiar construction varies in force: a manager requesting an overdue report, a classmate asking for notes, and a customer consulting technical support differ in entitlement, urgency, and anticipated obligations. Learners should be encouraged to describe these contextual variables before evaluating a sentence as appropriate.

Refusals require the speaker to balance clarity along with relational consequences. An indirect refusal that delays the main point may protect a relationship in one setting but create uncertainty in another. In urgent professional discussions, an explicit refusal paired with a practical alternative may be more considerate than an ambiguous response. Thus, instruction should compare the communicative effects of straightforwardness, explanation, hesitation, and options instead of treating indirectness as an invariant marker of courtesy.

Apologies differ in whether they acknowledge responsibility, show remorse, offer repair, or explain circumstances. These components are not interchangeable. "I am sorry that happened" may communicate sympathy without accepting responsibility, whereas "I sent the wrong file; I will replace it now" directly acknowledges an error and offers repair. Students can examine the difference between sympathy and accountability and discuss whether an event's severity calls for additional action.

Compliments and responses to compliments are also culturally and relationally sensitive. Acceptance, deflection and reciprocation can signal modesty, appreciation or discomfort depending on the participants. The aim of classroom comparison should not be to assign a fixed national preference but to examine how a

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response contributes to an ongoing relationship. Teachers can use paired exchanges and ask learners to identify how the second turn reshapes the first.

Pragmatic comprehension includes inference from prosody, sequencing along with shared knowledge. A remark such as "Interesting choice" might express admiration, reservation or criticism. In an audio recording, pitch and timing may narrow the interpretation; in a text message, punctuation or previous turns may play a similar role. A strong assessment therefore combines interpreting contextual indicators with opportunities to explain competing readings and solicit clarification.

6. Sociolinguistic Variation and English as a Lingua Franca

English is used across communities with different norms for turn-taking, honorifics, small talk, disagreement, and workplace hierarchy. A teaching model that treats one standardized native-speaker variety as the exclusive measure of appropriateness risks misrepresenting the communicative realities of multilingual users. The objective is not to eliminate variation but to help learners recognize it, adapt when useful, and negotiate meaning where expectations diverge.

English as a lingua franca communication frequently requires participants to clarify intentions, paraphrase, check understanding, and accommodate one another's linguistic resources. In such settings, repair strategies can matter as much as the initial choice of a conventional speech-act formula. Taguchi (2021) situates pragmatics research within globalization, multilingual practice, and technology-mediated interaction, providing a useful basis for moving beyond fixed national-cultural comparisons.

Culture should not be treated as a simple explanation for every interactional difference. Individuals within the same linguistic community vary by age, professional role, social network, institutional setting, and personal preference. An essentializing statement such as "speakers from culture X always prefer indirect requests" obscures this variation. Research and teaching should describe the actual interactional conditions and acknowledge within-group diversity.

Online communication further changes pragmatic expectations. In email, response delays, subject lines, greetings, punctuation, and sign-offs may index stance. In messaging, brevity may signal efficiency or impatience; emojis can soften an utterance but also produce ambiguity. Learners need to examine the medium, the relationship, and the interaction history rather than apply a single digital etiquette checklist.

6.1. Multilingual Norms, Digital Media and Equity

English as a lingua franca creates a tension between teaching stable conventions and preparing learners for variable interactional norms. Conventional speech-act patterns still are useful resources, particularly in recurring institutional genres such as email requests and service encounters. Nevertheless, assuming a single native-speaker norm defines communicative success may obscure how multilingual speakers collaboratively establish local expectations. A more defensible teaching goal is the ability to recognize plausible interpretations, explain intentions, and negotiate accommodation.

Digital settings intensify the importance of medium. Email allows planning and revision but may reduce access to prosody and immediate feedback. Messaging encourages rapid exchanges, yet brief replies can be read as efficient or dismissive. Video meetings restore some vocal and visual cues while introducing interruptions, latency and simultaneous speech. Students can compare one communicative intention across email, instant messaging and spoken interaction to identify how the medium changes the evidence available for pragmatic interpretation.

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Assessment fairness follows from this variation. A rubric that rewards only a narrow set of formulaic expressions risks penalizing learners who communicate effectively through alternative strategies. At the same time, an entirely relativistic rubric would fail to identify serious misunderstandings. A well-rounded approach evaluates whether the action is intelligible, whether the learner recognizes relevant contextual constraints, and whether the learner can repair trouble when it occurs. Examiners should document the task setting and justify the standards used.

7. Evidence on Pragmatics Instruction

Instructional research generally supports the view that pragmatic knowledge can be taught. Taguchi (2015) synthesized 58 intervention studies and discussed differences in pedagogical approaches and outcomes. Ren, Li, and Lü (2023) synthesized 29 primary studies involving 1,898 learners and reported a large aggregate instructional effect (Hedges' g = 1.656, 95% confidence interval 1.387–1.924). This estimate is reported from their publication and is not calculated in the present article. Table 3 distinguishes the contributions of the selected reviews and methodological sources.

The Ren and colleagues synthesis also found variation by setting, treatment length, and assessment method. Although explicit instruction had a larger mean effect than implicit instruction, their moderator analysis found that difference was not statistically significant. It would therefore overstate the evidence to claim that explicit teaching always outperforms implicit exposure. The stronger conclusion is that instruction is useful and its effect depends on implementation and how outcomes are measured.

Instruction should combine accessible explanation with opportunities to notice variation in authentic interaction. Metapragmatic discussion helps learners articulate why one expression may be interpreted distinctly across situations. Role-play offers rehearsal, but highly scripted role-play can reward memorization rather than flexible judgment. More open-ended tasks require learners to negotiate goals and respond to surprising turns.

Feedback should focus on likely interpretations and alternatives, not simply label utterances "polite" or "impolite." For instance, an instructor might explain that an email sounds demanding because the request is missing context and gives the recipient no indication of flexibility. Students can then revise the message for different audiences and discuss what meaning changed. This practice develops informed selections rather than formulaic compliance.

Table 3. Selected published research syntheses

Source	Evidence type	Relevance
Taguchi (2015)	Review of 58 instructional studies	Instructional designs and variation
Ren, Li, and Lü (2023)	Meta-analysis of 29 primary studies	Overall effects and moderators
Taguchi and Youn (2022)	Methodological chapter	Outcome measurement
Taguchi (2021)	Special-issue introduction	Globalized and digital contexts

7.1. In-depth Comparison of Published Syntheses

Taguchi (2015) examined 58 instructional intervention studies and showed that the research base spans varied pedagogical treatments and outcomes. Its contribution is broad coverage of the instructional landscape rather than a single pooled effect estimate. Ren, Li and Lü (2023) subsequently meta-analyzed 29 primary studies with 1,898 learners and 54 between-group effect sizes. Their aggregate estimate was Hedges' g = 1.656

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(95% CI 1.387–1.924). These two reviews answer connected but separate questions: the earlier synthesis maps instructional approaches and recurring design issues, while the later meta-analysis quantifies intervention effects in a defined set of studies.

The meta-analytic result should not be interpreted as a universal prediction of classroom improvement. Ren and colleagues report meaningful moderation by instructional setting, treatment duration, and assessment format. In particular, written discourse-completion measures produced larger effects than some other outcome formats. A large score change on a constrained written instrument may reflect improved access to conventional formulas without proving that learners can sustain interaction under time pressure. The implication is not that written measures are invalid, but that the outcome construct must be stated precisely.

The finding that explicit instruction had a larger average effect than implicit instruction, without a statistically significant difference in that moderator comparison, also requires care. It supports the value of making pragmatic choices visible but does not warrant declaring one pedagogical method universally superior. Class size, teacher preparation, input quality, task authenticity, and opportunities for feedback are likely to affect implementation. The review therefore recommends a principled combination of explicit explanation and meaningful interaction rather than a single-method prescription.

Another methodological issue is the relationship among immediate performance and durable learning. A post-test administered shortly after instruction may capture temporary recall or task familiarity. Delayed assessment, new interlocutors, and transfer to unfamiliar situations offer stronger evidence that learners can generalize pragmatic knowledge. Future primary studies should report task formats, scorer training, reliability, and contextual characteristics so that effects can be compared without treating all pragmatic outcomes as interchangeable.

Another question is how improvement is defined. If learners become better at selecting an apology expression on a written test, the outcome is valuable but narrower than demonstrating that they can acknowledge an interlocutor's dissatisfaction and revise the apology during conversation. Conversely, interactional ratings may reflect fluency, confidence, and partner behavior in addition to pragmatic decision-making. A persuasive instructional evaluation should therefore combine task types and specify which part of pragmatic competence each measure samples.

Cross-study interpretation also depends on instructional dosage, learner proficiency, the target speech act, and feedback opportunities. Studies with longer interventions may have more time for consolidation, but treatment length is often entangled with materials and assessment timing. Comparisons should not be interpreted as evidence that duration alone causes better outcomes unless the study design isolates that variable.

7.2. Contemporary Observed Evidence and Methodological Contrasts

The meta-analysis by Ren, Li, and Lü (2023) included 29 primary studies, 1,898 learners, and 54 between-group effects. Its pooled estimate favored pragmatics instruction (Hedges' g = 1.656). Still, moderator results complicate any universal prescription: the explicit–implicit difference was not statistically significant, longer treatments produced larger effects, and written discourse-completion measures yielded larger effects than other assessment formats. These differences matter because treatment effects depend partly on what the instrument asks learners to do.

Youn (2020) examined 102 learner role-play performances and found that fine-grained interactional features were associated with performance ratings. Unlike written completion tasks, the analysis addressed how interaction is organized across turns. The findings therefore support a wider assessment construct yet do not

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demonstrate that a particular classroom intervention caused improvement. The studies answer different questions: Ren and colleagues estimate instructional effects across studies, whereas Youn examines the relationship between interactional behavior and assessed performance.

Taguchi and Barón (2024) investigated 65 L2 English speakers using video-based role-plays in which interlocutors responded with different degrees of acceptance to requests and apologies. Their focus on adjustment to listener reactions is particularly relevant to interactional adaptability: pragmatic success is not exhausted by choosing an initial formula. The design nevertheless uses simulated encounters, so transfer to spontaneous real-world interaction continues a separate empirical question.

Ying Zhang (2022) compared computer-mediated communication alone with communication combined with pragmatic instruction in a mixed methods study. This shifts attention from technology's presence to the pedagogical support it provides. A 2024 online training experiment used 60 university learners in explicit, implicit, and control conditions, with discourse-completion tasks administered before and after treatment. Such studies broaden the settings in which pragmatic instruction can be investigated, but short-term task scores should not be mistaken for demonstrated durable interactional competence.

Roever (2025) identifies a persistent disconnect between the prominence of pragmatic and interactional ability in communicative-competence theories as well as their limited uptake in large-scale tests. A 2025 systematic review of technology integration offers a wider map of digital instructional research, while a 2026 review of digital innovations surveys 118 studies published between 2006 and 2024. These syntheses offer useful coverage, but their inclusion rules and methods differ; you cannot add their study counts or treat them as the number of studies independently reviewed in this article.

These studies are most informative when their findings are contrasted directly. Ren, Li, and Lü (2023) address whether instruction improves measured outcomes across interventions; Youn (2020) examines what interactional features affect to performance ratings; and Taguchi and Barón (2024) examine adaptation to an interlocutor's changing response. Taken together, they suggest a progression from knowing an appropriate expression to handling its consequences in interaction. They do not, however, establish that one particular teaching sequence produces this progression.

The technology-focused work raises a different question: whether the medium itself creates learning or whether tasks, feedback and opportunities for noticing do the explanatory work. Zhang (2022) places mediated communication alongside instruction, making pedagogical design visible as a potential contributor. The implication is not that digital tasks outperform face-to-face tasks; rather, its pragmatic value should be evaluated through the interaction they elicit and the evidence of transfer they provide.

7.3. What the Comparisons Establish

Three distinctions emerge. First, an intervention effect is not the same as evidence of spontaneous communicative success. Second, pragmatic performance should not be reduced to formula accuracy when sequential responsiveness and repair are central to the communicative task. Third, technology provides additional opportunities for contextualized practice but does not, by itself, guarantee meaningful feedback or intercultural sensitivity. These distinctions themselves support an assessment program that samples interpretation, production, and interaction rather than relying on one written instrument.

8. Pedagogical Framework and Classroom Application

The teaching framework brings together five classroom practices: contextual noticing, contrastive interpretation, guided production, interactional feedback, and reflective transfer. Learners first examine

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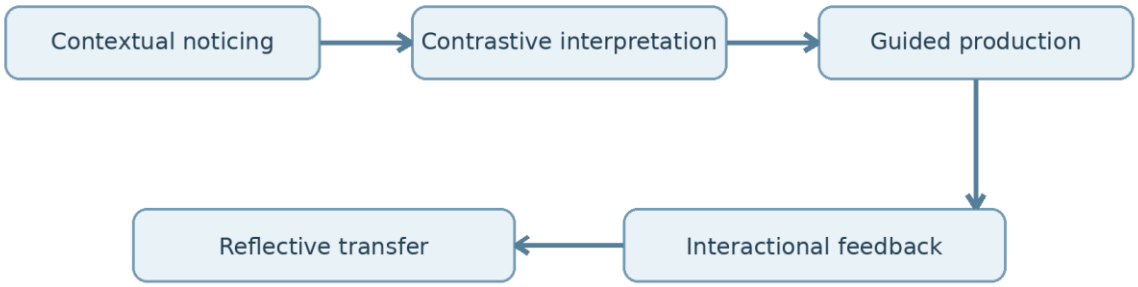
naturally occurring or carefully contextualized examples. They then compare interpretations, produce alternative expressions, receive feedback on plausible social effects, and apply the principles in a new setting. The sequence is cyclical rather than a fixed linear developmental model. Figure 1 visualizes this recurring instructional cycle.

At the noticing stage, students listen to two versions of a workplace request and identify differences in role, urgency, and interpersonal stance. During contrastive interpretation, they discuss why each version might succeed or fail. Guided production asks students to write a message to a friend, a teacher, and an unfamiliar administrator. Feedback considers clarity, relational effect, and potential misunderstanding. Reflective transfer asks students to revise the same message for a new medium or intercultural audience.

Teacher education matters because instructors may rely on simplified rules about politeness. Professional development should include discourse analysis, evaluation of authentic interaction, awareness of linguistic variation, and practice providing non-stigmatizing feedback. Teaching materials should include alternative formulations, contextual hints, and questions about possible interpretation instead of isolated lists of supposedly correct phrases.

Assessment can use discourse-completion tasks, role-plays, interaction recordings, reflective commentaries, and context-based interpretation questions. No single method captures all aspects of pragmatic ability. Written responses may show awareness of conventional forms while missing timing, prosody, and repair. Live tasks offer richer interactional evidence but are harder to standardize. Triangulation across different tasks provides a more defensible basis for evaluation. Table 4 provides a sample rubric that makes these criteria explicit.

Figure 1. Proposed context-sensitive development cycle



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ISSN (Online): 3006-3175 | ISSN (Print): 3006-3167
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Figure 2. Analytical dimensions of pragmatic performance

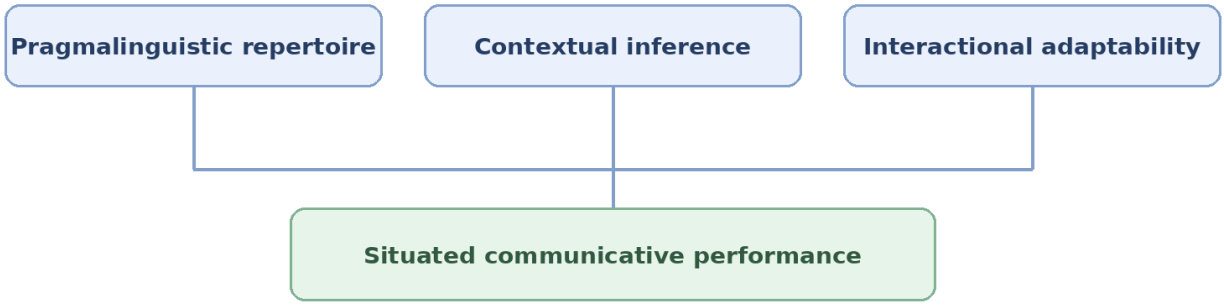


Table 4. Sample classroom assessment rubric

Criterion	What to observe	Caution
Intelligibility	Is the intended action understandable?	Do not conflate accent with pragmatic failure
Context sensitivity	Are role and purpose considered?	Allow legitimate variation
Response management	Can the learner clarify and repair?	Use interactive tasks
Reflection	Can choices be explained?	Do not require one fixed norm

8.1. Classroom Implementation and Assessment Protocol

A practical instructional sequence can be organized across four meetings. In the first meeting, learners annotate authentic or carefully contextualized request and refusal exchanges, identifying participants, roles, communicative goals, and potential ambiguity. In the second, they compare alternative formulations and discuss why a phrase may be effective in one setting but not another. In the third, pairs complete unscripted role-plays in which new information changes the first task. In the fourth, students revise email and messaging exchanges and write a short reflection explaining their decisions.

Feedback ought to address the communicative consequence of a choice. Instead of labeling "Send it now" as simply rude, an instructor might note that the sentence clearly conveys urgency yet may imply an entitlement that the sender does not possess in the assigned scenario. The learner can then choose whether to retain the direct form, provide a rationale, or provide flexibility. Such feedback makes the rationale transparent and protects legitimate variation.

For assessment, teachers should triangulate a scenario interpretation task, a written production task and an interactive role-play. Interpretation items can ask students to identify two plausible readings and the cues that favor each. Written production tasks assess available linguistic resources. Role-plays evaluate timing, turn management, and repair. A reflective explanation offers additional evidence of metapragmatic awareness, although it should not substitute in place of observed performance.

LIBERAL JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE REVIEW
An International Double-Blind Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-3175 | ISSN (Print): 3006-3167
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Rubric descriptors should be anchored in observable behavior. For contextual sensitivity, a high-level response recognizes relevant roles and constraints and adapts without compromising clarity; a developing response recognizes some cues but overlooks others; a beginning response relies on an inflexible formula. For interactional adaptability, stronger performance includes clarification, reformulation, and acknowledging misunderstandings. Raters should review sample performances together and record disagreements to reduce the risk of subjective or culturally narrow judgments.

8.2. Theoretical Comparison and Evidence-to-Claim Boundaries

Hymes (1972) foregrounds social appropriateness as part of communicative competence, while Canale and Swain (1980) distinguish sociolinguistic resources from grammatical as well as strategic competence. Bachman (1990) offers a language-assessment perspective by differentiating organizational and pragmatic knowledge. Kasper and Rose (2002) focus more directly on pragmatic development during additional-language learning. The present repertoire–inference–adaptability framework does not replace these accounts: it translates their overlapping concerns into three observable instructional targets. Its distinctive pedagogical emphasis is on repair and negotiation alongside selecting conventional forms.

Published evidence also varies in what it can establish. Taguchi (2015) surveys instructional designs, whereas Ren, Li, and Lü (2023) aggregate intervention effects. Neither review alone proves that gains on written discourse-completion tasks necessarily transfer to spontaneous interaction. Taguchi and Youn (2022) point out the importance of matching assessment instruments to instructional outcomes. This distinction motivates the recommendation to assess interpretation, production, and interactive repair separately, while refraining from claims that the proposed three-part model has already been empirically validated.

Table 5. Comparison of core models and the proposed teaching framework

Approach	Central concern	Relation to this review
Hymes (1972)	Socially situated communicative competence	Contextual inference
Canale & Swain (1980)	Grammatical, sociolinguistic and strategic resources	Repertoire and adaptation
Bachman (1990)	Organization and pragmatic language ability	Form/function distinctions
Kasper & Rose (2002)	Development of L2 pragmatic knowledge	Learning and contextual use
Proposed synthesis	Repertoire, inference and interactional adaptability	Classroom task and assessment alignment

8.3. Distinctive Pedagogical Contribution and Testable Implications

The contribution is practical rather than a claim to a newly discovered psychological ability. By separating initial formulation from the ability to respond to a partner's reaction, the framework makes repair and negotiation visible in classroom assessment. Existing interactional research has already established the importance of these processes (Youn, 2020; Roever, 2025); the proposed synthesis translates them into supplementary teaching and assessment tasks.

An appropriate test of the framework would compare whether three-task profiles predict independent communicative outcomes better than speech-act formula scores alone. Such a study would require

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preregistered hypotheses, multiple tasks per dimension, transparent scoring rubrics, trained raters, and independent samples. Until then, the model should remain a conceptual proposition.

Consider two learners: one selects a conventional request but cannot respond to hesitation; another uses a less conventional expression yet clarifies the intention and resolves misunderstanding. A single formula-based score may obscure this difference. A profile combining repertoire, inference, and adaptability could make each performance's strengths and limitations clearer, provided the assessment criteria are tested for reliability and fairness.

The framework also generates falsifiable expectations. If contextual inference and interactional adaptability capture useful information beyond formula knowledge, scores from tasks designed to measure those capacities should predict performance in independent conversations after controlling for general proficiency. If they do not, the added dimensions may be redundant, poorly measured, or overly dependent on the assessment context. Such possibilities are essential to a defensible conceptual proposal.

9. Critical Discussion

Three tensions emerge from the literature. First, grammatical knowledge is necessary for many pragmatic options but cannot substitute for situated judgment. Second, pragmatic instruction can improve performance, yet results depend on how learning is operationalized. Third, linguistic norms provide useful resources while remaining variable and negotiable. A strong account of competence must accommodate all three rather than treating pragmatic success as a checklist of expressions.

The discussion highlights three connected abilities: pragmatic repertoire, contextual inference, and interactional adaptability. Repertoire refers to available linguistic forms and discourse practices. Contextual inference refers to judgments about intent, relationships, and activity. Adaptability refers to the ability to clarify, repair, and renegotiate meanings as interaction unfolds. These dimensions are analytically separable but operate together in communicative performance. Figure 2 depicts these dimensions as jointly contributing to situated performance, and Table 5 compares the synthesis with established models.

This distinction matters when interpreting classroom results. Improvement on a written completion task can indicate broader access to conventional expressions, but it does not automatically establish successful interaction with unfamiliar interlocutors. Conversely, a learner may negotiate a misunderstanding successfully while producing forms that differ from a prescribed answer key. Evaluations should make explicit which aspect of competence they are measuring.

The framework is a conceptual synthesis and has not been validated with new learner data. Future research could test whether a multi-task assessment distinguishing repertoire, inference, and adaptability predicts communicative success better than conventional isolated speech-act measures. Longitudinal work could examine how learners transfer classroom knowledge into institutional and digital interactions.

9.1. Contribution, Boundaries and Testable Propositions

A further implication concerns assessment fairness. A single prestige variety can provide useful models for some institutional settings, but it should not be treated as the only acceptable way to communicate. The relevant questions are whether an utterance is intelligible, appropriate to the stated purpose, and responsive to the interlocutor. This position still allows teachers to explain why conventional forms matter in particular settings.

LIBERAL JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE REVIEW
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In practical lessons, teachers can move from brief contextual interpretation tasks to alternative formulations and then to unscripted exchanges with unexpected replies. Reflective feedback should identify what happened in the exchange and why a revision helped, rather than merely counting expressions classified as polite.

Assessors should record observable behavior before assigning an overall judgment. For example, a transcript may show a learner detecting hesitation and reformulating a request. Clear descriptors, multiple scenarios, and rater calibration can help distinguish such evidence from an assessor's personal preferences.

Where teaching time is limited, teachers can distribute interpretation questions, role-plays, and reflective notes across lessons rather than administer a large assessment battery at once. This approach is feasible as a pedagogical proposal, but the three-dimensional profile should not be described as a validated scale.

A rigorous validation study would recruit learners across proficiency levels, collect several tasks per dimension, assess inter-rater reliability, and compare predictive performance on new communicative scenarios. A longitudinal design would examine whether gains persist and transfer across interlocutors and media. Such evidence is required before the proposed framework can be claimed to have predictive validity.

10. Limitations and Future Research

This integrative review uses purposive source selection and does not provide comprehensive coverage of the available literature or formal study-level risk-of-bias assessment. Its framework is a conceptual synthesis rather than a validated intervention or measurement instrument. The evidence discussed should not be interpreted as a pooled estimate of the field.

Future research should compare pragmatic comprehension and production across contexts, document multilingual participants' own evaluations of appropriateness, and examine retention beyond immediate post-tests. It should also consider how assessment criteria can accommodate legitimate variation without abandoning standards of clarity, mutual understanding, and interpersonal accountability.

An additional limitation concerns cultural and institutional coverage. Much of the literature foregrounds classroom learners and elicited speech acts; this may underrepresent multilingual workplace encounters, peer networks, and informal digital communication. Assessment criteria also risk reproducing particular raters' preferences unless judgments are calibrated across communities and supported by explicit contextual rationales. Future studies should examine rater variation and include learner perspectives on the communicative goals they seek to achieve.

Future research could compare written scenarios, interactive role-plays and authentic communication samples collected from the same participants. A longitudinal design with delayed assessments would show whether changes are retained, while interlocutor variation would test adaptability beyond one familiar partner. Reporting reliability, task prompts and scoring decisions would make such evidence more useful for both theory and classroom practice.

11. Conclusion

Pragmatic competence is best understood as the ability to make informed linguistic choices and interpret other people's choices in context. Learners need more than a store of polite expressions: they must recognize what an utterance is intended to accomplish, consider the relationship between speakers, and respond when expectations differ. The discussion in this review shows why grammatical accuracy alone cannot account for successful interaction. An utterance can be structurally correct yet unsuitable for a particular exchange, while an unconventional formulation can still achieve its purpose when participants negotiate meaning effectively.

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An International Double-Blind Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
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The literature also suggests that pragmatic learning benefits from deliberate instructional attention. Published reviews of pragmatics instruction indicate positive learning outcomes, although their magnitude and durability vary with task design, learning setting, treatment duration, and assessment method. This variation matters for classroom practice. Rather than presenting indirect language as invariably more polite, teachers can compare authentic examples, discuss alternative interpretations, and give learners opportunities to rehearse requests, refusals, apologies, and disagreements with different interlocutors. Feedback is most useful when it explains possible communicative consequences and offers choices instead of imposing a single formula.

The proposed framework brings together three closely connected dimensions: pragmatic repertoire, contextual inference, and interactional adaptability. It offers a practical way to align learning activities with assessment. A written response may demonstrate knowledge of conventional expressions; an interpretation task can reveal sensitivity to contextual cues; and an interactive task can show whether a learner clarifies intentions or repairs misunderstanding. Assessing these dimensions together offers a fuller account of performance than relying on one speech-act exercise. The framework remains a conceptual synthesis, however, and future studies must test its explanatory and predictive value.

This perspective is particularly relevant in multilingual settings where English is used among speakers with different linguistic histories. Effective communication cannot always be measured against one native-speaker standard. Learners should be equipped to recognize variation, express their intentions clearly, and accommodate others without being required to abandon their identities or linguistic preferences. For English language teaching, this calls for contextualized materials, teacher preparation in discourse and intercultural communication, and assessments that recognize intelligibility, appropriateness, and repair.

Because the present article is a selective integrative review, its conclusions are necessarily bounded by the scholarship examined. Further research should use transparent study-selection procedures, include diverse learning environments, and investigate whether classroom gains persist in spontaneous interaction and digital communication. Longitudinal and multi-task studies would be particularly valuable for examining how pragmatic knowledge transfers across settings. Overall, treating pragmatic competence as flexible, socially situated communicative ability provides a stronger foundation for teaching English as it is actually used.

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LJLLR
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ISSN (Online): 3006-3175 | ISSN (Print): 3006-3167
Volume 5, Issue 8 October, 2026

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