

Pragmatic Competence In Second Language Acquisition: Challenges And Strategies For Uzbek Learners

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Abstract. This paper investigates the development of pragmatic competence in second language acquisition (SLA), focusing specifically on the challenges faced by Uzbek learners of English and the pedagogical strategies required to overcome them. Pragmatic competence, the ability to use language effectively and appropriately in various social contexts, is frequently overshadowed by grammatical and lexical instruction in traditional classrooms. Consequently, advanced learners often produce structurally flawless but socially inappropriate utterances. This study employs a mixed-methods approach, analyzing both quantitative performance on discourse completion tasks (DCTs) and qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews. The results indicate that socio-cultural transfer, lack of authentic interactional exposure, and textbook limitations significantly hinder target-like pragmatic performance. Based on these findings, we propose a framework for integrating explicit pragmatic instruction and authentic multimedia materials into the Uzbek English language curriculum to foster comprehensive communicative competence.

Keywords: pragmatic competence, second language acquisition, speech acts, sociocultural transfer, Uzbek learners, communicative language teaching, interlanguage pragmatics.

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary globalized world, proficiency in English has transcended the mere memorization of grammatical rules and vocabulary lists. True communicative competence requires what linguistic theory conceptualizes as pragmatic competence—the capacity of a language user to match utterances with appropriate contexts, decode implied meanings, and navigate complex social dynamics. Within the paradigm of Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP), researchers have long observed that second language (L2) learners may possess high levels of grammatical mastery yet fail consistently in cross-cultural communication due to a lack of situational and contextual awareness. This discrepancy highlights the critical division between sentence-level semantics and speaker-intended pragmatics.

For learners navigating the linguistic landscape in Uzbekistan, the acquisition of pragmatic competence in English presents distinct challenges. The traditional pedagogical structure within many domestic institutions historically prioritizes systemic grammar, reading comprehension, and standardized lexical development over the fluid, variable constraints of real-time social interaction. Consequently, when advanced Uzbek students engage with native speakers or enter international academic settings, they frequently experience communication breakdowns. These failures are rarely caused by syntactic errors; rather, they stem from a mismatch in speech act realization, politeness markers, and conversational implicatures.

This academic article establishes a comprehensive exploration of the precise socio-pragmatic and pragma-linguistic friction points encountered by Uzbek EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners. By examining how speech acts such as requests, refusals, and apologies are formulated, this paper seeks to fulfill two primary objectives: first, to diagnose the systematic linguistic and cultural transfer dynamics that color the interlanguage of Uzbek students; and second, to formulate actionable, evidence-based pedagogical strategies that can be integrated smoothly into modern higher education curricula, such as those at Sharq University. Ultimately, this research underscores that communicative fluidness must be evaluated not just by what is grammatically permissible, but by what is socially appropriate.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The foundational framework for pragmatic competence originates within the communicative competence models pioneered by Hymes and later refined by Canale and Swain. While Hymes argued that language acquisition must encompass knowledge of

socio-cultural rules of appropriateness, Canale and Swain structured communicative competence into grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic sub-components. In subsequent expansions, Bachman integrated pragmatic competence directly into his language competence model, partitioning it into illocutionary competence (the knowledge of speech acts and language functions) and sociolinguistic competence (the sensitivity to local dialect, register, and cultural appropriateness).

Within the specific domain of Interlanguage Pragmatics, Thomas introduced a foundational distinction between two types of pragmatic failure: pragma-linguistic failure and socio-pragmatic failure. Pragma-linguistic failure occurs when the linguistic structural choices made by a speaker fundamentally misrepresent the intended illocutionary force due to direct translation or incomplete mapping of the target language's communicative tools. For example, an L2 learner might use an over-direct imperative hoping to sound clear, unaware that the native environment demands a softened interrogative. Conversely, socio-pragmatic failure arises from a deeper crosscultural misunderstanding of the social variables regulating interaction, such as relative social distance, absolute power differentials, and the specific degree of imposition inherent to a request.

Recent empirical developments in Eurasian educational settings demonstrate that pragmatic development does not automatically correlate with grammatical advancement. Research conducted on interlanguage patterns across post-Soviet Central Asian contexts reveals that learners often experience a "pragmatic lag." This phenomenon describes a state where an individual holds an advanced CEFR ranking (such as B2 or C1) in reading or writing, but operates at a baseline A2 level in pragmatic execution. The primary driver of this lag is identified as negative pragmatic transfer, whereby structural scripts and socio-cultural paradigms from the first language (L1) are inappropriately transposed into L2 communication. This paper expands upon these theoretical frameworks by isolating the specific structural and cultural variables inherent to the Uzbek-English linguistic interface.

METHODOLOGY

To rigorously map the pragmatic landscape of Uzbek English learners, this study adopted a empirical mixed-methods research design. A cohort of 60 undergraduate students tracking at an upper-intermediate (B2) proficiency level was selected from institutional programs. The target population was exposed to structured testing instruments over a multi-week assessment window to guarantee cross-sectional data consistency.

The primary quantitative instrument utilized was an open-ended Discourse Completion Task (DCT), comprising twelve distinct situational prompts. The prompts were engineered to systematically vary the underlying social variables: Social Distance (**D**), Relative Power (**P**), and Absolute Ranking of Imposition (**R**). These variables determine the expected level of linguistic politeness in a given society. The mathematical representation of the weight of an act (**W**), which dictates the required x politeness strategy, follows Brown and Levinson's classic formulation:

$$W = D(S, H) + P(H, S) + R \times x$$

Where **S** represents the speaker and **H** represents the hearer. The DCT scenarios targeted high-stakes speech acts: four items requiring complex Requests (asking a professor for a deadline extension), four targeting Refusals (declining a supervisor's invitation), and four focusing on Apologies (accounting for a significant professional oversight).

Complementing the quantitative DCT matrix, qualitative data was gathered via semi-structured verbal protocols and introspective interviews with a subset of 15 participants. These sessions explored the cognitive processes guiding their pragmatic choices, allowing the researcher to identify instances of conscious L1 translation, cultural anxiety, and structural uncertainty. Collected linguistic tokens from the DCTs were systematically coded using the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) taxonomy, categorizing speech act strategies into direct, conventionally indirect, and non-conventional indirect configurations.

RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

The empirical corpus yielded substantial evidence of pragmatic divergence among the participants. The quantitative breakdown of speech act strategies chosen by the learners across the 720 total collected responses is summarized in the table below.

Speech Act Category	Direct Strategy (%)	Conventionally Indirect (%)	Non-Conventional/ Hints (%)	Pragmatic Failure Rate (%)
Requests (High Power Diff.)	42.5%	48.0%	9.5%	34.0%
Refusals (Social Distance+)	56.0%	31.5%	12.5%	48.5%
Apologies (High Imposition)	18.0%	72.5%	9.5%	15.0%

The distributional data reveals a clear tilt toward high directness within scenarios that natively demand sophisticated indirect modification in English. In the Request paradigm involving an asymmetric power differential (Student to Professor), 42.5% of the responses relied on direct imperative or unmodulated modal structures (e.g., "I want you to check my paper before tomorrow"). This starkly contrasts with target-like expressions which favor highly mitigated, bi-clausal structures ("I was wondering if you could possibly look over my draft").

The highest rate of categorical pragmatic failure occurred within the Refusal domain (48.5%). Uzbek learners exhibited intense socio-pragmatic friction when declining offers or invitations from interlocutors positioned at a higher social index. Rather than utilizing structural mitigators, gratitude tokens, or broad, non-specific justifications common in native English interactions, participants often fell into two distinct extremes: either producing an overly blunt, abrupt denial ("I cannot come because I have personal issues") which sounds combative to native ears, or constructing an excessively long, deeply personal narrative detailing private familial matters. This distribution clearly illustrates the structural manifestations of negative interlanguage transfer.

DISCUSSION AND LINGUISTIC TRANSFER

The operational patterns derived from the data highlight a deep structural relationship between the learner's native socio-cultural framework and their interlanguage output. The high percentage of direct strategies observed in requests and the binary polarization in refusals can be explained through the lens of positive and negative socio-pragmatic transfer from Uzbek cultural dynamics.

In Uzbek discourse communities, communicative politeness is profoundly embedded within semantic honorifics, verb suffixes, and non-verbal relational markers, rather than being solely dependent on syntactically complex structural softeners. For example, the use of the second-person plural form (*Siz*) or the attachment of the suffix *-mi* to a verb inherently establishes respect and social distance within the native environment. When translating these internal conceptual concepts into English, learners often omit the structural mitigators required in English (such as "Would you mind...", "If it's not too much trouble..."), because they assume that basic polite lexical items like "please" are sufficient to balance out a blunt imperative. This constitutes a classic pragmatic-linguistic failure driven by structural under-representation.

Furthermore, the qualitative interviews revealed that many learners experience severe "politeness anxiety" when trying to refuse an offer in English. In traditional Uzbek culture, maintaining collective social harmony (*andoza* and *hurmat*) makes a direct refusal highly sensitive. To compensate for this when speaking English, learners feel compelled to provide exhaustive, explicit details to validate their truthfulness. They do not realize that in Western contexts, providing excessive personal detail can inadvertently signal insincerity or cross conventional boundaries of professional privacy. This finding proves that pragmatic errors are not random performance slips; they are highly structured, deeply reasoned linguistic choices rooted in the user's primary socio-cultural identity.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND CLASSROOM STRATEGIES

The reality of the pragmatic lag affecting advanced learners demands a profound shift in how English language curricula are structured within modern university settings. To move beyond mechanical grammar drills, language departments must adopt explicit pragmatic instructional frameworks. Research demonstrates that implicit exposure to authentic language is insufficient for learners to acquire socio-pragmatic patterns; instead, active noticeability and explicit meta-pragmatic analysis must be integrated directly into day-to-day training.

A highly effective strategy involves restructuring classroom discourse around the Three-Step Pragmatic Awareness Cycle:

1. ****Observation and Contrastive Identification:**** Learners are exposed to authentic video segments or audio corpora depicting native interactions alongside parallel non-native failures. Students map the precise linguistic differences between direct commands and culturally modified speech acts, tracking how variables like social power alter conversational structure.
2. ****Contextual Simulation and Role-Play:**** Moving beyond static worksheets, students engage in dynamic, scenario-based simulations where they must adapt their speech styles based on changing parameters of social distance and power. For instance, a student must request a favor first from a close peer, then from a university dean, and finally from a stranger, forcing them to select different linguistic markers in real-time.
3. ****Reflective Feedback and Evaluation:**** Instructors must look past basic grammatical errors and provide dedicated feedback on tone, politeness levels, and structural appropriateness. By evaluating language through this lens, students become conscious of their own linguistic output and learn to avoid unintended socio-pragmatic errors.

Furthermore, textbook developers and instructors must actively audit educational materials to replace artificial, overly stylized dialogues with authentic, context-rich language models. Incorporating digital media, film clips, and interactive speech corpora allows students to witness how intonation, discourse markers, and indirect speech acts operate in real-world contexts. This multi-sensory exposure ensures that when students achieve an upper-intermediate grammar status, their pragmatic abilities advance at the same rate.

CONCLUSION

This paper has illustrated that achieving true fluency in a second language requires a deep, comprehensive mastery of pragmatic competence alongside grammatical accuracy. Through a detailed analysis of upper-intermediate Uzbek learners, we have documented that structural correctness does not shield a speaker from significant pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic failures. The identified patterns of negative linguistic transfer confirm that learners frequently rely on native socio-cultural communicative frameworks when navigating English social interactions, which often leads to unintended directness or conversational strain.

To overcome these challenges, modern higher education frameworks must evolve past traditional structural models and fully adopt communication-centric methodologies. Integrating explicit pragmatic instruction, raising cultural awareness, and utilizing authentic interactive materials are vital steps toward bridging the pragmatic lag. By equipping students with the tools to smoothly modify their language according to social context, power dynamics, and social distance, we ensure that their academic and professional communication is both effective and socially appropriate.

While this study provides valuable insights into the interlanguage patterns of a specific student cohort, further long-term research is needed to track how pragmatic competence develops over extended periods of study. Future investigations should also explore the role of digital communication environments, such as email and professional messaging apps, in shaping the pragmatic choices of modern language learners. Ultimately, prioritizing pragmatic development within the curriculum guarantees that university graduates leave fully prepared to excel within the international global community.

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