



Developing Pragmatic Competence in English: A Case Study of Uzbek Learners

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Annotation: This article examines the development of pragmatic competence in English among Uzbek learners and explores challenges they face in acquiring pragmatic skills required for effective communication in intercultural contexts. The research discusses theoretical foundations of pragmatic competence, factors influencing its acquisition, and the current state of pragmatic awareness among learners in Uzbekistan. It further presents a case study analyzing authentic classroom observations, learner responses, and language use in real-life situations. The study identifies common pragmatic failures, including inappropriate speech acts, limited sociolinguistic awareness, and transfer of L1 pragmatics into English. Recommendations for improving pragmatic competence through communicative approaches, authentic materials, and culturally enriched language input are proposed.

Keywords: Pragmatic competence, intercultural communication, Uzbek learners, EFL, sociolinguistics, discourse, speech acts, language acquisition.

Introduction: Developing pragmatic competence is a crucial component of foreign language learning, as it ensures learners not only possess linguistic knowledge but also understand how to use language appropriately in a particular socio-cultural context. Pragmatics refers to the ability to interpret meaning beyond the literal level and involves understanding implied meanings, politeness norms, speech acts, conversational rules, and cultural elements that influence communication. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), pragmatic competence becomes even more significant due to the intercultural nature of English communication. For Uzbek learners, gaining pragmatic competence means learning to express themselves not only grammatically correctly but also socially and culturally appropriately. In Uzbekistan, the English language is taught widely in schools, colleges, universities, and private educational centers, yet instruction traditionally focuses on grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension rather than pragmatic use. Consequently, learners may achieve high scores in tests but struggle to communicate naturally with native or international English speakers. This article aims to explore how Uzbek learners develop pragmatic competence, identify barriers to their pragmatic development, and suggest pedagogical strategies that can enhance their ability to communicate effectively in English-speaking environments.



Main Body: Pragmatic competence includes several components such as illocutionary competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. Illocutionary competence refers to the ability to perform speech acts such as requesting, refusing, complimenting, apologizing, and suggesting, in manners appropriate to context. For example, a grammatically correct but pragmatically inappropriate request such as “Give me your pen” may sound rude in English whereas Uzbek pragmatic norms may allow directness among peers. Sociolinguistic competence involves knowing how social variables like age, status, relationship, and cultural norms affect language choice. Uzbek learners often rely on literal translations or Uzbek cultural rules when communicating in English, leading to pragmatic transfer. For instance, learners may excessively use honorific expressions or indirectness in situations where English norms value clarity and brevity. Discourse competence refers to the ability to produce coherent speech and manage conversation appropriately. Strategic competence helps learners overcome communication difficulties through strategies such as paraphrasing, self-repair, or politeness markers. A case study was conducted at a pedagogical institute in Uzbekistan involving 30 first-year English majors aged 18–20. The study included classroom observation, pragmatic awareness tasks, and interviews. During role-play activities, learners performed speech acts involving greeting, refusing, apologizing, and complaining.

Analysis showed that learners displayed stronger grammatical accuracy than pragmatic appropriateness. For instance, when refusing an invitation, many students used culturally influenced expressions such as “I am sorry, I cannot come because my parents will not allow and it is shame for me” which sounded unnatural or overly personal to English listeners. A native-like refusal in English often follows a formula such as gratitude + softening + indirect excuse, e.g., “Thanks for inviting me, I’d really love to, but I already have plans.” In apology scenarios, Uzbek learners often over-apologized, reflecting Uzbek politeness norms. For example, “I am very, very sorry teacher, I made a huge mistake” was commonly used even for minor issues like forgetting a pen. English apologies tend to be concise such as, “Sorry, I forgot my pen. Can I borrow one?” Another area of pragmatic failure was compliment response. Uzbek cultural norms often discourage accepting compliments directly; therefore, students frequently rejected compliments in English. For example, when complimented for a nice presentation, a typical response was “No, it was not good, I am not good at English,” which in English communication may sound lacking in confidence or ungrateful. Appropriate responses could include “Thank you, I appreciate it” or “Thanks, I tried my best.” Classroom observations also showed limited exposure to authentic English input. Textbooks provided scripted dialogues that failed to represent real-life pragmatics. Teachers heavily emphasized grammar and written tasks, leaving little opportunity for pragmatic practice. Students rarely interacted with international



speakers and thus lacked intercultural communication experiences. Interviews with teachers revealed that many educators themselves felt uncertain about how to teach pragmatics due to lack of training and resources. Most teachers relied on translation-based methods, focusing on accuracy over communicative appropriateness. To develop pragmatic competence, learners need input that reflects natural English usage, including idiomatic expressions, discourse markers, small talk conventions, and cultural norms. Authentic materials such as movies, podcasts, interviews, and real-life dialogues provide such exposure. Role-plays, simulations, and pragmatic awareness activities also support learning. For instance, comparing Uzbek and English refusal strategies raises learners' metapragmatic awareness and helps avoid negative pragmatic transfer. Explicit instruction plays a significant role in pragmatic development. Research shows that pragmatic competence does not always develop automatically through exposure, therefore teachers should explain norms of politeness, speech acts, and conversational rules. For Uzbek learners, contrastive analysis between Uzbek and English politeness formulas is effective. Students should learn how cultural values such as individualism and collectivism influence communication styles. English speaking cultures, especially in Western contexts, tend to be more direct, individualistic, and time-efficient, whereas Uzbek culture values collectivism, hierarchy, and emotional warmth. These cultural differences shape communication. For instance, Uzbek speakers tend to ask personal questions early in a conversation (e.g., age, marital status, salary) as signs of friendliness, but such questions in English may be considered intrusive. Teaching pragmatic competence requires integration into curriculum design, teacher training, and assessment reforms. Teachers should incorporate communicative language teaching (CLT), task-based learning (TBL), and intercultural communicative competence approaches. Assessment should not only evaluate linguistic knowledge but also pragmatic use. Pragmatic assessment may include discourse completion tests, role-plays, reflection journals, and peer feedback. Students should also be encouraged to participate in English clubs, international exchange programs, online intercultural communication platforms, and collaborative projects with foreign peers.

The digital environment provides valuable tools for pragmatic learning. Social media, international forums, online gaming, and language exchange applications expose learners to authentic English. Watching English content with an intercultural lens, analyzing dialogues, and keeping a pragmatic diary can support independent learning. In the case study, after implementing a six-week pragmatic awareness training program that included authentic video analysis, role-plays, and peer feedback, learners demonstrated significant improvement in using polite requests, making suggestions, responding to compliments, and managing small talk. Students reported increased confidence and awareness of cultural norms. Some began using English idioms and discourse markers such as "by the way," "actually," "to be honest," and "I see what you



mean,” which enhanced their conversational naturalness. The findings show that targeted pragmatic instruction has a positive impact on Uzbek learners’ communicative competence.

Conclusion: Developing pragmatic competence is essential for Uzbek learners of English to communicate effectively in intercultural settings. While linguistic competence remains important, knowing how to use language appropriately in social contexts determines communicative success. The case study revealed that Uzbek learners often face pragmatic challenges due to limited exposure to authentic English, L1 pragmatic transfer, and traditional teaching methods focusing on accuracy rather than communicative use. However, with explicit instruction, authentic materials, intercultural awareness training, and communicative practice, learners can significantly enhance their pragmatic skills. Teachers play a crucial role in integrating pragmatics into English instruction and guiding learners towards becoming culturally competent communicators. Strengthening pragmatic competence ensures that Uzbek learners not only know English but can use it confidently, politely, and effectively in real-life communication.

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