

**Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review**

**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

**<https://llrjournal.com/index.php/11>**

**PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT IN SECOND  
LANGUAGE LEARNERS: AN ANALYSIS OF SPEECH ACTS IN  
ACADEMIC SETTINGS**



**Mumlikanova Anna<sup>\*1</sup>, Naveed Ahmad<sup>2</sup>, Talha<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>\*1</sup>School of Foreign Languages, Zhejiang Gongshang University, Hangzhou, China

<sup>2</sup>Department of Education, Minhaj University Lahore, Pakistan

<sup>3</sup>University of Makran, Pakistan

<sup>\*1</sup>[mumlikanova99@mail.ru](mailto:mumlikanova99@mail.ru),

<sup>2</sup>[naveedahmedrajpoot347@gmail.com](mailto:naveedahmedrajpoot347@gmail.com), <sup>3</sup>[talha@uomp.edu.pk](mailto:talha@uomp.edu.pk)

## Abstract

*Historically, second language acquisition (SLA) research focused heavily on grammatical and lexical mastery; however, the modern globalized academic landscape necessitates a shift toward pragmatic competence the ability to use language appropriately across social contexts. This report examines the developmental trajectories and realization patterns of speech acts among second language (L2) learners in academic settings. Grounded in Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory, the analysis explores how learners navigate "face-threatening acts" and social variables such as power, distance, and imposition. The research highlights a non-linear developmental path, influenced by cognitive mechanisms like the "Noticing Hypothesis" and structured stages of request development. It further analyzes core academic speech acts, including requests, refusals, and disagreements, noting how advanced learners utilize mitigation devices and supportive moves to manage interpersonal relationships. Finally, the paper discusses the paradigm shift toward English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and the emerging role of Artificial Intelligence and digital tools in providing immersive, albeit challenging, environments for pragmatic growth.*

**Keywords:** *Pragmatic Competence, Speech Act Theory, Interlanguage Pragmatics, Academic Discourse, Politeness Theory, Second Language Acquisition (SLA).*

### 1. Introduction

The study of second language acquisition (SLA) has historically been dominated by the pursuit of grammatical accuracy and lexical breadth; however, the modern globalized landscape of higher education necessitates a more profound focus on pragmatic competence. Pragmatic competence, fundamentally defined as the ability of a language user to employ linguistic resources effectively and appropriately across varied social contexts, represents the critical juncture where linguistic knowledge meets social action (Lv et al., 2021). In academic settings, where communicative demands range from formal lectures and seminars to peer collaborations and status-unequal email exchanges, the mastery of pragmatic nuances is not merely an "ornamental" skill but a prerequisite for academic success and social integration (Choraih et al., 2016). This report provides an exhaustive review of the developmental trajectories, theoretical underpinnings, and realization patterns of speech acts among second language (L2) learners within the global academic sphere (Abrams, 2022).

### 2. Conceptual Frameworks and Theoretical Foundations

The theoretical architecture of pragmatic competence is built upon the premise that utterances are not just strings of words but actions performed to achieve specific social goals. This conceptualization is primarily rooted in Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962). At its core, every communicative act consists of three distinct components: the locutionary act, which is the literal production of sounds and words; the illocutionary act, which reflects the speaker's intent (e.g., requesting, apologizing, or commanding); and the perlocutionary act, representing the effect the utterance has on the hearer (Alzebaree & Yavuz, 2017).

**Table 1. Components of Communicative Acts in Academic Contexts**

Component	Definition	Academic Context Example
Locutionary Act	The literal meaning and structure of the utterance.	"Is there an extension available for this assignment?"
Illocutionary Act	The intended function or force of the speaker.	Making a request for more time.
Perlocutionary Act	The actual effect or outcome on the listener.	The professor granting or denying the request.

In the academic domain, the successful alignment of these components is complex. Learners must navigate the "direction of fit" whether the words aim to match the world (as in assertions) or the world is intended to match the words (Bernard & Arnold, 2019). For a directive to be "felicitous" or successful, specific sincerity and preparatory conditions must be met; for instance, a student making a request must truly need the outcome and believe the professor has the authority to grant it (Pietarinen & Beni, 2025).

### 2.1 Politeness Theory and Face Management

Central to the realization of speech acts in academic settings is the concept of "face," defined as the public self-image that every member of a society wants to claim for themselves. Academic interactions are inherently face-threatening acts. A request threatens the hearer's "negative face" their desire to be unimpeded while a refusal or disagreement might threaten the "positive face" of the interlocutor their desire to be liked or validated (Aporbo et al., 2024).

To mitigate these threats, speakers employ politeness strategies. Positive politeness strategies aim to build rapport and solidarity, often used in peer-to-peer interactions, while negative politeness strategies emphasize deference, autonomy, and the avoidance of imposition, which are critical in student-to-professor interactions. The choice of strategy is governed by three social variables: power (P), social distance (D), and the degree of imposition (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

**Table 2. Social Variables Influencing Politeness Strategies**

Variable	Definition	Impact on Speech Act Realization
Power (P)	The vertical hierarchy between interlocutors (student vs. dean).	High power differentials typically require more indirectness and formal mitigation.
Social Distance (D)	The degree of familiarity or intimacy between speakers.	Greater distance (strangers) necessitates higher levels of formal politeness.
Imposition (R)	The perceived cost or weight of the requested action.	High-imposition acts (e.g., asking for a grade change) require significant "supportive moves."

### 3. Developmental Trajectories in Interlanguage Pragmatics

The field of Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP) investigates how L2 learners' pragmatic systems evolve over time, oscillating between their native language (L1) norms and the target language (L2) conventions. Unlike the acquisition of syntax, which may follow a relatively linear path of complexity, pragmatic development is a highly variable, non-linear process influenced by cognitive and environmental factors (Kasper & Rose, 2002).

#### 3.1 Cognitive Mechanisms: Noticing and Processing

A primary driver of pragmatic development is the "Noticing Hypothesis," which posits that learners must consciously attend to linguistic forms, their functional meanings, and the contextual features of the situation to convert input into intake (Schmidt, 1983). In a globalized academic environment,

simply being exposed to the language is insufficient; learners must "notice" the subtle ways a professor softens a criticism or how a peer manages a disagreement (Chen & Brown, 2025). Adult L2 learners often have high levels of mental representation from their L1 but lack the linguistic "control" to execute it in the L2 in real-time, leading to "pragmatic failure" (González-Lloret, 2020).

### 3.2 Kasper's Five Stages of Request Development

Longitudinal research has identified a five-stage developmental trajectory that learners navigate as they move toward target-like proficiency in requests (Taguchi, 2011).

1. **Pre-basic Stage:** Communication is context-dependent and minimalistic (e.g., "Paper?").
2. **Formulaic Stage:** The use of unanalyzed routines and imperatives emerges (e.g., "Please" or "Can I have...?").
3. **Unpacking Stage:** Learners begin to break down formulas, incorporating them into more varied language use.
4. **Pragmatic Expansion Stage:** This stage is marked by a significant increase in the use of mitigators and "supportive moves".
5. **Fine-tuning Stage:** The ability to adapt speech acts precisely to the social context, balancing directness and indirectness (Thomas, 1983).

Figure 1 presents the non-linear progression of request development in L2 learners, illustrating increasing linguistic and pragmatic complexity. The transition from formulaic expressions to context-sensitive strategies reflects the gradual acquisition of pragmatic competence.

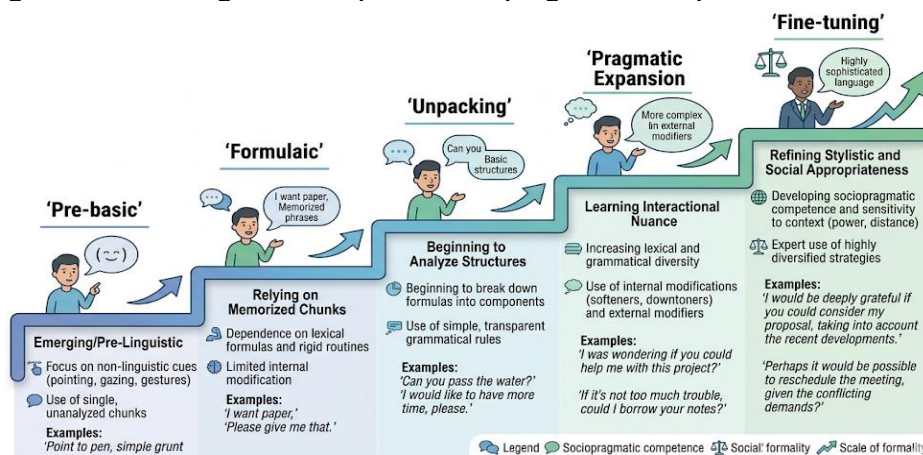


Figure 1: Developmental Stages of Request Strategies in L2 Learners

## 4. Analysis of Core Speech Acts in Academic Settings

Academic settings demand high "pragmatic sophistication". The most frequently researched speech acts include requests, apologies, refusals, and disagreements (Alzeebaree & Yavuz, 2017).

### 4.1 Requests: Navigating Imposition and Authority

Requests are "impositive" acts, requiring the speaker to exert control over the hearer's future actions. Research indicates that L2 learners, regardless of proficiency, often rely on "conventionally indirect" strategies such as "Could you...?" However, advanced learners distinguish themselves through "mitigation devices," including internal modifiers (lexical items like "perhaps") and external modifiers, also known as supportive moves (Li et al., 2017).

Table 3. Request Strategies and Mitigation in Academic Contexts

Strategy Type	Definition	Example in Academic Request
Direct Strategy	Explicitly stating the request without softening.	"Give me an extension on the paper."
Conventionally	Using standard polite inquiries about	"Could you please clarify the

Indirect	ability or willingness.	instructions?"
Internal Modifier	Softening the request within the main clause.	"I would <i>possibly</i> need a little more time."
Supportive Move	Providing justification or context before/after the request.	"I've been quite ill this week, <i>so</i> I was wondering..."

**4.2 Refusals and Disagreements: Managing Face**

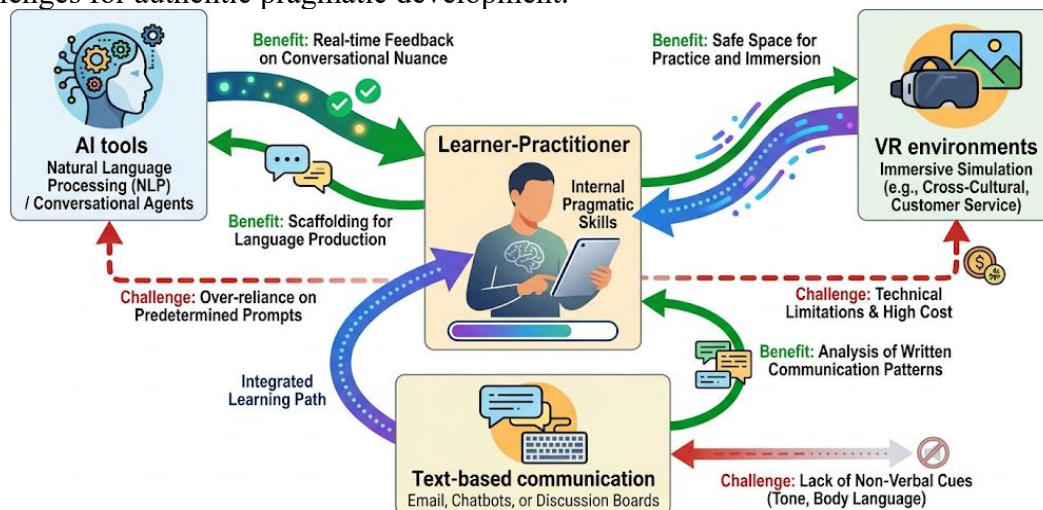
Refusals are pragmatically taxing as they represent a "dispreferred response" to an invitation or offer. Studies have shown that learners from "high-harmony" cultures often use longer, more complex formulas emphasizing excuses to avoid the "face-loss" of a direct refusal, while learners from "low-context" cultures may prioritize clarity. Advanced learners also use "hedging" (e.g., "I'm not sure if...") to reduce the force of a disagreement in academic seminars (González-Lloret, 2020).

**5. Redefining Competence: English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)**

A paradigm shift is moving from the "English as a Foreign Language" (EFL) model, which prioritizes native-speaker norms, to the "English as a Lingua Franca" (ELF) model. In international universities, the goal of communication is "mutual intelligibility" and "communicative efficiency". Pragmatic competence in ELF is characterized by linguistic creativity and accommodation strategies, such as rephrasing and repetition, to monitor understanding (Kecskes, 2019).

**6. The Role of Technology and Artificial Intelligence**

Figure 2 presents the ecosystem of technology-mediated pragmatic learning, highlighting both its affordances and limitations. While these tools enhance exposure and feedback, they also introduce new challenges for authentic pragmatic development.



**Figure 2: Technology-Mediated Pragmatic Learning Ecosystem**

Digital tools provide immersive environments for L2 development. Technologies such as computer-mediated communication (CMC) and virtual reality (VR) offer authentic interactional spaces (Al Zoubi et al., 2025). However, text-based digital pragmatics lacks the non-verbal cues (intonation, facial expressions) vital for interpreting sociopragmatic meaning, which can lead to increased interpersonal tension (Shaffaqat et al., 2025).

**Table 4. Technology-Mediated Pragmatic Affordances and Challenges**

<b>Technology</b>	<b>Pragmatic Affordance</b>	<b>Pragmatic Challenge</b>
<b>Generative AI</b>	Provides instant, personalized feedback and models for varied speech acts.	May encourage reliance on "pre-packaged" pragmatics without deep cultural noticing.
<b>VR/SDS</b>	Immersive, low-anxiety role-playing in simulated academic scenarios.	Technical constraints can limit the spontaneity and emotional depth of interaction.
<b>Text-based CMC</b>	Allows for planning and review of communicative choices.	Absence of non-verbal cues increases the risk of "cold" or "abrupt" perceptions.

### Conclusion

The mastery of pragmatic nuances is a prerequisite for academic success and social integration in higher education. While L2 learners often face "pragmatic failure" due to a lack of linguistic control over complex social interactions, development can be fostered through conscious "noticing" and the use of sophisticated mitigation strategies. As the educational landscape evolves, the focus is shifting from rigid adherence to native-speaker norms toward communicative efficiency and mutual intelligibility within an ELF framework.

Furthermore, while technology and Generative AI offer personalized models for speech act realization, they also present challenges, such as the loss of vital non-verbal cues and a potential over-reliance on pre-packaged formulas. Ultimately, achieving pragmatic sophistication requires learners to balance directness with indirectness, precisely adapting their speech to the vertical hierarchies and social distances inherent in the global academic sphere.

### References

- Al Zoubi, S. M., Al-Zoubi, S. M., Akkawi, A., & Al-Zoubi, R. S. (2025). The pragmatic competence of academically talented English language students: Cross-cultural research. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 16(6), 2118–2129. <https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.1606.01>
- Alzeebaree, Y., & Yavuz, M. A. (2017). Realization of the speech acts of request and apology by Middle Eastern EFL learners. *Eurasian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 3(2), 173–188. <https://doi.org/10.32601/ejal.460634>
- Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Oxford University Press.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge University Press.
- Chen, X., & Brown, L. (2025). L2 pragmatic development in constructing and negotiating contextual meanings. *Applied Linguistics*, 46(3), 503–521. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amae049>
- González-Lloret, M. (2020). Pragmatic development in L2: An overview. In K. P. Schneider & E. Ifantidou (Eds.), *Developmental and clinical pragmatics* (pp. 237–267). De Gruyter Mouton. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110431056-009>
- Kasper, G., & Rose, K. R. (2002). *Pragmatic development in a second language*. Blackwell.
- Kecskes, I. (2019). *English as a lingua franca*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316217832>
- Schmidt, R. (1983). Alice in wonderland: A case study of a Japanese learner of English (Wes) in Hawaii. In M. Eisenstein (Ed.), *The dynamic interlanguage* (pp. 137–174). Plenum.
- Searle, J. R. (1969). *Speech acts: An essay in the philosophy of language*. Cambridge University Press.

## **Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review**

**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

- Shaffaqat, M., Martín de Vidales Martín, M., & Hussain, W. (2025). Teaching pragmatic competence: Challenges and strategies for second language learners in the digital age. *Advance Social Science Archive Journal*, 4(01), 3455–3467. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17046754>
- Taguchi, N. (2011). Pragmatic development as a dynamic, complex process: Longitudinal study of L2 Japanese implicature development. *Modern Language Journal*, 95(4), 605–627. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2011.01246.x>
- Thomas, J. (1983). Cross-cultural pragmatic failure. *Applied Linguistics*, 4(2), 91–112. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/4.2.91>
- Abrams, Z. I. (2022). Second Language Pragmatics, written by Naoko Taguchi and Carsten Roever. *Contrastive Pragmatics*, 4, 153–157. <https://doi.org/10.1163/26660393-bja10048>
- Choraih, M. A., Loutfi, A., & Mansoor, A. (2016). The Importance of Pragmatic Competence in the EFL Curriculum: Application and Implications\*. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2895549>
- Lv, X., Ren, W., & Li, L. (2021). Pragmatic Competence and Willingness to Communicate Among L2 Learners of Chinese. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.797419>
- Bernard, D., & Arnold, A. (2019). Cognitive interaction with virtual assistants: From philosophical foundations to illustrative examples in aeronautics. *Computers in Industry*, 107, 33–49.
- Pietarinen, A. V., & Beni, M. D. (2025). Beyond Bayesian Accuracy: Skill, Abduction, and the Free Energy Principle in Normative Rationality. *Foundations of Science*, 1-20.
- Aporbo, R. J., Barabag, J. M. C., Catig, B. U., & Claveria, C. M. P. (2024). Face-threatening and face-saving speech acts of teachers: A discourse analysis of classroom interactions. *World Journal of English Language*, 14(3).
- Li, Q., Zhang, H., & Taguchi, N. (2017). The use of mitigation devices in heritage learners of Chinese. *Heritage Language Journal*, 14(2), 150-170.