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DEVELOPING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE THROUGH INTERACTIVE METHODS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: A CRITICAL SYNTHESIS AND INSTRUCTIONAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract: Pragmatic competence enables English language learners to interpret speakers' intentions, calibrate language to relationships and communicative goals, and negotiate meaning as interaction unfolds. Although university students may acquire substantial grammatical knowledge, limited opportunities for situated communication can constrain their ability to make contextually appropriate requests, refusals, apologies, and suggestions. This article critically synthesizes peer-reviewed research on instructed second-language pragmatics and proposes an interactive instructional framework for university-level English as a foreign language (EFL) settings. The analysis draws on selected theoretical studies, experimental investigations, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses published principally between 2017 and 2026. Rather than reporting a new classroom experiment, the study examines convergent findings and methodological limitations in the literature. The synthesis identifies five connected design priorities: contextualized noticing of pragmatic choices, task-based interpersonal negotiation, explicit metapragmatic guidance, dialogic feedback, and transfer across communicative settings. These priorities inform a five-stage learning cycle and an assessment protocol combining role-plays, discourse-completion tasks, reflective accounts, and performance rubrics. Published meta-analytic evidence indicates that pragmatics instruction can be effective, while study-specific results caution against equating knowledge of conventional expressions with spontaneous, culturally responsive performance. The proposed framework offers a testable model for pedagogical innovation; its effectiveness in Uzbek higher education remains an empirical question requiring controlled and longitudinal evaluation.

Keywords: pragmatic competence; interactive teaching methods; instructional pragmatics; EFL; role-play; task-based learning; metapragmatic awareness; formative assessment.

INTRODUCTION

Internationalized higher education increasingly requires students not merely to produce grammatically well-formed English but also to communicate effectively with peers, lecturers, professional partners, and interlocutors from diverse linguistic backgrounds. A learner who knows the modal verb could may still issue a request that overlooks institutional roles, an appropriate degree of imposition, or a conversational partner's expectations. Conversely, an indirect formulation may be linguistically sophisticated yet unclear in a setting where directness is preferred. Pragmatic competence therefore involves situated judgment rather than the mechanical selection of polite phrases. It covers the ability to link linguistic forms with communicative functions, infer implied meanings, recognize social relationships, adapt to changing turns, and decide when established conventions should be followed or strategically departed from (Taguchi & Roever, 2017; Ishihara & Cohen, 2022).

The article has two objectives: first, to synthesize the evidence concerning interactive techniques and the conditions under which they may support pragmatic development; second, to construct a transparent instructional and assessment framework adaptable to tertiary EFL teaching. Three analytical questions guide the review: Which mechanisms plausibly connect interactive methods with pragmatic learning? Which design features and assessment practices receive the clearest support from published research? What limitations must be addressed before claiming improved pragmatic competence in a local university setting? The contribution is a research-

grounded pedagogical synthesis, not an unreported intervention study or a claim of universal causal effectiveness.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

Second-language pragmatics is often described through two mutually dependent domains. Pragmalinguistic knowledge concerns the linguistic resources available for realizing communicative intentions: lexical choices, modality, discourse markers, formulaic expressions, prosody, and sequencing. Sociopragmatic knowledge concerns the interpretation of contextual factors such as power, social distance, rights and obligations, expectations, and the perceived weight of a request or disagreement. The distinction is analytically useful but should not conceal the fact that communication unfolds jointly. A refusal, for instance, cannot be evaluated only by counting mitigating expressions; timing, acknowledgment of the preceding turn, explanation, and the recipient's response may alter its interpersonal meaning.

Interactional competence adds a further dimension: participants coconstruct meaning through turn-taking, alignment, repair, topic management, and responsiveness to emergent contingencies. Galaczi and Taylor emphasize that interactional competence has both cognitive and social dimensions and raises assessment challenges that are not resolved by testing isolated utterances. Pragmatic performance should accordingly be understood as a situated accomplishment, partly dependent on interlocutor behavior. A learner may select a suitable apology but fail to respond to dissatisfaction; another may employ noncanonical wording yet successfully repair a problem. Any defensible assessment must consider contextual interpretation, linguistic options, sequential organization, and negotiation, while avoiding the reduction of competence to a single idealized native-speaker norm.

The strongest aggregate evidence comes from research syntheses. The meta-analysis by Ren et al. indicates positive learning outcomes associated with pragmatics instruction but also identifies design-sensitive moderators. Earlier, Yousefi and Nassaji reviewed 39 studies and found that computer-mediated instruction could produce stronger effects than face-to-face instruction in their selected evidence base; however, modes were entangled with study characteristics and the finding does not justify treating technology itself as the causal mechanism. Li and Sun, in a broader meta-analysis of explicit instruction across L2 learning outcomes, likewise identified effects moderated by instructional type, practice, treatment intensity, and measurement choices. Because this last synthesis was not confined to pragmatic competence, it serves as supportive methodological context rather than direct confirmation of an interactive-pragmatics intervention.

Evidence from more focused studies illustrates why activity design matters. Nguyen and Pham (2022) investigated the comprehension of indirect refusals and opinions and found that metapragmatic instruction could improve learners' recognition of conversational implications, with outcomes differing by implicature type. Róg compared alternative task implementations for teaching interactional sequences and reported gains across conditions, with a combined implicit–explicit arrangement appearing more beneficial in that investigation. These findings suggest a plausible sequence in which learners first notice a communicative problem, attempt a situated response, receive focused guidance, and revise their choices. Nevertheless, individual studies cannot determine the optimal sequence for every proficiency level, speech act, or cultural environment.

Technology-mediated contexts widen opportunities for recurring, lower-stakes pragmatic practice. Hui, Liu, and Chi synthesized 20 publications on technology-supported English pragmatic competence and emphasized multidimensional pragmatic awareness rather than tool use alone. Akay and Kessler examined virtual-reality pedagogy in relation to oral communication and pragmatic competence, illustrating an additional interactional environment for instructional design. Digitally mediated communication also presents genre-specific conventions: requests by email, instant messaging, synchronous video calls, and in-person conversation involve different response

expectations and resources. Digital practice must therefore model the discourse conventions of a channel and should be judged by meaningful uptake, not the novelty of a platform.

Learner variables constitute another qualification. In their systematic review of 86 studies, Zhang and Aubrey identified roles for proficiency, identity, motivation, willingness to communicate, intercultural competence, and cognitive factors in pragmatic development. These are interrelated with learning context over time. Uniformly requiring learners to imitate a prespecified politeness form may suppress legitimate variation and overstate error. An inclusive approach asks students to explain why a strategy may work in a particular situation, consider alternatives, and recognize risks of misunderstanding. Such instruction can foreground pragmatic flexibility and respect for linguistic diversity while continuing to teach the conventional patterns that make successful communication more likely.

This paper uses a critical narrative synthesis with a theory-to-design mapping procedure. It is not registered as a systematic review, does not claim exhaustive database coverage, and does not produce a new pooled effect size. Sources were purposively selected from accessible peer-reviewed publications and recognized scholarly books, with priority given to work published between 2017 and 2026 and to research directly addressing L2 pragmatics instruction, interactive tasks, assessment, and individual differences. Seminal conceptual contributions were retained where they clarified the construct. Publication records and bibliographic identifiers were checked against publisher pages or research indexes. The selected set includes meta-analyses, focused experimental studies, systematic reviews, methodological scholarship, and pedagogical research; these genres are distinguished rather than statistically combined.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first finding is that pragmatic development benefits from explicit attention to the relationship between form, function, and context. Metapragmatic explanation can help students interpret why a speaker chooses a hedged request, a delayed refusal, or an indirect critical comment. The literature does not establish that explicit explanation alone is sufficient; rather, it suggests that awareness is one component of competence that should be followed by appropriate communicative use. The strong aggregate effects reported by Ren et al. together with the focused observations of Nguyen and Pham, support incorporating guided comparison of alternatives before and after interaction. A pedagogical inference is to use brief noticing tasks that contrast several plausible responses and ask students to justify each in terms of interlocutor relationship and communicative purpose.

The second finding concerns contingencies in interaction. Communicative competence is not exhausted by the initial performance of a speech act. Learners also need to interpret acceptance, hesitation, challenge, or resistance and to revise their responses. Open-ended role-plays, structured peer consultation, and information-gap exchanges can create these contingencies; the instructor should avoid scripts that determine both turns in advance. Róg provides evidence that the implementation of tasks influences learning outcomes, while Galaczi and Taylor establish why sequentially organized interaction warrants separate analytical attention. The inferred principle is that every task should require at least one moment in which students react to information they did not know before the exchange.

The third finding is that feedback should address communicative consequences, not only linguistic correctness. A teacher may ask whether the message expressed appropriate urgency, gave the partner a reasonable option, or responded adequately to an objection. Peers can also compare how different expressions alter the perceived stance of the speaker. Written feedback on lexical forms remains useful, but the activity becomes pragmatic when alternatives are evaluated in relation to audience and purpose. A structured cycle of practice, dialogic feedback, and re-performance plausibly combines the benefits of explicit instruction with those of interaction. Its

effectiveness in a particular university context, however, remains to be tested rather than assumed from the reviewed studies.

Table 1. Evidence-informed design matrix for interactive pragmatics instruction

Teaching priority	Illustrative interactive procedure	Targeted pragmatic process	Suggested evidence
Context-rich noticing	Compare direct/indirect requests across power and distance	Form–function–context links; alternative interpretations	Short scenario-based justification
Negotiated role-play	Run unscripted paired consultation with changing partner responses	Uptake, turn-taking, pragmatic repair	Recorded interaction and rubric
Collaborative problem solving	Reach agreement on a contested group-project decision	Disagreement mitigation; stance negotiation	Observation notes and peer reflection
Metapragmatic feedback	Discuss why one formulation helped or hindered the goal	Conscious choice of linguistic resources	Revision commentary + second attempt
Cross-context transfer	Rework the same intention for email, chat and a meeting	Genre sensitivity; strategic adaptation	Delayed contrasting-situation task

The synthesized principles support an original five-stage learning cycle: contextualize, notice, negotiate, reflect, and transfer. The first stage defines the communicative purpose, interlocutor relationship, channel, and potential cost of misunderstanding. The second introduces several authentic or pedagogically adapted ways of performing the relevant function and asks learners to analyze their likely consequences. In the third stage, students perform a genuinely interactive task with incomplete information or evolving constraints; the teacher observes without eliminating uncertainty. The fourth stage combines peer comparison and guided feedback with an opportunity to retry. Finally, learners adapt the same communicative goal to a new partner, medium, or degree of imposition. The stages are recursive: evidence of confusion during negotiation may justify returning to contextualization, while transfer failures identify new noticing priorities.

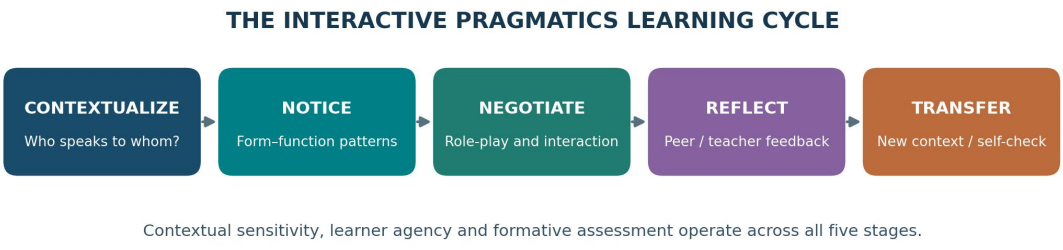


Figure 1. Proposed interactive pragmatics learning cycle (author-developed conceptual model; no empirical quantities are represented).

Consider a B2-level lesson in which a student needs a two-day extension for a group assignment. The communicative intention appears simple, yet the scenario includes a lecturer's time constraints, a group member's contribution, institutional deadlines, and uncertainty about acceptable alternatives. Students first examine three possible openings—an abrupt demand, a minimally mitigated request, and an explanation followed by a negotiated proposal—without

being told that a single option is universally correct. They consider who bears the cost of the extension, which details are relevant, and how the same request might differ in a face-to-face meeting or an email. The teacher supplies brief metapragmatic prompts concerning imposition, accountability, entitlement, and the possible interpretations of hedging.

In the negotiation stage, one student acts as the requester and another as the lecturer, but the second participant receives a confidential constraint: the final submission date cannot change, although partial submission is permissible. Because the requester does not know this fact, a memorized request cannot complete the task. The partners must clarify the problem, propose alternatives, respond to refusal, and reach an explicit outcome. A third student observes and records evidence of initial framing, responsiveness, mitigation, clarification, and repair. After the role-play, the group compares two excerpts from the interaction and identifies points where a different turn could have changed the outcome. The activity then repeats with altered institutional roles so that learners cannot simply reproduce the initial exchange.

A defensible evaluation should distinguish four domains: contextual inference, pragmalinguistic range, sociopragmatic judgment, and interactional responsiveness. Each can be rated on a five-point ordered scale, from 0 (no observable evidence) to 4 (consistently purposeful and adaptive performance), using descriptors illustrated by anchor samples. Contextual inference concerns the interpretation of goals, relationship, and constraints; pragmalinguistic range concerns the availability and clarity of linguistic resources; sociopragmatic judgment concerns justified alignment between strategy and circumstances; responsiveness concerns uptake, clarification, negotiation, and repair. A total score may be reported for administrative convenience, but domain profiles should remain visible because two learners with identical totals may require different instructional support.

The proposed design uses at least three forms of evidence. A written discourse-completion task samples recognition and planned formulation under standardized contextual descriptions. An oral role-play samples the construction of a response in real time, and a delayed transfer task assesses application in an unfamiliar setting or medium. Reflective explanations may identify learners' reasoning but should not substitute for performance evidence. For empirical research, raters should be trained on anonymized examples, coding decisions should be documented, and inter-rater agreement should be reported with an appropriate statistic such as weighted kappa or an intraclass correlation coefficient, depending on the scoring design. Tasks should be piloted for comparable difficulty; analysis should report uncertainty, attrition, and alternative explanations, not just changes in mean scores.

If the framework is evaluated through a quasi-experimental university study, a reasonable next step is a pretest–posttest–delayed-posttest comparison of two intact groups with equivalent contact hours, proficiency profiling, and transparent assignment procedures. A sufficiently powered study would prespecify primary outcomes and effect sizes, control for initial differences, and use blinded scoring where practical. Audio or video collection would require informed consent, privacy safeguards, and institutional approval. Multilevel analyses may be needed if learners are nested in classes or raters. These are methodological recommendations, not descriptions of procedures already performed. Without primary observations and an appropriate comparison, this article cannot legitimately claim causal effectiveness for its proposed cycle.

The term interactive is often used descriptively, but speaking time is not a sufficient explanation of pragmatic learning. Two groups may perform the same number of dialogues while differing in contextual specificity, uncertainty, corrective feedback, opportunities for revision, or perceived safety in experimenting with language. The pedagogically relevant mechanism is arguably the interaction between noticing and consequential communicative choice: learners encounter a context-sensitive problem, select a strategy, receive information about how the strategy was interpreted, and update subsequent performance. This account is consistent with the

broader literature on explicit instruction and pragmatics interventions, yet the relative contribution of each component remains open to empirical identification.

For Uzbek universities, a contextualized application should begin with a needs analysis of the interactions students are expected to undertake: meeting teachers, joining international seminars, resolving group-project disagreements, submitting requests, and collaborating online. Scenarios should include local institutional conditions and multiple English-using interlocutors rather than only imagined interactions with native speakers. Students could examine why a strategy is effective for one relationship but ambiguous for another, and teachers could compare student-selected formulations with descriptions from diverse international communicative settings. The framework may thereby support professional communication while avoiding a deficit model of learners' linguistic identities. Its utility, however, cannot be confirmed without collecting local classroom data.

Several limitations delimit the present synthesis. The purposive search strategy creates a risk of selection bias; no PRISMA flow, exhaustive study inventory, or formal risk-of-bias grading is offered. The reviewed research varies in population, target speech acts, instructional length, outcome instruments, and technological environments; it should not be treated as a homogeneous dataset. The instructional cycle and assessment dimensions are original integrations developed for this article and have not undergone expert validation, factor analysis, or classroom trials. Finally, performance on simulated tasks may not fully generalize to high-stakes institutional exchanges. These boundaries are integral to the interpretation of the results rather than shortcomings to conceal.

CONCLUSION

The literature reviewed in this article supports the educational value of explicit, contextualized instruction in second-language pragmatics, while demonstrating that outcomes vary with teaching conditions and assessment methods. Interactive tasks are most defensibly understood not as inherently effective activities, but as opportunities to connect context-sensitive interpretation with communicative action and feedback. The proposed five-stage cycle—contextualize, notice, negotiate, reflect, and transfer—offers a coherent way to integrate role-play, collaborative problem solving, metapragmatic explanation, and formative assessment within university EFL courses. The design matrix and worked classroom example translate this synthesis into observable teaching decisions without claiming an experiment that has not been conducted.

Three implications follow. First, pragmatic targets should be specified alongside grammatical and lexical objectives, with attention to interpersonal relationships and changing communicative conditions. Second, assessment should combine planned responses with real-time interaction and delayed transfer, using multidimensional rubrics rather than relying on a single written task. Third, culturally responsive pedagogy should expand learners' strategic repertoires while preserving agency in pragmatic choices. The framework constitutes a conceptual contribution and a basis for rigorous classroom testing, not proof of local effectiveness. Controlled implementation studies with transparent sampling, valid instruments, ethical safeguards, and longitudinal analysis are needed before claims about gains in Uzbek higher education can be made.

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