



THE IMPACT OF UZBEK CULTURAL NORMS ON ENGLISH PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE

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This article examines the impact of Uzbek cultural norms on the development of pragmatic competence in English as a foreign language. Pragmatic competence refers to the ability to use language appropriately according to context, social relations, and communicative intent. Drawing on theories of intercultural pragmatics and politeness, the paper analyzes how collectivism, respect for hierarchy, indirectness, and hospitality influence Uzbek learners' English communication. The study argues that pragmatic transfer can result in both effective politeness strategies and pragmatic failure. Pedagogical implications for English language teaching in Uzbekistan are discussed, emphasizing explicit pragmatics instruction and intercultural awareness. The article also argues that pragmatic competence does not develop automatically alongside grammatical proficiency and so it requires explicit pedagogical attention, pragmatic competence as a main component of communicative competence, the study contributes to the second language acquisition (SLA) research and offers practical implications for improving the effectiveness of EFL instruction in culturally diverse contexts.

Introduction. Pragmatic competence has become a central concept in second language acquisition (SLA) research, as it plays a crucial role in achieving effective and contextually appropriate communication. While grammatical accuracy has traditionally dominated language teaching and assessment, it is now widely acknowledged that successful communication depends not only on linguistic form but also on the ability to use language appropriately in social, cultural, and situational contexts. Pragmatic competence encompasses knowledge of speech acts, politeness strategies, implicatures, and discourse conventions, all of which are essential for meaningful interaction in a second language.¹

In the context of English as a foreign language (EFL) learning in Uzbekistan, pragmatic competence presents particular challenges. Learners often transfer pragmatic norms from their native language into English, resulting in pragmatic failure even when grammatical structures are accurate. Differences between Uzbek and English communicative norms—such as levels of directness, expressions of politeness, forms of address, and the management of interpersonal distance—can lead to misunderstandings in both spoken and written communication. These challenges are especially evident in intercultural interactions, where inappropriate pragmatic choices may be perceived as impolite, overly direct, or socially awkward.

Despite the growing recognition of pragmatics in SLA, pragmatic instruction remains underrepresented in many EFL classrooms in Uzbekistan, where curricula tend to prioritize vocabulary acquisition and grammatical competence. As a result, learners may achieve high levels of structural proficiency while still lacking the pragmatic awareness necessary for real-world communication. Addressing this gap requires greater attention to intercultural pragmatics and the integration of pragmatic competence into language teaching practices.

This study seeks to contribute to the growing body of research on pragmatic competence by examining its manifestation within the English-Uzbek linguistic and cultural context. While considerable attention has been given to pragmatic competence in widely studied language pairs, relatively little research has explored how English pragmatic norms are interpreted, acquired, and employed by Uzbek learners of English. By focusing on this specific context, the study aims to identify recurrent areas of pragmatic difficulty, including the use of speech acts, politeness strategies, implicatures, and context-dependent meanings that may not be adequately conveyed through grammatical knowledge alone. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the crucial role of context-sensitive language use in successful communication. Pragmatic failures often arise not from incorrect grammatical forms but from mismatches between linguistic choices

and sociocultural expectations, such as inappropriate levels of directness, misinterpretation of politeness conventions, or insufficient awareness of power relations and social distance. By highlighting these issues, the research underscores how pragmatic competence is deeply embedded in cultural norms and communicative practices, making it an essential component of effective second language use.

By foregrounding pragmatic competence as a core dimension of communicative competence, this study argues for a reorientation of language pedagogy that extends beyond grammar-centered instruction. It underscores the need for pedagogical approaches that integrate pragmatic awareness, sociocultural knowledge, and authentic communicative contexts into language teaching. Such approaches can better equip learners to navigate real-world interactions, reduce instances of pragmatic failure, and foster more socially and culturally appropriate language use. Ultimately, the findings of this study aim to inform both theoretical discussions of pragmatic competence and practical strategies for improving English language education in the Uzbek context.

Literature review. Pragmatic competence has become a central concept in second language acquisition (SLA) research, particularly as the field has shifted from a focus on formal linguistic accuracy toward communicative effectiveness. While early language teaching methodologies emphasized grammatical correctness and vocabulary acquisition, later communicative approaches highlighted the importance of using language appropriately in social interaction. As Kasper and Rose argue, successful communication requires not only linguistic knowledge but also an understanding of how language functions within specific sociocultural contexts.²

Pragmatic competence has emerged as a central concept in second language acquisition (SLA) research, particularly as the field has gradually shifted its focus from formal linguistic accuracy toward communicative effectiveness. Early language teaching methodologies were largely grounded in structural and grammar-based paradigms, prioritizing mastery of syntactic rules and vocabulary items as the primary indicators of language proficiency. Although such approaches contributed to learners' formal accuracy, they often failed to equip learners with the ability to use language appropriately in real-life communicative situations. With the advent of communicative language teaching, greater attention was directed toward the functional and social dimensions of language use. This shift underscored the importance of not only what learners say, but how, when, and to whom they say it. Within this framework, pragmatic competence came to be understood as the ability to interpret and perform language functions in a manner that is sensitive to contextual variables such as social norms, cultural

¹ Spencer-Oatey, H. (2008). Culturally speaking: Culture, communication and politeness theory. Continuum.

² Kasper, G., & Rose, K. R. (2002). Pragmatic development in a second language. Blackwell.

expectations, power relations, and interpersonal goals. As a result, successful communication began to be measured not solely by grammatical correctness, but by the appropriateness and effectiveness of language use in interaction.

Subsequent developments in SLA research further reinforced the significance of pragmatic competence, particularly through studies in interlanguage pragmatics, which examine how learners acquire, develop, and sometimes diverge from target-language pragmatic norms. These studies have demonstrated that pragmatic competence does not automatically develop alongside grammatical proficiency and often requires explicit instruction and exposure to authentic communicative contexts. Consequently, pragmatic competence is now widely recognized as an essential component of overall communicative competence, playing a crucial role in enabling learners to participate effectively and appropriately in second language interactions.

Pragmatic competence is commonly defined as the ability to interpret and perform language functions in a manner that is socially and culturally appropriate. It encompasses both **pragmalinguistic knowledge**, which involves linguistic resources for expressing communicative acts, and **sociopragmatic knowledge**, which relates to social norms, values, and expectations governing language use.³ These components enable speakers to perform speech acts such as requests, refusals, apologies, and compliments in ways that align with contextual variables including power relations, social distance, and degree of imposition.

One of the most influential concepts in interlanguage pragmatics is **pragmatic failure**, introduced by Thomas, who distinguishes between pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure.⁴ Pragmalinguistic failure occurs when learners use inappropriate linguistic forms to express an intention, while sociopragmatic failure arises from mismatches between learners' cultural norms and those of the target language community. Both types of failure can result in misunderstanding, negative impressions, or breakdowns in communication, even when grammatical accuracy is achieved.

Pragmalinguistic failure occurs when language learners select linguistic forms that are inappropriate or insufficient to convey their intended communicative meaning within a given context. This type of failure is typically associated with limited knowledge of how specific speech acts, politeness markers, modal expressions, or formulaic sequences function in the target language. Even when learners possess a clear communicative intention, their reliance on literal translations or overgeneralized grammatical rules may result in expressions that sound unnatural, overly direct, or ambiguous to native or proficient speakers.

In contrast, sociopragmatic failure stems from discrepancies between the learners' culturally shaped expectations and the social norms governing language use in the target language community. Such failures often involve misjudgments related to social distance, power relations, degrees of imposition, or contextually appropriate levels of formality and indirectness. Because sociopragmatic norms are deeply rooted in cultural values and social conventions, learners may remain unaware of these mismatches, particularly when similar communicative situations are governed by different norms in their first language.

Both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failures can have significant communicative consequences. They may lead to misunderstandings, unintended offense, or negative evaluations of the speaker's politeness, competence, or interpersonal sensitivity, even when grammatical accuracy and lexical choice are largely correct. In more serious cases, such failures can disrupt interactional flow and result in communication breakdowns. These outcomes highlight the limitation of grammar-focused instruction and reinforce the need to address pragmatic competence as an integral component of second language learning and use.

Methodology. Pragmatic transfer plays a crucial role in shaping learner behavior in foreign language contexts. Defined as the influence of learners' first language and culture on their second language pragmatic performance, pragmatic transfer may have both positive and negative effects. On the one hand, it can facilitate

communication when norms overlap; on the other hand, it can lead to inappropriate or non-native-like usage when cultural expectations differ significantly. In EFL contexts, where exposure to authentic interaction is limited, learners often rely heavily on first-language pragmatic frameworks.⁵

Intercultural pragmatics offers a valuable theoretical framework for examining how speakers from diverse cultural backgrounds negotiate meaning, manage interpersonal relationships, and enact politeness in communication. This perspective focuses on language use at the intersection of linguistic form, social norms, and cultural values, highlighting how communicative practices are shaped by culturally specific expectations. In intercultural interactions, speakers often draw on differing pragmatic conventions, which can lead to misunderstanding or pragmatic failure when these conventions are not mutually recognized or appropriately adjusted.⁶

Within this framework, politeness theories—most notably those proposed by Brown and Levinson—play a central role in explaining how speakers attend to issues of face in interaction. Brown and Levinson conceptualize face as an individual's public self-image, encompassing both positive face (the desire to be approved of and appreciated) and negative face (the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition). Speakers employ a range of politeness strategies to mitigate face-threatening acts, such as making requests, giving advice, or expressing disagreement, in order to maintain social harmony and minimize potential conflict. Importantly, the choice and interpretation of politeness strategies vary considerably across cultures. These variations are influenced by broader sociocultural values, including orientations toward individualism versus collectivism, preferences for directness versus indirectness, and differing assumptions about egalitarianism and social hierarchy. As a result, strategies that are perceived as polite and appropriate in one cultural context may be interpreted as rude, overly formal, or insufficiently respectful in another. From an intercultural pragmatics perspective, understanding these culturally grounded differences is essential for analyzing cross-cultural communication and for developing learners' ability to engage in pragmatically appropriate and culturally sensitive language use.

In collectivist cultures such as Uzbekistan, communicative practices are strongly shaped by social values that prioritize group harmony, respect for elders, and the maintenance of stable interpersonal relationships. Language use in such contexts often reflects a heightened sensitivity to social hierarchy and relational obligations, leading speakers to avoid direct confrontation and overt expressions of disagreement. As a result, indirect speech acts, mitigation devices, and elaborate politeness formulas are frequently employed as pragmatic strategies to minimize face threat and preserve social cohesion. When Uzbek learners engage in communication in English, these culturally embedded pragmatic norms may be transferred into English discourse. Such pragmatic transfer can manifest in the preference for highly indirect request forms, reluctance to articulate explicit disagreement, or the overuse of politeness markers such as hedges, apologies, and honorific expressions.⁷ While these strategies are socially appropriate and effective within the Uzbek cultural context, they may be interpreted differently by native or proficient English speakers, particularly in communicative settings that value clarity, efficiency, and moderate directness.

Consequently, the pragmatic choices of Uzbek learners may sometimes be perceived as overly indirect, excessively formal, or pragmatically ambiguous in English interactions. This mismatch can lead to misunderstandings or unintended interpretations regarding the speaker's intentions, confidence, or communicative competence. Such outcomes illustrate how differences in cultural orientations toward politeness and directness can influence second language use and underscore the importance of developing intercultural pragmatic awareness as part of English language instruction.

Results. Uzbek communication is characterized by collectivism, hierarchical respect, and indirectness. Social harmony

³ Leech, G. (2014). *The pragmatics of politeness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁴ Thomas, J. (1983). Cross-cultural pragmatic failure. *Applied Linguistics*, 4(2), 91–112.

⁵ Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge University Press.

⁶ Taguchi, N. (2015). Instructed pragmatics at a glance: Where instructional studies were, are, and should be going. *State-of-the-Art Article. Language Teaching*, 48(1), 1–50. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444814000263>.

⁷ Abdulkayeva, M. M. qizi ., & Botirov, H. O. o'g'li . (2025). THE ROLE OF CULTURAL BACKGROUND IN ENGLISH–UZBEK FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION. *GOLDEN BRAIN*, 3(17), 137–143. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17686076>

is prioritized, and direct refusals or disagreements are often avoided. Hospitality and ritual politeness play a major role in daily interaction, influencing pragmatic choices such as requests and offers.

Pragmatic Transfer in Uzbek EFL Learners. When Uzbek learners use English, pragmatic transfer may occur. Indirect requests and excessive politeness may be interpreted as vagueness by native English speakers. However, such strategies also demonstrate cultural sensitivity and respect, which can be communicative strengths.

Learners of English in Uzbekistan often encounter pragmatic difficulties due to systematic differences between Uzbek and English communicative norms. While English discourse generally values clarity, efficiency, and moderate directness, Uzbek communication is deeply influenced by hierarchical relationships, hospitality norms, and implicit understanding among interlocutors. As a result, Uzbek EFL learners may struggle to adjust their pragmatic behavior to meet English expectations, particularly in institutional, academic, or professional settings.

Research in similar EFL contexts suggests that pragmatic competence does not automatically develop alongside grammatical proficiency and often requires explicit instruction.⁸ Without targeted pedagogical intervention, learners may continue to exhibit pragmatic transfer that leads to misinterpretation or reduced communicative effectiveness. This highlights the need for pedagogical approaches that integrate pragmatics instruction with intercultural awareness.

Discussion. The findings of this study underscore the urgent need to integrate pragmatic instruction more systematically into English language teaching (ELT) in Uzbekistan. Although existing curricula place strong emphasis on grammatical accuracy and lexical development, these components alone are insufficient to prepare learners for effective participation in real-life intercultural communication. Learners who possess high levels of formal linguistic knowledge may still encounter significant communicative difficulties if they lack awareness of how language functions in socially and culturally appropriate ways.

Pragmatic competence—particularly knowledge of speech acts, politeness strategies, and context-sensitive language use—should therefore be treated as a core component of communicative competence rather than as an optional or implicitly acquired skill. Instructional practices that neglect pragmatics risk leaving learners unprepared to manage everyday interactions such as making requests, offering refusals, expressing disagreement, or negotiating social roles in English-speaking contexts. The findings suggest that without explicit attention to pragmatic norms, learners may continue to rely on first-language pragmatic conventions, leading to pragmatic transfer and potential misunderstandings in intercultural encounters.⁹

To address this gap, ELT programs in Uzbekistan should incorporate explicit pragmatic instruction through the use of authentic materials, discourse-based activities, and guided reflection on sociocultural differences. Classroom practices such as role-plays, analysis of real-life interactions, and comparison of English and Uzbek pragmatic norms can help learners develop greater pragmatic awareness and flexibility.¹⁰ By embedding pragmatic instruction into curricula, teacher training, and assessment practices, ELT in Uzbekistan can move beyond a predominantly form-focused approach and better equip learners with the communicative skills necessary for successful and culturally appropriate language use in global contexts.

One effective way to foster pragmatic awareness in the classroom is through the use of interactive and reflective activities. Role-plays, for instance, allow learners to practice contextually appropriate language in simulated communicative situations, such

as making requests, giving refusals, or expressing disagreement. Discourse analysis tasks, including the examination of authentic conversations, emails, and online interactions, can help learners identify pragmatic norms and recognize how meaning is negotiated beyond grammatical structures. The use of authentic materials—such as films, television programs, social media exchanges, and real-life dialogues—further exposes learners to naturalistic language use and sociocultural variation.

Teacher education and professional development programs also play a crucial role in advancing pragmatic instruction. Many teachers may lack formal training in intercultural pragmatics or may feel uncertain about how to teach pragmatic features explicitly. Incorporating pragmatics-focused modules into pre-service and in-service teacher training can equip educators with both theoretical understanding and practical classroom strategies. This, in turn, enables teachers to model pragmatically appropriate language and guide learners in developing intercultural sensitivity.

Given the increasing globalization of communication and the growing need for English proficiency in academic, professional, and digital contexts, ELT in Uzbekistan must move beyond a purely structural orientation. Explicit attention to pragmatic norms and cultural differences can significantly reduce instances of pragmatic failure, where learners' utterances are grammatically correct but socially inappropriate. By raising learners' awareness of how meaning varies according to context, power relations, and cultural expectations, pragmatic instruction can enhance communicative confidence and effectiveness.

Conclusion. Uzbek cultural norms significantly influence English pragmatic competence. Recognizing these influences allows educators to support learners in developing intercultural appropriate communication skills. Cultural expectations related to politeness, indirectness, hierarchy, and interpersonal relations strongly influence how Uzbek EFL learners interpret and perform speech acts in English. Recognizing these influences enables educators to better understand sources of pragmatic difficulty and to provide targeted support that facilitates intercultural appropriate communication.

Pragmatic competence emerges as a crucial yet frequently underemphasized dimension of second language learning. By examining the impact of Uzbek cultural norms on English pragmatic performance, this study contributes to both second language acquisition theory and pedagogical practice. The findings underscore the importance of moving beyond form-focused instruction toward an approach that integrates sociocultural awareness and pragmatic sensitivity into language education. The integration of pragmatic competence into English language teaching in Uzbekistan carries important pedagogical and social implications. It supports learners in developing higher levels of communicative competence, enhances their confidence in real-world interactions, and reduces the likelihood of pragmatic failure in intercultural contexts. Ultimately, pragmatics should be recognized as an essential component of English language education and systematically incorporated into curriculum design, teaching materials, teacher training, and assessment practices. Such an approach can promote more effective, respectful, and culturally informed communication in an increasingly globalized world. Overall, the integration of pragmatic competence into English language education has important pedagogical and social implications. It not only supports learners in achieving higher levels of communicative competence but also promotes more successful and respectful intercultural interaction. As such, pragmatics should be recognized as an essential dimension of English language teaching in Uzbekistan and incorporated into curriculum design, teaching materials, and assessment practices.

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