

## DEVELOPING PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE IN EFL LEARNERS THROUGH TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING

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### Abstract

Pragmatic competence constitutes a core dimension of communicative proficiency and remains an essential objective in EFL pedagogy. However, learners in foreign language contexts frequently exhibit deficiencies in their ability to perform speech acts appropriately due to limited exposure to naturalistic communication. This article investigates the potential of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) as an effective methodological framework for enhancing pragmatic competence among EFL learners. Drawing on a qualitative action-research design with B2-level university students, the study demonstrates that task-based instruction fosters substantial gains in pragmalinguistic accuracy, sociopragmatic judgment, interactional fluency, and metapragmatic awareness. The findings highlight the pedagogical value of TBLT as a comprehensive approach to pragmatic instruction and underscore its relevance for contemporary EFL curricula.

**Keywords:** Pragmatic competence, Task-Based Language Teaching, speech acts, sociopragmatic norms, EFL instruction, pragmalinguistics, communicative competence.

### Introduction

The development of pragmatic competence has increasingly become a central concern in second language acquisition research, as scholars have emphasized that successful communication depends not only on linguistic accuracy but also on the ability to use language appropriately in context [1;3]. Roever suggests that that EFL learners frequently struggle with sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic conventions due to limited access to authentic interaction and culturally embedded input [4]. As a result, the integration of pedagogical approaches that situate language learning within meaningful, socially grounded activities has been widely recommended to promote the development of pragmatic competence in instructed settings [2]. Pragmatic competence, broadly understood as the ability to interpret and produce language in ways that are socially appropriate and contextually sensitive, is widely acknowledged as a fundamental component of communicative competence [6]. Despite its centrality, pragmatic competence often remains underdeveloped among learners in EFL settings, where exposure to authentic input and opportunities for real-life interaction are inherently limited [5]. While many learners achieve high levels of grammatical and lexical proficiency, they may still encounter difficulties in performing speech acts such as requests, apologies, refusals, or complaints in



culturally appropriate ways. These challenges stem from the complex interplay between linguistic forms, social meanings, and culturally grounded expectations.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has gained prominence as a pedagogical approach that addresses the limitations of form-focused instruction by promoting meaningful communication through goal-oriented tasks. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) emphasizes the centrality of meaning in language learning by engaging learners in tasks that replicate real-world communicative demands [2]. Unlike traditional form-focused instruction, which prioritizes grammatical accuracy and isolated language forms, TBLT encourages learners to focus on achieving specific outcomes, such as resolving a problem, negotiating plans, or expressing opinions appropriately in context. Through task completion, learners are compelled to attend to both linguistic forms and pragmatic functions simultaneously, thereby fostering the development of both grammatical and sociopragmatic competence [3].

TBLT provides language learning within authentic interactional contexts, enabling learners to negotiate meaning, manage interpersonal relations, and attend to sociocultural norms as they arise naturally in the communicative process [1]. Because pragmatic competence emerges through situated use rather than mechanical practice, TBLT offers a theoretically sound and pedagogically viable pathway for developing pragmatic abilities in EFL learners. The interactive nature of TBLT creates opportunities for learners to experiment with speech acts, adjust language use based on feedback, and internalize culturally appropriate patterns of communication.

TBLT provides a natural framework for integrating metapragmatic reflection and explicit instruction alongside experiential learning. By engaging learners in pre-task awareness activities, task-based practice, and post-task reflection, instructors can scaffold pragmatic development in a systematic and pedagogically coherent manner. This cyclical approach allows learners to notice pragmalinguistic features, recognize sociocultural norms, and refine their use of speech acts over repeated interactions. Research has demonstrated that such task-supported instruction enhances learners' ability to perform requests, apologies, refusals, and complaints with greater appropriateness and interactional fluency, suggesting that TBLT is particularly effective for cultivating pragmatic competence in EFL contexts [4].

### **Methodology**

The study employed a qualitative, classroom-based action research framework, enabling the instructor-researcher to design, implement, observe, and evaluate a series of pedagogical interventions focused on pragmatic development. The participants were twenty-two undergraduate students enrolled in an English language program and classified at the B2 level of proficiency. Initial diagnostic tasks and pre-instruction questionnaires revealed notable gaps in learners' awareness of pragmatic strategies and sociocultural conventions, particularly in contexts requiring indirectness, mitigation, and interpersonal sensitivity.

The instructional intervention spanned six weeks and was grounded in Willis's (1996) three-phase TBLT cycle: pre-task, task cycle, and post-task language focus [7]. Targeted speech acts included requests, apologies, complaints, refusals, compliments, and advice-giving. During the pre-task phase, students engaged with authentic audiovisual input such as film extracts,



recorded conversations, and naturally occurring dialogues, and performed noticing activities aimed at identifying sociopragmatic variables and pragmalinguistic patterns.

The task cycle consisted of communicative tasks that required students to enact speech acts in context-rich situations. Examples included resolving service-related complaints, negotiating academic responsibilities, mediating interpersonal conflicts, and offering advice in simulated peer-counselling sessions. Tasks were completed in pairs, small groups, and evaluated for both pragmatic appropriateness and communicative effectiveness.

Post-task activities involved metapragmatic reflection, comparison with native-speaker models, explicit discussion of sociocultural norms, and guided reformulation of learner output. Data collection instruments included audio recordings, reflective journals, field notes, and pre-/post-intervention pragmatic awareness questionnaires (Table 1). The data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns of development and recurring challenges.

**Table 1. Pragmatic awareness questionnaire**

Section	Statement	Scale (Strongly disagree Strongly agree)
<b>Awareness of speech acts</b>	I can accurately identify the communicative intention (e.g., request, apology, complaint, refusal) behind an utterance in English conversations.	1–5
	I understand how native English speakers modify their speech acts based on contextual variables such as power, social distance, and imposition.	1–5
	I am aware of the differences between direct and indirect strategies in performing speech acts in English.	1–5
	I can distinguish between linguistically appropriate and inappropriate realizations of speech acts in English.	1–5
<b>Contextual and sociopragmatic awareness</b>	I understand how contextual factors such as age, role relationships, and formality influence language choice in English.	1–5
	I can infer a speaker's attitude (e.g., annoyance, gratitude, reluctance) from linguistic and sociocultural cues.	1–5
	I can identify sociopragmatic violations (e.g., overly informal expressions in formal settings).	1–5
	I understand how cultural norms in English-speaking societies shape expectations for politeness and appropriateness.	1–5
<b>Production-oriented pragmatic awareness</b>	I am able to produce pragmatically appropriate responses to apologies, requests, complaints, or refusals in English.	1–5
	I can adjust my linguistic choices to suit formal and informal interactional contexts.	1–5
	I can produce utterances that balance clarity and politeness when making requests or expressing disagreement.	1–5
	I can reformulate my speech when I realize that my initial utterance may be inappropriate in a given English-speaking context.	1–5
<b>Awareness of pragmatic failure</b>	I can identify instances in which EFL learners' utterances fail to meet pragmatic norms in English (e.g., too direct, too informal).	1–5
	I understand the potential interpersonal consequences of pragmatic failure, such as misinterpretation or unintended offense.	1–5
	I am aware of differences between pragmatic norms in English and those in my first language.	1–5
	I can explain why particular expressions or strategies may be inappropriate in specific English-language contexts.	1–5
<b>Self-assessment of pragmatic learning</b>	I feel confident that classroom tasks and activities help me develop pragmatic competence in English.	1–5
	I actively pay attention to pragmatic features during listening, reading, and interactive tasks.	1–5
	I believe I can improve my pragmatic competence through task-based learning activities.	1–5
	I consider pragmatic competence essential for effective communication in English-speaking environments.	1–5



## Results

The findings indicated substantial improvement across multiple dimensions of students' pragmatic competence. To begin with, significant enhancement was observed in pragmalinguistic accuracy, as learners increasingly incorporated conventionalized expressions and mitigated linguistic forms. Direct, overly literal productions such as *"Give me your notes"* were gradually replaced by more contextually appropriate formulations including *"Would you mind sharing your notes with me?"* or *"I was wondering if it might be possible to borrow your notes"*.

Moreover, the learners demonstrated heightened sociopragmatic awareness. Their capacity to assess contextual variables such as power relations, social distance, formality level, and the degree of imposition showed marked improvement. For instance, complaint tasks conducted at the outset of the study frequently displayed a confrontational tone and excessive directness. By the concluding sessions, however, students employed polite pre-sequences, hedges, and affiliative strategies such as *"I understand you're very busy, but..."* or *"I'm afraid there seems to be an issue that needs attention."*

In addition, the students exhibited increased interactional fluency. Analysis of recorded tasks revealed smoother turn-taking, more appropriate use of discourse markers (e.g., *well, actually, I mean, you know*), and a greater reliance on conversational repair strategies. Learners also reported enhanced confidence when engaging in spontaneous communication, particularly in situations involving sensitive interpersonal concerns. Furthermore, metapragmatic awareness expanded considerably. Learners became increasingly capable of articulating the rationale underlying their linguistic choices, identifying cross-cultural pragmatic differences, and explaining why particular expressions or strategies were appropriate or inappropriate in specific communicative contexts.

## Discussion

The observed gains can be attributed to several inherent strengths of TBLT as a pedagogical framework. The authenticity of tasks compelled students to engage with language in contextually rich and socially meaningful scenarios, thereby facilitating the emergence of naturally occurring pragmatic phenomena. Tasks that required negotiation, persuasion, conflict resolution, and interpersonal management closely replicated real-world communicative conditions and elicited target speech acts in meaningful ways. Such authenticity not only increased learners' motivation but also enabled them to experience the functional relevance of pragmatic choices. Moreover, by situating language use within realistic communicative goals, TBLT encouraged learners to draw on both linguistic and contextual cues, resulting in more nuanced and socially appropriate performance.

In addition, the interactional focus of TBLT created sustained opportunities for learners to negotiate meaning collaboratively. Through peer interaction, learners were compelled to make real-time pragmatic decisions, which supported the gradual proceduralization of pragmatic knowledge. This process aligns with usage-based theories, which posit that repeated exposure, interactional feedback, and meaningful communicative practice serve as essential mechanisms for the development of pragmatic competence. Furthermore, collaborative dialogue enabled learners to observe and internalize diverse pragmatic strategies used by their peers, fostering a



richer repertoire of context-sensitive communicative behaviors. Over time, these repeated interactional cycles contributed to a more automatic and flexible use of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic resources.

The explicit reflection embedded in the post-task phase played a crucial role in consolidating learning and deepening metapragmatic insight. By examining authentic models, comparing linguistic choices, and discussing sociocultural norms explicitly, learners developed a more systematic understanding of how pragmatic meaning is constructed and interpreted. This reflective component enabled students to articulate the rationale behind their communicative decisions and to recognize potential sources of pragmatic failure. The integration of explicit instruction with experiential learning appears particularly effective, as it bridges the gap between intuitive performance and conscious awareness, allowing learners to refine their pragmatic judgments with greater precision.

The cyclical nature of TBLT provided learners with repeated and progressively more challenging opportunities to refine their pragmatic performance. The structured progression from initial task performance to guided reflection, reformulation, and subsequent re-performance fostered both fluency and accuracy, enabling learners to internalize culturally appropriate pragmatic routines. Through this iterative process, learners were able to notice gaps in their performance, apply corrective strategies, and monitor their improvement over time. This continuous cycle of practice and reflection not only strengthened learners' confidence but also facilitated the long-term retention of pragmatic skills, highlighting the value of TBLT as a dynamic and adaptive instructional model for pragmatic development.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the pedagogical value of Task-Based Language Teaching as a robust framework for developing pragmatic competence in EFL contexts. By situating communication within authentic, interaction-driven tasks, TBLT enables learners to acquire both pragmalinguistic forms and sociopragmatic sensitivity in meaningful ways. The approach helps bridge the persistent gap between classroom language learning and real-life communicative demands, addressing the needs of learners who may otherwise lack exposure to naturalistic pragmatics.

Given its demonstrated effectiveness, TBLT should be incorporated more extensively into EFL curricula, teacher training programs, and materials development efforts. Future research could investigate longitudinal effects of TBLT-based pragmatic instruction, explore its impact across different proficiency levels, or examine learner performance in cross-cultural communication beyond the classroom. Nonetheless, the present study provides compelling evidence that TBLT constitutes a powerful and theoretically grounded pedagogy for fostering pragmatic competence in contemporary language education.

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