



### PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE AND CULTURAL ADAPTATION IN EFL CONTEXTS: CHALLENGES AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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**Abstract.** *The article explores the development of pragmatic competence and cultural adaptation among Uzbek EFL learners. It focuses on two major challenges – negative pragmatic transfer and resistance to perceived L2 norms – identified through reflective practice and literature review. Findings indicate that effective pragmatic instruction requires explicit teaching, authentic interaction, and intercultural awareness. Teachers are encouraged to balance linguistic accuracy with cultural sensitivity to promote successful cross-cultural communication.*

**Keywords:** *pragmatic competence, cultural adaptation, EFL, pragmatic transfer, intercultural awareness, language teaching.*

#### **Introduction**

Having the ability to apply a particular language in a pragmatically appropriate manner is not as easy as it might seem. Pragmatic competence – the ability to use language effectively and appropriately in social contexts – is an essential component of communicative competence. As Cohen and Olshtain (1993) argue, without formal instruction one might need at least ten years to be as flexible within a target culture as native speakers. Mastering pragmatic norms, therefore, prevents second language (L2) learners from the risk of feeling alienated in new linguistic and cultural environments.

In foreign language classrooms, learners are often exposed primarily to grammatical and lexical aspects of language, while pragmatic knowledge remains underrepresented. According to Ishihara and Cohen (2010), there are five key factors that give rise to divergence from pragmatic norms: (1) limited exposure to authentic input, (2) negative pragmatic transfer from the first language (L1), (3) resistance to perceived L2 norms, (4) lack of metapragmatic awareness, and (5) insufficient pragmatic instruction. Out of these, two factors – negative pragmatic transfer and resistance to perceived L2 norms – are the most common among learners in the Uzbek EFL context.

This article aims to discuss these two challenges through reflective practice, theoretical insights, and relevant literature. Pedagogical strategies for enhancing learners' pragmatic competence and cultural adaptability in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings are also proposed.

#### **Materials and Methods**

The study is based on reflective practice and literature-based qualitative research. The reflections were drawn from many years of experience teaching English to learners of varying expertise levels, including Uzbek and Russian speakers. Findings were compared with those of previous influential works in the fields of pragmatics and language teaching (e.g., Ishihara & Cohen, 2010, Kasper & Rose, 2002, Taguchi, 2011). In the reflective



strategy, teachers analyze their practice, relating theory to their experience of teaching. According to Schön (1983), two aspects of reflective practice are distinguished: reflection-in-action (thinking while in the act of teaching) and reflection-on-action (thinking after the act of teaching). In this paper, classroom experiences and previous literature were used to identify common difficulties for learners and teachers in developing realistic fluency.

Additional information was gathered from studies related to pragmatic transfer and cultural identity in second language learning, including interlanguage pragmatics (Thomas, 1983, Bardovi-Harlig, 1996), L1–L2 transfer (Taylor, 1975), and identity negotiation (Beebe & Giles, 1984).

## **Results**

### *Negative Pragmatic Transfer*

In the case of practical transfer, it is interesting to note that during English classes at school, English sentence structures were taught through the framework of Uzbek grammar, with emphasis on subject, predicate, and sentence order. While this method was found helpful for understanding grammatical structure, errors in pragmatic transfer were frequently made when English communication strategies were applied.

Through later pedagogical practice, it was realized that such instruction may lead to negative transfer from the learners' first language (L1). This negative transfer is manifested in inappropriate directness, misinterpretation of politeness, and incorrect use of speech acts. Taylor (1975) emphasizes that beginners are especially prone to this phenomenon, while advanced learners rely more on L2 norms.

The dissimilar nature of Uzbek and English contributes significantly to this challenge. The two languages differ not only in phonology and morphology but also in pragmatic conventions such as address forms, requests, apologies, and expressions of politeness. For instance, Uzbek speakers often rely on contextual and tonal cues rather than explicit politeness markers, while English communication tends to value explicitness and indirectness. Consequently, Uzbek learners might appear overly direct in English, which can lead to pragmatic failure (Thomas, 1983).

Learners whose L1 is Russian tend to show more positive transfer, especially in vocabulary and phrase patterns, due to some lexical and semantic similarities between Russian and English. For example, Russian learners often find it easier to understand formal address forms or modals of politeness ("could you," "would you mind") than Uzbek learners. This demonstrates that transfer can function both positively and negatively depending on linguistic proximity and exposure.

### *Resistance to Perceived L2 Norms*

Another challenge frequently observed in EFL classrooms is students' resistance to adopting English pragmatic norms. Many learners express skepticism about the necessity of conforming to L2 cultural expectations. Questions such as "Why must English be learned to do business abroad?" or "Why can't foreigners learn Uzbek instead?" are often asked. While such remarks reveal a strong sense of national identity, they also indicate emotional resistance to full participation in L2 culture.

This resistance is not uncommon. According to Ishihara and Cohen (2010), learners may consciously or subconsciously resist adopting L2 pragmatic behaviors due to a desire



to maintain their cultural identity. Beebe and Giles (1984) also observed that some individuals deliberately emphasize their linguistic differences as a form of identity preservation, even when near-native proficiency has been achieved.

In one instance, several students who had achieved IELTS scores of 8.0–8.5 and were studying in Florida were observed during video chats. Uzbek was often used among themselves, and it was explained that English was reserved for academic communication only. It was mentioned that Uzbek made them feel more comfortable and “true to themselves.” This situation exemplifies the tension between linguistic adaptation and cultural loyalty. Teachers thus face the challenge of balancing respect for learners’ identities with the pedagogical goal of developing pragmatic competence. While total assimilation into L2 culture is not necessary, developing pragmatic awareness remains crucial for successful cross-cultural communication.

### **Discussion**

The results confirm that pragmatic competence is both a linguistic and cultural phenomenon. Learners must not only know what to say but also how, when, and to whom to say it appropriately. Failure to acquire pragmatic norms can lead to misunderstandings or social distance in communication. Negative transfer results primarily from contrastive teaching methods and insufficient exposure to authentic interaction. Teachers in EFL contexts are encouraged to integrate explicit instruction in pragmatics through real-life dialogues, role plays, and authentic materials. Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor (2003) suggest that teachers can raise learners’ awareness of pragmatic differences through consciousness-raising tasks, such as comparing native and non-native speech acts or analyzing politeness strategies in real conversations.

Resistance to L2 norms should be approached with cultural sensitivity. Learners’ reluctance to adopt foreign norms often reflects deeper issues of identity and belonging. Therefore, pragmatic learning should be framed not as abandoning one’s culture but as developing intercultural competence – the ability to navigate between cultural systems appropriately (Byram, 1997). Language learning thus becomes a process of dialogue between cultures rather than unilateral assimilation.

Furthermore, pragmatic instruction should move beyond mechanical drills. The incorporation of reflective journaling, peer discussions, and authentic multimedia (films, podcasts, interviews) can foster awareness of social nuances and speech conventions. Teachers themselves must remain lifelong learners of pragmatics, as their understanding of culture and context directly influences students’ pragmatic growth (Rose, 1999).

### **Conclusion**

Pragmatic competence is indispensable for genuine communicative success in a foreign language. While grammatical accuracy is important, understanding social norms, speech acts, and cultural expectations enables learners to use English naturally and effectively. Findings from reflection and literature indicate that negative transfer and resistance to perceived L2 norms are the two main barriers to achieving pragmatic fluency among Uzbek EFL learners.

To address these issues, teachers should adopt methods combining explicit instruction, authentic exposure, and intercultural dialogue. Learners, in turn, should be encouraged to view L2 pragmatic learning as a way to expand – not diminish – their cultural

identity. As Cohen and Olshtain (1993) note, pragmatic learning requires time, awareness, and cultural openness. Therefore, success in mastering L2 pragmatics ultimately depends on balancing fidelity to one's culture with adaptability to new communicative norms.

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