

Pragmatic Competence in Saudi EFL Learners: Challenges, Consequences, and Strategies for Overcoming Barriers

Khalid Al-Seghayer

Department of English Language and Literature

College of Languages and Translation

Al Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Received: November 8, 2024 Accepted: November 27, 2024 Published: December 1, 2024

doi:10.5296/jsel.v12i1.22438 URL: <https://doi.org/10.5296/jsel.v12i1.22438>

Abstract

This article critically explores the challenges Saudi learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) face in developing pragmatic competence. Despite the pivotal role pragmatic skills play in facilitating effective communication, Saudi EFL learners frequently struggle with the nuances of English pragmatics, leading to miscommunication and social misunderstandings. The article is organized around three key areas of inquiry: the factors contributing to these pragmatic difficulties, the broader consequences of inadequate pragmatic competence, and practical strategies for overcoming these challenges. Major contributing factors include limited exposure to authentic language usage, cultural divergences in communication styles, pragmatic transfer from Arabic to English, and an EFL pedagogy that prioritizes linguistic accuracy over pragmatic awareness. The repercussions of insufficient pragmatic competence extend beyond communication, affecting learners' academic performance, professional prospects, and social integration. In response, the article advocates for the incorporation of explicit pragmatic instruction into the curriculum, the creation of opportunities for authentic communicative practice, and the inclusion of culturally relevant contexts to foster greater intercultural sensitivity. By equipping Saudi EFL learners to navigate the intricacies of English pragmatics more effectively, this study seeks to enhance their overall communicative proficiency and intercultural competence, while contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of pragmatic development in specific sociocultural contexts.

Keywords: Pragmatic competence, Saudi EFL learners, Pragmatic instruction, Cultural differences in language learning, Miscommunication in EFL, Pragmatic challenges in EFL pedagogy, Intercultural communication, Pragmatic transfer in language acquisition, Saudi English language education

1. Introduction

In today's progressively globalized and interconnected world, effective communication in a second language (L2) necessitates not only linguistic proficiency—comprising vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation—but also pragmatic competence, which pertains to the appropriate use of language within a myriad of social contexts (Yan, 2022; Sánchez-Hernández and Barón, 2022). Pragmatics allude to the social norms and conventions that dictate language use across varying situations, inclusive of speech acts, politeness strategies, and cultural references. Attaining competence in pragmatics is imperative to avert misunderstandings and fostering successful intercultural communication, thereby marking a crucial element of overall L2 proficiency (Mokoro, 2024; Sánchez-Hernández and Martínez-Flor, 2021).

Despite years of study, 72% of Saudi EFL learners report that the practice time allocated for practicing English-speaking skills in class is insufficient. This signifies a significant gap in their language education (Al-Hassaani & Al-Saalmi, 2022). Considering the crucial role of pragmatic competence in effective communication, it is particularly disconcerting that many English as a foreign language (EFL) learners, specifically in non-English-dominant contexts such as Saudi Arabia, encounter considerable challenges in developing this essential skill. The challenges faced by Saudi EFL learners in developing pragmatic competence are often especially pronounced due to marginalization in language education, where the focus predominantly lies on formal linguistic components.

Studies (Zughaibi, 2022; Al-Qahtani, 2020) demonstrate that in Saudi Arabia, where English instruction is largely confined to academic settings, the prevalence of textbook-based teaching coupled with scarce opportunities for authentic English interactions adversely affects learners' capability to interpret and produce contextually appropriate language. These obstacles are magnified by cultural and linguistic disparities between Saudi learners and native English-speaking contexts. The first language and cultural norms of Saudi learners considerably differ from those of English-speaking nations, resulting in frequent communication misunderstandings that cannot be resolved by grammatical competence alone. These misunderstandings unfavorably influence learners' interactions with colleagues, instructors, and professionals in English-speaking settings, emphasizing the crucial need to incorporate pragmatic competence into EFL curricula.

Despite the increasing attention towards L2 pragmatics, much of the existing research continues to prioritize other aspects of linguistic competence, such as grammar and vocabulary, while pragmatic competence remains comparatively underexplored in Saudi EFL contexts. Previous studies have often overlooked the practical challenges stemming from cultural differences in communication styles and the limited exposure of Saudi learners to authentic language use.

Additionally, current language curricula, which heavily rely on textbooks and teacher-centered methodologies, failing to sufficiently incorporate pragmatic instruction. This leaves a critical gap in learners' ability to navigate real-world communication effectively. Such instructional shortfall impairs learners' capacity to comprehend and engage in contextually appropriate language use, ultimately hindering their overall English communicative competence.

This article aims to fill a significant gap in contemporary language education discourse by focusing on the specific pragmatic challenges confronted by Saudi EFL learners. It rigorously assesses the constraints of current pedagogical approaches in fostering the development of pragmatic competence among this learner group of learners.

The article will investigate the multifaceted nature of the pragmatic difficulties faced by Saudi EFL learners, offering a thorough analysis of key factors that impede their ability to engage effectively with the pragmatic aspects of the English- language. In particular, it will explore issues such as limited exposure to authentic language use, cross-cultural variations in communication styles, and educational practices that emphasize grammatical accuracy at the expense of pragmatic competence. Each of these factors will be examined in detail to elucidate their impact on learners' pragmatic development.

Subsequently, this article will explore the implications of insufficient pragmatic competence. Such deficiencies can hinder learners' academic success, limit their professional opportunities, and diminish their confidence in using English. The inability to engage effectively in conversation may also lead to in social isolation and frustration, thereby exacerbating the challenges they face in both academic and social circles.

In the final section, the article will present practical strategies for confronting these challenges and enhancing English communicative proficiency among learners. By integrating pragmatic instruction into language curricula, fostering authentic communicative interactions, and encouraging a critical reflection on cultural differences, educators can better equip Saudi EFL learners to navigate the complex pragmatic dimensions of the English-language.

By tackling these critical issues, this article aims to contribute meaningfully to the ongoing discourse on pragmatic competence in language education, offering actionable insights for both educators and learners alike. Ultimately, the cultivation of pragmatic competence is vital not only for the individual success of Saudi EFL learners but also for their capacity to thrive in an increasingly interconnected global environment.

2. Contributing Factors to the Pragmatic Challenges Faced by Saudi EFL Learners

2.1 Overview of Pragmatic Challenges and Their Causes

The unique learning context of Saudi EFL learners significantly contributes to delays in the development of socio-pragmatic skills for the appropriate use of English in diverse social settings. More precisely, these challenges arise from difficulties in internalizing pragmatic norms. Learners struggle to identify and integrate linguistic resources with contextual cues, making it hard to select the most appropriate verbal expressions. Two key dimensions of pragmatics competence —communicative competence and functional ability—pose considerable challenges for Saudi EFL learners (Al-Seghayer, 2019).

Communicative competence refers to the appropriateness of the linguistic form (e.g., pragma-linguistics), which signals “the particular resources that a given language provides for conveying particular illocutions” (Leech, 1983, p. 11). Conversely, functional ability pertains

to the appropriateness of the conveyed meaning (e.g., socio-pragmatics), highlighting how pragmatic performance is shaped by specific sociocultural conventions and values (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993).

Many Saudi EFL learners struggle to develop cognitive representations of pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic knowledge, both crucial for effective communication in English. Consequently, during English conversations, they often struggle to adapt their language to different contexts, topics, and interpersonal dynamics, further hindering effective communication in English. This knowledge gap generates barriers to effective communication in the target language. Research (e.g., Al-Ghamdi & Alqarni, 2019; Qutub, 2024) underscores this issue, revealing that Saudi EFL learners tend to rely on the pragmatic conventions of their first language (L1) when communicating in their second language (L2), primarily due to a lack of pragmatic competence in L2. Saudi EFL learners often transfer pragmatic norms from their L1, Arabic, into L2, which can lead to various forms of miscommunication, particularly in social interactions where expectations differ between the two languages. This phenomenon, known as pragmatic transfer, occurs when learners apply the sociocultural rules of communication from their native language in contexts where they may be inappropriate or misunderstood in the target language.

One common example of L1 transfer is in the realm of politeness strategies, specifically in making requests. In Arabic, politeness is often expressed through indirectness and the use of more elaborate language to soften a request. For instance, a Saudi learner may say something like "I was wondering if it would be possible for you to help me with this, if it's not too much trouble," even when addressing a peer. While this level of formality and indirectness is polite and expected in Arabic-speaking cultures, native English speakers in casual contexts might interpret such a request as overly formal, distant, or even unnecessary. English, particularly in informal settings, tends to favor more direct, concise expressions such as "Can you help me with this?" or "Could you give me a hand?"

One prominent example of L1 transfer occurs in the use of intonation patterns. Arabic speakers often use rising intonation in statements, which in Arabic can convey sincerity or respect. However, in English, rising intonation at the end of a statement typically signals uncertainty or a question. For instance, a Saudi learner might say, "*I think we should leave now?*" intending to make a firm suggestion, but it could be interpreted as hesitation or doubt. This misalignment in intonation patterns can cause confusion about or miscommunication of the speaker's intent.

Similarly, responses to compliments often reflect Arabic cultural norms. In Arabic culture, modesty is highly valued, and deflecting compliments is a common practice. A Saudi learner might respond to a compliment on their English proficiency by saying, "*No, my English is very weak,*" even if they are quite proficient. While this is considered polite in Arabic, in English-speaking contexts, it may come across as insincere or overly modest. Native English speakers are more likely to respond with a simple "*Thank you*" when receiving a compliment, and failure to do so could lead to social awkwardness.

Another example occurs in refusal strategies. In Arabic culture, direct refusals are often considered as impolite, especially in situations in which preserving face is important. Therefore,

Saudi learners might give vague excuses or defer decisions to avoid saying "no" outright. For instance, when declining an invitation, a Saudi learner might respond with something like "I'll try to come, but I have a lot of work, so I'm not sure." While this kind of indirect refusal is culturally appropriate in Arabic, in English, it may be considered as evasive or confusing. Native English speakers often value clarity and directness, so a simple "I'm sorry, I can't make it" would be more appropriate and less likely to cause misunderstandings.

To further clarify these challenges, the following section will examine the most pervasive pragmatic difficulties Saudi EFL learners face, explore their causes, and critically assess the obstacles hindering progress.

2.2 Limited Exposure to English-Dominant Environments: Cultural and Pedagogical Factors

Several interrelated contextual, cultural, and pedagogical factors contribute to the pragmatics challenges Saudi EFL learners experience, creating barriers to effective communication in English. A primary issue is that the acquisition of pragmatic competence typically occurs gradually, often through immersion in English-dominant environments. Mastering these skills, along with the conversational norms of English, is a slow and cumulative process. Many pragmatic rules remain imperceptible for extended periods, and in some cases, they may never be fully acquired (Mizne, 1997).

In the Saudi Arabian EFL context, opportunities for learners to practice pragmatic skills in authentic conversational settings outside the classroom are often limited. The absence of an immersive English-speaking environment makes it difficult for learners to acquire pragmatic skills organically. Without regular exposure to real-life communication in English, learners are unable to develop a strong understanding of subtle sociocultural cues, such as politeness strategies, turn-taking, or non-verbal signals.

To compensate for this lack of immersion, Saudi learners may turn to classroom simulations, language learning apps, or media consumption. Although these tools provide some exposure to English, they often fail to replicate the dynamic nature of real-world communication, in which immediate feedback and complex social interactions are crucial for developing pragmatic competence. Consequently, learners may struggle to apply appropriate politeness levels, recognize conversational shifts, or know when to interrupt or remain silent. This lack of exposure hampers their ability to develop the necessary competence to navigate social interactions in English effectively.

For instance, cultural norms regarding politeness, turn-taking, and non-verbal cues often differ significantly between Arabic and English, leaving learners unprepared for appropriate responses in social interactions. For example, in Arabic culture, indirectness is often used as a strategy to maintain politeness, whereas in English-speaking contexts, more direct communication is generally preferred. Similarly, nonverbal gestures, such as maintaining eye contact and using certain hand gestures, may carry different connotations in the two cultures, further complicating pragmatic competence. Interrupting a speaker in English, for example, is often seen as a breach of conversational etiquette, whereas in Arabic, overlapping speech may be viewed as a sign of engagement. This cultural mismatch can lead to awkwardness or

misunderstandings in English-speaking settings.

Moreover, the limited immersion reinforces learners' reliance on Arabic sociocultural norms when they are communicating in English, a phenomenon known as pragmatic transfer. This transfer often results in inappropriate or overly direct communication because learners apply familiar Arabic conventions to English interactions. Over time, this challenge creates a cycle of pragmatic stagnation, in which learners find reaching higher levels of communicative competence difficult despite their progress in grammar and vocabulary.

2.3 Insufficient EFL Instruction on Cross-Cultural Differences

The second major challenge facing Saudi EFL learners is the lack of instruction in cross-cultural differences, which hinders their ability to recognize and navigate distinctions between Arabic and English-speaking cultures. Many Saudi learners are not exposed to the nuanced social norms, attitudes, and mannerisms essential for effective communication in English. Key aspects of English-speaking cultures—such as politeness strategies, social taboos, customary forms of address, and both verbal and non-verbal signals of courtesy—are often overlooked in instruction. In Saudi EFL classrooms, pragmatic competence is not explicitly taught. Instead, teachers tend to focus on grammar and vocabulary, leaving learners without guidance on navigating the social and cultural aspects of English-communication. As a result, learners frequently miss out on critical communication skills such as managing turn-taking, responding to compliments, recognizing conversational shifts and knowing when to speak or remain silent.

As a result, Saudi EFL learners often struggle to grasp the pragmatic rules that govern communication in English as opposed to Arabic. These cultural differences can present significant challenges. For instance, Saudi learners may respond to questions in a roundabout manner or offer vague excuses to avoid direct answers, practices that are more acceptable in Arabic but may lead to confusion in English-speaking settings. Additionally, intonation patterns that are natural in Arabic may not translate well into English, causing further miscommunication. The lack of explicit instruction in these areas, combined with limited opportunities for natural language acquisition, makes it difficult for learners to develop pragmatic competence. Without an understanding of English-language norms, learners often struggle to adopt native-like communication patterns. As Mizne (1997) pointed out, language is deeply embedded in the subconscious, which complicates learners' ability to recognize and adjust to differences between their L1 and L2.

Al-Ghamdi & Alqarni (2019) provided empirical support for this argument through their examination of refusal strategies in invitations and requests among Saudi and American students. They found significant differences in how the two groups handle these situations, attributing these differences to the distinct cultural frameworks of each group. Saudi culture, which emphasizes collectivism and group cohesion, contrasts with the individualistic orientation of American culture, where personal autonomy is highly valued. These cultural divergences contribute to the broader pragmatic difficulties Saudi EFL learners face.

The absence of comprehensive instruction in cross-cultural and pragmatic norms severely hampers Saudi learners' ability to communicate effectively in English. This gap not only

impedes the development of linguistic competence but also underscores the broader cultural challenges inherent in second-language acquisition. Addressing these issues requires integrating pragmatic and cultural training into language instruction, which would better prepare learners to navigate the complexities of English-speaking environments.

2.4 Challenges of Pragmatic Transfer from Arabic to English

The third significant challenge Saudi EFL learners face is their tendency to transfer Arabic sociocultural patterns into English, largely due to limited pragmatic competence. This transfer often results in deviations from English communicative conventions, manifesting in various ways. For instance, Saudi learners frequently adopt indirect and suggestive communication styles, reflecting Arabic pragmatic norms, instead of the more direct and explicit speech often expected in English-speaking contexts. A clear example is in the use of apologies: Whereas Saudi speakers tend to use more elaborate and nuanced strategies, native English speakers, particularly Americans, often prefer simpler, more direct forms.

Al-Shammari (2015), in his comparison of requests between American English and Saudi Arabic speakers, highlighted these differences. His findings show that Saudis are more likely to use direct requests when speaking to close friends or subordinates, whereas Americans tend to employ indirect strategies, particularly with superiors or unfamiliar individuals. When Saudi learners apply the directness of Arabic requests in English contexts, it may be perceived as overly assertive or inappropriate. Similarly, Al-Otaibi (2015) found that Saudi EFL learners struggled with applying appropriate direct strategies and lacked the syntactic and lexical modifiers that soften requests in English. El-Dakhs et al. (2019) also demonstrated that Saudi learners prefer indirect and non-confrontational complaint strategies, relying on modifiers to soften their statements. These studies collectively illustrate a recurring pattern of transferring Arabic pragmatic norms into English, leading to potential misunderstandings or perceptions of rudeness in cross-cultural interactions. Pragmatic transfer, as defined by Mizne (1997), occurs when a learner projects sociocultural norms from their first language onto their second language. This transfer can cause communication breakdowns and unintended offense when speakers unconsciously revert to familiar norms. Ellis (1991) noted that even as learners' language proficiency improves, they often continue relying on pragmatic transfer as a strategy for navigating potentially face-threatening situations. These instances of pragmatic transfer highlight the importance of explicit instruction in cross-cultural communication skills for Saudi EFL learners.

2.5 Insufficient Teaching Resources for Pragmatics

The final challenge confronting Saudi EFL classrooms is the lack of stimuli necessary for developing pragmatics competence, particularly in addressing its more nuanced aspects. Pragmatics competence enables learners to comprehend and convey language that is sensitive to sociocultural and contextual subtleties. However, many Saudi EFL teachers assume that such skills are acquired incidentally through exposure and experience, rather than through explicit instruction. This assumption is compounded by the lack of instructional materials that address the sociolinguistic aspects of English, which teachers often view as too complex or time-consuming to integrate into their curriculum.

Adding to this difficulty is the implicit nature of pragmatics acquisition. Much of sociolinguistic competence is processed subconsciously, making it challenging to teach directly. Omaggio (2001) noted that pragmatics competence is often deprioritized in language instruction due to factors such as time constraints, heavy workloads, and a lack of institutional emphasis on sociocultural skills. As a result, grammatical and lexical skills tend to receive greater focus, leaving sociocultural awareness underdeveloped.

Furthermore, many teachers lack confidence in teaching the more subtle aspects of sociolinguistics, partly due to insufficient training or familiarity with these concepts. Student disengagement and resistance can further complicate matters, as learners may perceive sociocultural conventions of the target language as distant or irrelevant to their own experiences. Despite widespread acknowledgment of the importance of pragmatics competence, its implementation in Saudi EFL classrooms remains underdeveloped.

In summary, the challenges Saudi EFL learners face in developing pragmatic competence are multifaceted and interrelated. The lack of immersion in English-dominant environments severely limits their opportunities to practice and internalize essential sociocultural norms. Furthermore, the absence of explicit instruction in cross-cultural differences hinders their ability to recognize and adapt to the expectations of English-speaking contexts. Additionally, the tendency to rely on Arabic sociocultural patterns, coupled with insufficient instructional stimuli, perpetuates a cycle of pragmatic transfer that can lead to miscommunication and social misunderstandings. As a result, these barriers significantly impede learners' progress toward achieving effective communication in English.

The next section will explore the consequences of failing to develop pragmatic competence among Saudi EFL learners, highlighting the broader implications for their language acquisition and social interactions in English-speaking environments.

3. The Consequences of Pragmatic Competence Deficits in Saudi EFL Learners

3.1 Overview of the Consequences of Pragmatic Competence Deficits

Pragmatic competence, defined as the ability to use language effectively in social contexts, is a fundamental skill for EFL learners, particularly in navigating complex intercultural interactions. Among Saudi EFL learners, insufficient pragmatic competence leads to a range of consequences that extend beyond grammatical or vocabulary issues. This deficit not only disrupts communication but also hinders learners' ability to adapt to diverse social and cultural norms, leading to challenges in both academic and everyday contexts. As a result, learners often struggle with miscommunication, anxiety, reduced fluency, and difficulty adapting to diverse social situations. This section will explore these challenges in detail, examining how the inability to interpret social cues or modify language use in real-time perpetuates communication breakdowns and stifles language development.

3.2 Miscommunication and Pragmatic Errors

Saudi EFL learners are particularly susceptible to miscommunication when they lack adequate pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic competence. This deficiency can lead to their attempts

at communication being perceived as rude, overly formal, or otherwise inappropriate for the context, often resulting in misunderstandings with native speakers. Mastery of pragmatic competence, which entails an understanding of social norms, cultural expectations, and the contextual nuances of language use, is crucial for effective communication. Without such awareness, learners frequently commit pragmatic errors, including misjudging levels of formality, choosing unsuitable expressions, or failing to interpret social cues accurately.

For example, Saudi EFL learners may unintentionally use excessively formal language in informal settings or adopt direct language when indirectness or politeness is culturally required—both of which can hinder successful communication. Almegren (2021) highlighted that Saudi learners often make pragmatic errors when using conventional expressions, with these mistakes typically arising from the misuse of culturally expected phrases, an overreliance on verbosity, or the incorporation of language patterns perceived as impolite by native speakers. These challenges are further compounded by first-language interference, which can skew learners' perceptions of appropriate linguistic behavior in English-speaking contexts.

Similarly, Alzahrani (2023) found that Saudi EFL learners tend to overuse certain pragmatic markers, particularly in oral presentations, reflecting cultural conventions from their native language. This overuse in English-speaking contexts can lead to unnatural speech and misunderstandings. At the same time, they struggle with interjections, pauses, and cohesive devices, which often disrupt the flow and coherence of their spoken discourse. This complements Almegren's (2021) findings, which suggest that learners often transfer linguistic habits from Arabic to English, leading to inappropriate language use in specific social contexts.

3.3 Loss of Confidence and Anxiety

Pragmatic incompetence among Saudi EFL learners significantly contributes to a cycle of communication anxiety, diminished confidence, and lower self-esteem. When learners become aware that their communication is ineffective or socially inappropriate, a heightened fear of making mistakes emerges. This anxiety is particularly pronounced in informal settings, where the pressure to perform socially amplifies their reluctance to engage in English conversations.

As these communication failures accumulate, learners' confidence in their language abilities steadily diminishes. Al-Wossabi (2024) found that this anxiety often leads to withdrawal from real-world language practice, with learners avoiding speaking opportunities to shield themselves from the embarrassment of making pragmatic errors. This avoidance, however, creates a harmful cycle—by evading real-world interactions, learners deprive themselves of valuable chances to practice and improve, which further deepens their anxiety and reinforces their sense of inadequacy.

The emotional toll is exacerbated by a sense of social isolation. Al-Nasser (2015) highlighted how Saudi learners often feel excluded when they cannot engage as confidently as their peers or native speakers, leading to their withdrawal from social environments. This isolation not only impairs their growth in language proficiency but also limits their integration into English-speaking communities, reinforcing the very anxiety and lack of confidence that hinder their development.

3.4 Reduced Fluency and Naturalness

A lack of pragmatic competence also results in significant challenges in achieving fluency and naturalness in communication. Many Saudi EFL learners focus heavily on mastering grammar and vocabulary, neglecting the importance of pragmatics—how language is used in context. This gap often causes their speech to sound overly formal or stilted, particularly in casual interactions, where a more relaxed and fluid use of language is expected (Al-Hozali, 2023).

The rigid use of language stems from an over-reliance on textbook phrases, which do not always reflect the dynamic, conversational nature of real-world communication. Almeahaidly (2023) noted that textbook language often leaves learners unprepared for informal exchanges, making them sound unnatural in social situations. In more formal contexts, learners may revert to overly simplistic language, further highlighting their lack of alignment with native speaker norms.

This linguistic awkwardness can lead to a heightened awareness of their deficits, causing learners to feel anxious about engaging in conversations. As Al-Seghayer (2021) observed, repeated communication breakdowns make learners increasingly hesitant to participate in real-world interactions. Over time, this reluctance erodes their fluency and naturalness, contributing to a sense of demotivation, as learners feel they will never achieve the ease of native speakers.

Ultimately, this lack of fluency and naturalness not only limits learners' ability to communicate effectively but also hinders their ability to connect meaningfully with others. As learners' conversations become more formal and less dynamic—often due to a lack of confidence or limited pragmatic competence—they miss out on opportunities for authentic interaction and pragmatic growth, reinforcing a cycle of anxiety and stunted development.

3.5 Inability to Engage in Meaningful Interaction

One major repercussion of inadequate pragmatic competence among Saudi EFL learners is their diminished ability to engage in meaningful interactions. This deficiency arises primarily from their insufficient understanding of both pragmalinguistic dimensions of communication, which are necessary for meaningful social engagement in diverse contexts. Effective communication extends beyond the literal meaning of words; it is also defined by the way language is delivered, the contextual settings in which it is used, and the social norms that regulate discourse. In the absence of a nuanced grasp of these complexities, learners often encounter difficulties in navigating conversational exchanges with ease, causing them to misinterpret indirect requests, overlook humor, or fail to recognize cultural expectations. Such deficiencies in pragmatic awareness frequently lead to awkward or stilted interactions, which, in turn, discourage learners from pursuing deeper, more meaningful engagements. In professional and academic contexts, this inability to connect effectively can impede collaboration, negotiation, and networking opportunities, thereby constraining their potential to cultivate valuable relationships and to understand the social dynamics embedded in interpersonal interactions.

Moreover, learners who are unable to recognize or utilize appropriate conversational cues may encounter difficulties in sustaining dialogue, often leading to communication breakdowns.

These breakdowns not only undermine their self-confidence but can also exacerbate feelings of isolation, particularly as they struggle to connect with native English speakers or proficient non-native speakers in culturally appropriate ways. Without an understanding of conversational norms—such as turn-taking, polite interruptions, and engaging in small talk—learners find it challenging to participate in group discussions or maintain fluid conversations. This can make them appear disengaged or socially awkward, reducing opportunities for meaningful interaction. As a result, despite a solid grasp of linguistic structures, many Saudi EFL learners remain ill-equipped to navigate complex socio-cultural dimensions, limiting their potential for meaningful interaction.

The challenges Saudi learners face in achieving meaningful interaction are not merely linguistic; they are deeply entrenched in cultural differences. Rouissi (2016) underscored the significant contrasts between Saudi cultural norms and those of English-speaking countries, particularly regarding politeness strategies, levels of formality, and the use of indirect language. For example, Saudi EFL learners may misinterpret indirect requests as impolite or confusing, and they may fail to grasp culturally specific uses of humor and sarcasm. Lacking the requisite pragmatic skills, learners often experience insecurity in social situations, leading to a reluctance to engage fully in conversations.

The issue of pragmatic competence among Saudi EFL learners, particularly their inability to participate in meaningful interactions, has been extensively documented by various studies. Alharbi (2022) investigated these challenges, revealing that Saudi EFL learners frequently struggle with understanding and employing conversational implicatures, indirect requests, and contextually appropriate responses. These difficulties are primarily attributed to learners' limited exposure to authentic communicative contexts, where the socio-cultural nuances of English are naturally embedded.

Similarly, Al-Shlowiy and Mahfoodh (2020) explored how Saudi EFL learners navigate speech acts such as requests, apologies, and compliments. Their findings suggest that, although learners often produce grammatically correct sentences, they struggle to apply these constructions appropriately in context, leading to misunderstandings and awkward exchanges. Both studies emphasized the necessity of incorporating explicit pragmatic instruction into the EFL curriculum to equip students with the skills needed to navigate the cultural and social conventions that govern English communication.

These challenges in communication do not only affect learners in informal, social contexts but also in professional and academic environments. Their inability to adapt to varied social situations further amplifies their communication difficulties, making it challenging to tailor their language use to different settings or adjust their speech to varying levels of formality.

3.6 Inability to Adapt to Varied Social Situations

Another consequence of limited pragmatic competence among Saudi EFL learners is the lack of flexibility in adjusting language use to varied social situations. Many learners often struggle to modify their communication style based on the level of formality, politeness, or social status. This rigidity leads to ineffective exchanges, whether interacting with friends, colleagues, or

authority figures. For example, instead of saying “Hey, how’s it going?” when meeting a friend, a learner might say “Good afternoon, I hope you are doing well,” which is more suitable in formal settings. This mismatch can make the interaction seem stiff and unnatural, leading to a sense of disconnection in informal conversations.

Various studies have illustrated the difficulties Saudi EFL learners face in achieving communicative flexibility. For instance, AlHarbi (2021) found that many Saudi EFL learners struggle to tailor their communication style to different social contexts, which leads a tendency toward overly rigid and sometimes inappropriate language use. In a similar vein, Bakhsh (2018) emphasized the obstacles that Saudi EFL learners encounter in adapting their language use across various situations, highlighting their challenges in recognizing the necessity for flexibility in communication styles, particularly in interactions with individuals of varying social statuses. Furthermore, Almegren (2022) investigated the implications of limited pragmatic competence on communication flexibility, indicating that the difficulties Saudi EFL learners face in adjusting their language use according to level of situational formality or informality detrimentally affect their interactions with both peers and authority figures.

This inability to adapt not only affects learners’ social interactions but also limits their overall language development. By failing to recognize or respond to varying social cues—such as tone, gestures, or body language—learners miss valuable opportunities to improve their language skills through real-life interactions. This brings us to the next key consequence: missed opportunities for language development.

3.7 Missed Opportunities for Language Development and Inability to Interpret Social Cues

A critical consequence of insufficient pragmatic competence is the missed opportunities for meaningful language development. Saudi EFL learners often struggle to perceive and respond to social cues—such as body language, tone, and facial expressions—that signal how their words are being received. Without the ability to interpret these cues, learners may fail to recognize when a conversation partner is confused, disengaged, or requesting clarification. This inability to adjust language use in real-time hinders self-correction and reinforces incorrect language habits.

For instance, Mahdi (2024) found that Saudi EFL learners frequently overlook nonverbal signals during conversations, leading to persistent communication breakdowns. Learners may unknowingly continue using inappropriate language patterns, missing chances to refine their skills. Mustafa (2012) underscored that Saudi EFL learners often struggle to interpret feedback from native speakers, which stunts their pragmatic growth. This inability to grasp subtle cues, such as changes in facial expressions or tone, prevents learners from making real-time adjustments and utilizing authentic communicative experiences as valuable opportunities for self-correction and language improvement.

Beyond missed opportunities for developmental, the inability to interpret social cues also impairs overall communicative competence. Recognizing signals like changes in intonation, gestures, or facial expressions is essential for fluid and effective conversations. Misunderstanding cues, such as sarcasm or humor, often results in awkward or inappropriate

responses. Alsiyat (2021) observed that many Saudi EFL learners struggle to interpret nonverbal communication, such as changes in body language, which disrupts conversational flow and causes learners to misjudge when to speak or how to respond in both formal and informal settings.

The consequences of failing to develop pragmatic competence among Saudi EFL learners are both multifaceted and far-reaching. Miscommunication, diminished confidence, and an inability to engage effectively in conversations not only impede language acquisition but also stifle personal and social growth. As learners grapple with adapting their communication styles to various social contexts, they risk missing out on critical opportunities for linguistic and cultural development. This lack of communicative effectiveness further limits their integration into English-speaking environments and professional settings, underscoring the urgent need for targeted interventions. Strengthening pragmatic skills is essential to empower learners to navigate complex communicative situations with confidence, ultimately improving both their language proficiency and their broader ability to connect meaningfully with others. In the subsequent section, I will explore strategies for addressing the challenges associated with gaining pragmatic competence, offering practical approaches designed to enhance Saudi EFL learners' proficiency in the nuances of the English language.

4. Strategies for Overcoming Pragmatic Competence Challenges Saudi EFL Learners Face

4.1 Overview of Strategies for Overcoming Pragmatic Challenges

Having explored the far-reaching consequences of insufficient pragmatic competence among Saudi EFL learners, it is crucial to shift the focus toward identifying practical strategies to overcome these challenges. While the difficulties in mastering pragmatic skills are undeniable, they are by no means insurmountable. With targeted interventions and a comprehensive understanding of both the social and linguistic dimensions of language, Saudi EFL learners can make significant strides in improving their pragmatic competence.

This section will outline key approaches that educators, curriculum designers, and learners themselves can adopt to address these challenges. From incorporating explicit pragmatic instruction into EFL curricula to providing ample opportunities for authentic interaction, these strategies aim to equip learners with the tools they need to navigate the complex sociolinguistic landscape of English more effectively. In doing so, learners will not only enhance their communicative competence but also gain greater confidence in engaging with English speakers in both formal and informal contexts.

4.2 Explicit Pragmatic EFL Instruction

Teaching pragmatic competence explicitly is essential for Saudi EFL learners as it equips them with the social rules and norms necessary for effective communication. By incorporating lessons on speech acts such as making requests, offering apologies, and employing politeness strategies into the curriculum, learners can develop a deeper understanding of how language functions across various social contexts. Pragmatic instruction should also focus on cultural differences in politeness, turn-taking, and contextual language use, enabling learners to

distinguish key variations between English and their native language. Role-playing, case studies, and real-life scenarios are highly effective in demonstrating how these rules apply in different situations, helping learners grasp both the linguistic and social dimensions of English communication. One practical approach is to intertwine cultural nuances into lessons on speech acts. For instance, in Saudi culture, indirect requests are often preferred. Instead of directly asking for a favor, a learner might be taught to say, “I was wondering if it would be possible for you to help me with this?” which reflects cultural values of politeness and deference. This kind of specialized instruction allows students to navigate social interactions more effectively and sensitively.

Research has shown that explicit pragmatic instruction significantly enhances learners’ ability to navigate social interactions. For instance, a study by Shakki (2022) underscored the effectiveness of direct instruction in pragmatics. He found that students who received targeted lessons on speech acts, politeness strategies, and context-sensitive language use demonstrate considerable improvement in their pragmatic performance. Similarly, Almehmadi (2024) found that integrating pragmatic instruction into language teaching greatly improves Saudi EFL learners’ ability to handle diverse communicative situations, especially in using culturally appropriate language. The insights gained from these studies emphasize the importance of explicitly teaching the social and cultural aspects of language to foster a higher level of pragmatic competence.

4.3 Increased Exposure to Authentic Language Use

Exposure to authentic language use plays a critical role in helping Saudi EFL learners overcome pragmatic challenges. While many learners rely heavily on textbook phrases, these often fail to capture the natural flow of conversation and the cultural nuances present in real-world communication. Engaging with English through media, such as TV shows, podcasts, and movies, provides invaluable insight into how native speakers use language in diverse social contexts. This exposure helps learners internalize pragmatic norms like politeness, indirectness, and humor.

To enhance the effectiveness of this exposure, it is important to select media that best aligns with specific pragmatic functions. For instance, sitcoms such as *Friends* or *The Office* are outstanding resources for learning informal speech, humor, and casual conversational norms. These shows showcase everyday interactions abundant with idiomatic expressions, sarcasm, and banter, assisting learners in understanding the pragmatic nuances of informal communication. Observing how characters address situations like offering apologies, making requests, or complimenting, learners can gain insights into how politeness and indirectness are managed in less formal settings.

On the other hand, debate programs or news talk shows such as *BBC’s Question Time* or *The Daily Show* offer a more profound understanding of formal speech, persuasive language, and handling disagreements. These genres expose learners to the pragmatic strategies used in formal, high-stakes communication, such as turn-taking, politely expressing disagreement, and maintaining a formal tone. Watching such content prepares learners for academic, professional, or political settings by introducing them to language appropriate to varying levels of formality,

thereby facilitating their adjustment to the required degree of formality.

Podcasts also provide a variety of opportunities for pragmatic development. For example, podcasts like *How I Built This* or *Freakonomics Radio* often feature interview-based formats where listeners can observe how speakers manage politeness, handle interruptions, and respond to questions; these skills are valuable skills in both professional and academic settings. Concurrently, storytelling podcasts such as *The Moth* or *Snap Judgment* offer insights into how speakers navigate narrative structures, schedule pacing, and express emotions, which are important pragmatic features in public speaking or storytelling contexts.

Movies, especially those portraying specific cultural settings, can also help learners develop pragmatic awareness in contextually specific situations. For example, films like *The King's Speech* or *Dead Poets Society* provide abundant examples of formal and motivational speeches in hierarchical or academic contexts, while movies like *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* or *The Farewell* highlight cultural pragmatics, such as family dynamics, politeness strategies in multi-generational communication, or the role of indirect speech in handling sensitive topics.

Facilitating opportunities for direct interaction with native or proficient English speakers, such as through language exchange programs or conversation practice sessions, can further enhance learners' ability to internalize pragmatic norms. These real-world interactions provide valuable feedback on the learners' use of pragmatic markers, such as turn-taking, politeness, or tone, and foster a more natural and contextually appropriate use of language.

Authentic language exposure has been shown to significantly aid pragmatic skills development. Djari (2022) found that learners who regularly engage with English media, such as films, TV shows, and podcasts, develop a more intuitive grasp of conversational norms. This type of exposure enables learners to internalize the ways native speakers handle politeness, humor, and indirect language in both formal and informal settings. Al-Qahtani (2020) echoed these findings in a Saudi context, illustrating that increased interaction with native speakers, and consistent exposure to authentic materials, significantly improve learners' awareness of pragmatic and fluency in everyday communication.

By integrating a variety of media resources into EFL programs, learners are provided with a more immersive and practical approach to mastering the pragmatic aspects of language. This exposure ensures that learners develop a more comprehensive understanding of how language functions in both casual and formal contexts, equipping them to handle real-world communication with increased confidence.

4.4 Task-Based Interactive Speaking Activities

Interactive, task-based learning activities provide learners with valuable opportunities to practice language in world scenarios, essential, which can be vital for developing pragmatic competence. By engaging in role-plays, simulations, and problem-solving tasks provide Saudi EFL learners a platform to practice navigating varying social contexts, such as workplace dialogues, casual conversations, and formal events. For example, role-playing activities intended to mimic workplace interactions, such as giving feedback to a colleague or addressing a superior, enable learners to manage the hierarchical construct of Saudi work environments

while refining their English language skills. These activities not only help students develop fluency but also encourage them to adjust their language use according to the situation—whether it requires politeness, indirect speech, or varying levels of formality. Teachers can create simulated environments that closely mirror authentic communication challenges, allowing learners to practice pragmatic strategies in a supportive, low-pressure setting.

Research consistently shows that interactive, task-based learning activities are highly effective in promoting pragmatic competence. Nguyen et al. (2012) demonstrated that role-plays, simulations, and problem-solving tasks enhance learners' ability to use context-appropriate language, as they simulate real-world social interactions. Similarly, Arafat (2016) found that Saudi EFL learners who participated in interactive speaking activities became more skilled at adjusting their language use according to formality and politeness levels, which improved both their fluency and pragmatic competence. These research findings highlight the importance of incorporating task-based activities that simulate authentic communication challenges, providing learners with practical experience in a controlled setting.

4.5 Developing Cross-Cultural Awareness

A lack of cultural awareness is a key factor behind many pragmatic errors among Saudi EFL learners. To resolve this, it is essential for language instruction to incorporate lessons on cultural competence, illustrating the differences in communication styles between Saudi Arabia and English-speaking countries. For instance, understanding the significance of personal space, where English speakers may be more comfortable with direct eye contact, while in Saudi culture, maintaining a respectful distance and avoiding prolonged eye contact with the opposite gender is crucial. By becoming aware of cultural norms related to politeness, formality, humor, and indirect language use, learners can better anticipate how their speech might be perceived by others, thereby avoiding common miscommunication pitfalls. Cross-cultural comparisons, case studies, and comparative role-playing exercises where students must adapt to different cultural contexts, along with discussions about cultural expectations, can help students in navigating cultural differences more effectively and adapting their communication to suit a variety of settings.

Cultural awareness is critical for avoiding pragmatic errors, and recent research strongly supports this assertion. Alkhonini et al. (2024) emphasized that numerous pragmatic failures in EFL learners stem from a lack of cultural competence, particularly in understanding the differences in politeness and formality between Saudi Arabian and English-speaking contexts. Ayar & Kiziltan (2022). explored the benefits of integrating cultural awareness into language instruction. They found that students who receive explicit cultural comparisons and training are better able to adapt their communication to suit different sociocultural settings. These studies suggest that focusing on cultural differences can enhance learners' ability to navigate cross-cultural communication effectively.

4.6 Using Feedback and Reflective Learning

Constructive feedback is an indispensable tool for fostering pragmatic competence among Saudi EFL learners. Targeted feedback that addresses not only grammar and vocabulary, but

also the pragmatic use of language can significantly enhance their learning experience. Teachers can provide individualized feedback on learners' performance during speaking activities, pointing out areas where learners may have misunderstood social norms or failed to adjust their language use appropriately. For instance, when learners engage in role-plays that involve giving compliments or making polite requests, teachers can provide individualized feedback on cultural appropriateness. Additionally, recording these activities can be beneficial, as it allows learners to reflect on their performances and identify patterns of error. Through this process of reflective learning, students can progressively refine their pragmatic skills, ultimately becoming more confident communicators.

Providing constructive feedback and promoting reflective learning have been proven effective in enhancing pragmatic competence. Taguchi and Kim (2018) posited that detailed feedback on learners' pragmatic language use—especially in terms of appropriateness and sociocultural norms, helps them identify areas for improvement and promotes long-term retention of pragmatic strategies. Likewise, Sibahi (2015) investigated reflective learning among Saudi EFL learners and found that those who reflected on recorded role-plays and peer feedback demonstrated significant improvement in their use of pragmatic markers. This growing corpus of evidence underscores the value of both constructive feedback and reflective learning in promoting pragmatic development.

4.7 Leveraging Pragmatics-Focused Technology

Leveraging technology to augment pragmatic competence offers learners an interactive and immersive way to practice real-life communication. Beyond conventional language-learning apps, a growing number of cutting-edge tools focus specifically on pragmatic language use, providing learners with innovative ways to engage with English in various social contexts. For example, artificial intelligence (AI)-driven language tutoring platforms such as Duolingo or *Babbel* now use sophisticated algorithms to emulate dialogues and offer contextualized feedback on the learners' use of speech acts, politeness strategies, and social cues. These platforms individualize learning by adapting to users' proficiency levels, offering targeted exercises that assist them in fine-tuning their pragmatic awareness.

Additionally, interactive simulations are becoming integral to language instruction. Platforms such *EON Reality* and *Mursion* use virtual avatars in realistic social and professional settings, enabling learners to practice navigating complex conversations, such as job interviews, presentations, or customer service interactions. These simulations not only help learners adjust their language based on formality and context, but also offer real-time feedback on their use of politeness markers, tone, and indirect language-key components of pragmatics.

Furthermore, mobile apps specifically designed for pragmatics, such as *Cake* and *Elsa Speak*, focus on authentic, conversational English. These apps emphasize context-based language use, providing scenarios where learners are required to respond to everyday situations, such as making requests, giving compliments, or offering apologies. By simulating common interactions and offering feedback on the adequacy and tone of learners' responses, these apps contribute to a more natural and contextually suitable use of English.

Recent research has highlighted the growing role of technology in developing pragmatic skills among EFL learners. Taguchi (2022) explored how virtual reality (VR) and AI-based platforms create immersive, pragmatic-focused learning experiences. The study revealed that learners who used VR and AI simulations to practice speech acts and context-based communication showed improved performance compared to traditional classroom settings. Additionally, Almeahmadi (2024) examined digital platforms that promote pragmatic awareness and found that learners using these tools achieved better outcomes in real-world communication.

These advancements in technology provide a dynamic and practical approach to developing pragmatic competence. By integrating AI-driven language tutoring, interactive simulations, and pragmatics-focused mobile apps, learners can interact with English in more authentic, real-life contexts, receiving immediate feedback that aids them in modifying their language use in meaningful ways.

4.8 Collaborative Learning and Peer Feedback

Collaborative learning environments encourage interaction and offer a valuable platform for practicing pragmatic language skills. By working together on group projects or discussions, Saudi EFL learners can practice adapting their language to suit different contexts and receive feedback from their peers. This peer feedback allows learners to identify pragmatic errors in a supportive manner, promoting mutual learning. Group tasks that require negotiation, presentations, or problem-solving also imitate real-world communication challenges, granting students the opportunity to apply their pragmatics knowledge in a supportive and cooperative setting. For example, a group task requiring negotiation can highlight differences in assertiveness and indirectness, enabling learners to gauge how these communication styles are perceived in both Saudi and English-speaking cultures.

Collaborative learning environments and peer feedback have been shown to boost learners' pragmatic skills. Byram (2021) found that students working in groups tend to develop better communication strategies by observing and responding to each other's language use. Studies on collaborative learning in EFL contexts, including research on Saudi learners (e.g., Alsmari, 2020; Al-Hozali, 2023), suggest that group work, combined with peer feedback, significantly enhances learners' ability to adapt their language to various social contexts. Peer-based tasks, such as group discussions and presentations, create a supportive environment where Saudi students can practice pragmatics in realistic and interactive ways, bridging the gap between classroom instruction and real-world communication.

4.9 Emphasizing Learner Autonomy

Encouraging learner autonomy is essential enhancing their pragmatic competence of Saudi EFL learners. One effective approach is self-directed language practice, which involves learners maintaining a language journal to record their English interactions, reflecting on the successes and challenges faced managing pragmatic situations. A study by Taguchi et al. (2019) found that self-directed learning significantly improved the pragmatic skills of EFL learners, thus emphasizing the value of reflective practices. Setting specific goals, such as using polite requests during conversations, can also stimulate motivation and focus. In addition, engaging

with online language communities can provide invaluable support. Engaging in online forums and social media groups can provide Saudi EFL learners with valuable peer interactions, fostering increased confidence and improvement in their pragmatic skills (Sharma, 2019; Mubarak, 2016). Using language exchange apps like Tandem or HelloTalk allows learners to connect with native speakers, offering opportunities for authentic conversation and cultural exchange. Sharma (2019) demonstrated that using these platforms helped learners strengthen their conversational skills and pragmatic awareness. Furthermore, learners can gain from online resources, such as webinars and interactive platforms like Duolingo or FluentU. These platforms frequently offer modules focused on pragmatic skills. Perrym (2021) found that these tools not only improved language proficiency but also enhanced learners' understanding of pragmatic norms through context-based exercises. Finally, forming study groups to facilitate peer teaching allows learners to reinforce their understanding while practicing their skills collaboratively. Nguyen et al. (2017) highlighted that peer teaching significantly enhanced students' pragmatic skills by providing opportunities to navigate language use and cultural expectations together. By embracing these strategies, learners can take charge of their language development, significantly augmenting their pragmatic abilities and overall communicative competence.

Table (1) summarizes the key strategies discussed in this section, along with their main advantages. These strategies offer a multifaceted approach to overcoming pragmatic challenges in Saudi EFL learners and can be easily integrated into language instruction.

Table 1. *Key Strategies to Overcome Pragmatic Challenges Saudi EFL Learners Face*

	Strategy	Description	Key Benefits
1	Explicit Pragmatic Instruction	Incorporating direct lessons on speech acts, politeness, and contextual language use.	Improves learners' understanding of social norms and language functions across various contexts.
2	Increased Exposure to Authentic Language	Using media (TV shows, podcasts, movies) to expose learners to real-world conversational norms.	Helps internalize informal/formal language, politeness, humor, and indirect speech.
3	Interactive Speaking Activities	Role-plays, simulations, and problem-solving tasks that mimic real-life communication.	Provides practical experience with social interactions, improving fluency and context-appropriate language use.
4	Focus on Cultural Awareness	Lessons on cultural norms and communication styles	Reduces pragmatic errors by increasing learners' understanding

		between Saudi and English-speaking contexts.	of cross-cultural differences in politeness and formality.
5	Feedback and Reflective Learning	Constructive feedback during speaking activities and reflective practice with recorded sessions.	Promotes long-term retention of pragmatic strategies and helps learners identify areas for improvement.
6	Use of Pragmatics-Focused Technology	Leveraging AI-based platforms, virtual reality, and mobile apps for pragmatic practice.	Provides immersive, interactive learning with real-time feedback to improve pragmatic awareness and confidence.
7	Collaborative Learning and Peer Feedback	Group projects and peer review to foster social interaction and mutual learning.	Enhances learners' ability to adjust language in real-time, fosters pragmatic competence in a supportive environment.
8	Emphasizing Learner Autonomy	Equipping Saudi EFL learners with tools for self-directed practice, such as journaling, goal-setting, and engaging with online communities and language exchange apps.	Enhances reflection and motivation; increases confidence; improves conversational skills; fosters understanding of pragmatic norms; encourages collaborative learning and peer feedback.

In conclusion, while Saudi EFL learners encounter significant challenges in building pragmatic competence, these hindrances can be effectively managed with targeted strategies. Incorporating explicit pragmatic instruction, increasing exposure to authentic language use, and integrating interactive speaking activities are vital approaches for equipping learners with the necessary tools for English communication. Additionally, promoting cultural awareness, providing constructive feedback, employing technology, and encouraging collaborative learning environments further support learners in honing their pragmatic skills.

By implementing these strategies, learners can develop a stronger understanding of the sociolinguistic norms of English, enabling them to communicate more confidently in diverse

social contexts. With sustained efforts from educators, curriculum designers, and learners, Saudi EFL students can make meaningful progress in overcoming pragmatic barriers and achieving greater communicative competence.

6. Conclusion

Pragmatic competence is a crucial, yet frequently underappreciated facet of EFL education. For Saudi EFL learners, cultivating this competence is particularly challenging due to cultural disparities, limited exposure to authentic English-language interactions, and a predominant focus on formal, linguistic instruction. These barriers often manifest in significant communication difficulties, notably in scenarios that require sociocultural sensitivity and contextual appropriateness.

This article illuminates crucial issues, contributing significantly to the discourse, especially within the Saudi context. It urges a more encompassing approach to EFL education—one that incorporates pragmatic awareness and intercultural competence, along with the standard emphasis on linguistic precision. The article argues that language educators and policymakers must not only give priority to the inclusion of pragmatic awareness and intercultural competence in English curricula, but also make certain that Saudi EFL students have the chance to refine these skills through actual engagement, genuine interaction, and cultural immersion.

In closing, In conclusion, addressing the practical challenges faced by Saudi EFL learners is crucial, not just for their linguistic proficiency, but also for their ability to navigate an increasingly globalized world. By employing these pedagogical strategies, Saudi learners can enhance their linguistic skills while cultivating the required cultural and communicative competence to prosper in diverse international settings. Failure to confront these challenges will prolong their communicative struggles, academically and professionally, highlighting the immediate need for comprehensive educational reform.

References

- Al-Ghamdi, N. A. S., & Alqarni, I. R. (2019). A sociolinguistic study of the use of refusal strategies by Saudi and American females. *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 9(5), 66–77. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v9n5p66>
- Alkhonini, O. A., Al-Shboul, O. K., & Dakamsih, N. J. (2024). How Americans and Saudis make requests: A politeness theory analysis. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 15(5), 8618–6937. <https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.1505.29>
- Alharbi, M. (2021). Barriers in implementing the communicative language teaching approach: EFL learners' perspective. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 12(9), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.7176/JEP/12-9-01>
- Alharbi, M. (2022). Pragmatic awareness of conversational implicatures by L2 undergraduate students in Saudi Arabia. *East Asian Pragmatics*, 7(2), 237–266. <https://doi.org/10.1558/eap.19270>

- Al-Hassaani, A. M. A., & Al-Saalmi, A. F. M. Q. (2022). Saudi EFL learners' speaking skills: Status, challenges, and solutions. *Arab World English Journal*, 13(2), 328–337. <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol13no2.22>
- Al-Hozali, F. N. (2023). The role of pragmatic competence in the language proficiency of Saudi EFL learners. *Education and Linguistics Research*, 9(1), 67–80. <https://doi.org/10.5296/elr.v9i1.20945>
- Almegren, A. (2021). Pragmatic awareness among Saudi EFL learners. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 17(1), 674–689. <https://www.jlls.org/index.php/jlls/article/view/4261>
- Almegren, A. (2021). Saudi EFL students' production of conventional expressions in second language pragmatics. *International Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*, 10(4), 260–274. <https://doi.org/10.18488/journal.23.2021.104.260.274>
- Almegren, A. (2022). Pragmatic awareness among Saudi EFL learners. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 18(Special Issue 1), 266–276.
- Almeahaidly, N. (2023). *Analysis of the pragmatic content in EFL textbooks used in Saudi Arabia*. In *Proceedings of the World Conference on Language Learning*, London, 10-12 November 2023 (Vol. 1, No. 1). ISBN: 978-1-914266-35-5.
- Almehmadi, W. (2024). The influence of social media on improving the pragmatic skills of EFL Saudi university students. *World Journal of English Language*, 14(6), 279–289. <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v14n6p279>
- Al-Nasser, A. S. (2015). Problems of English language acquisition in Saudi Arabia: An exploratory-cum-remedial study. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 5(8), 1612–1619.
- Al-Otaibi, S. (2015). Saudi EFL students' knowledge in pragmatics: Making requests. *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ)*, 6(2), 302–315.
- Al-Qahtani, A. (2020). Teaching pragmatic competence in EFL context: The case of Saudi EFL teachers. *Asian EFL Journal*, 27(4), 137–164. <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol6no2.23>
- Alsmari, N. (2020). The effect of flipped classroom instruction on developing Saudi EFL learners' comprehension of conversational implicatures. *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 10(2), 107–127. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v10n2p107>
- Alsiyat, F. (2021). Speaking challenges of Saudi EFL learners. *International Journal of Social Science and Human Research*, 4(12), 3676–3681. <https://doi.org/10.47191/ijsshr/v4-i12-30>, Impact factor-5.586
- Al-Seghayer, K. (2021). Adverse effects of the current instructional practices for macro and micro language skills on Saudi EFL learners' skills and competencies. *British Journal of English Linguistics*, 9(3), 1–19.
- Al-Seghayer, K. (2019). Unique Challenges Saudi EFL Learners Face. *Studies in English Language Teaching*, 7(4), 490-515. <https://doi.org/10.22158/selt.v7n4p490>

- Al-Shammari, K. (2015). Directness and indirectness of speech acts in requests among American native English speakers and Saudi native speakers of Arabic. *English Literature and Language Review*, 1(8), 63–69.
- Al-Shlowiy, A., & Mahfoodh, M. (2020). Navigating speech acts: Requests, apologies, and compliments in Saudi EFL learners. *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, 32(2), 198–213.
- Ayar, Z., & Kiziltan, N. (2022). The effect of text-driven approach on Saudi EFL learners' cultural awareness. *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Language Research*, 9(1), 1–15.
- Alzahrani, S. A. (2023). Pragmatic markers used by Saudi undergraduate EFL learners in oral classroom presentations at Albaha University. *International Journal of Linguistics and Translation Studies*, 4(4), 34–45. <https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlts.v4i4.380>
- Al-Wossabi, S. (2024). Saudi students' reluctance to engage in English communication: Critical issues and considerations. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 23(8), 57–75. <https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.23.8.4>
- Byram, M. (2021). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence: Theories, practices, and research*. Multilingual Matters.
- Djari, W. (2022). Investigating the effect of authentic materials on improving EFL learners' pragmatic competence: The case of third-year students, Department of English, University of Batna 2 (Doctoral dissertation, University of Batna).
- Ellis, R. (1991). The interaction hypothesis: A critical evaluation. In E. Sadtono (Ed.), *Language acquisition and the second/foreign language classroom* (pp. 179–211). RELC Anthology Series 28. SEAMEO Regional Language Centre.
- El-Dakhs, D., Abdel Salam, R. M., Muhammad, M., & Amroun, F. (2019). The Saudi EFL learners' complaint behavior: A study on interlanguage pragmatics. *Asian EFL Journal*, 24(4), 295–324.
- Hamouda, A. (2016). The impact of task-based instruction on developing Saudi university EFL students' English-speaking skills. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 32(2), 1–80. <https://doi.org/10.12816/0042381>
- Kasper, G., & Blum-Kulka, S. (1993). *Interlanguage pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.
- Leech, G. N. (1983). *Principles of pragmatics*. New York, NY: Longman.
- Mahdi, D. (2024). Linguistic and non-linguistic barriers to English speaking ability among Saudi EFL learners. *Journal of Pedagogical Research*, 8(2), 191–211. <https://doi.org/10.33902/JPR.202426853>.
- Mizne, C. A. (1997). *Teaching sociolinguistic competence in the ESL classroom* (Unpublished master's thesis). Ohio State University.
- Mokoro, E. (2024). Pragmatic competence in second language learners. *European Journal of Linguistics*, 3(2), 15–28. <https://doi.org/10.47941/ejl.2044>

- Mubarak, A. (2016). Learning English as a second language through social media: Saudi Arabian tertiary context. *International Journal of Linguistics*, 8(6), 112–127. <https://doi.org/10.5296/ijl.v8i6.10449>
- Mustafa, R. (2012). Feedback on the feedback: Sociocultural interpretation of Saudi ESL learners' opinions about writing feedback. *English Language Teaching*, 5(3), 45-56.
- Nguyen, M. T. T., Pham, T., & Pham, H. (2017). The effects of input enhancement and recasts on the development of second language pragmatic competence. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 11(1), 45–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17501229.2015.1026907>
- Nguyen, T. T. M., Pham, T. H., & Pham, M. T. (2012). The relative effects of explicit and implicit form-focused instruction on the development of L2 pragmatic competence. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 44(4), 416–434.
- Omaggio Hadley, A. (2001). *Teaching language in context* (3rd ed.). Heinle & Heinle Publishers.
- Qutub, H. (2024). Apology strategies: Appropriateness and frequency of use by Saudi EFL students. *International Journal of Learning and Development*, 14(2), 29–44. <https://doi.org/10.5296/ijld.v14i2.21939>
- Perry, F. (2021). The use of embedded digital tools to develop English language proficiency in higher education. *Journal of Academic Language & Learning*, 15(1), 1–12.
- Rouissi, I. (2016). Requests as impositions: Negative face among Saudi learners of English. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 1, 344–359.
- Sánchez-Hernández, A., & Barón, J. (2022). Teaching second language pragmatics in the current era of globalization: An introduction. *Language Teaching Research*, 26(2), 147–156. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688211064931>
- Sánchez-Hernández, A., & Martínez-Flor, A. (2021). Teaching the pragmatics of English as an international language: A focus on pragmatic markers. *Language Teaching Research*, 26(2), 294-312. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688211064933>
- Shakki, F. (2022). Meta-analysis as an emerging trend to scrutinize the effectiveness of L2 pragmatics instruction. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, Article 1016661, 1–6.
- Sharma, V. (2019). Saudi students' perspective on social media usage to promote EFL learning. *International Journal of Linguistics Literature & Translation*, 2(1), 117–127. <https://doi.org/10.32996/ijllt.2019.2.1.17>
- Sibahi, A. (2015). Exploring reflective practice among college EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia. *Arab World English Journal*, 6(2), 337–351. <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol6no2.26>
- Taguchi, N., & Kim, Y. (Eds.). (2018). *Task-based approaches to teaching and assessing pragmatics*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Taguchi, N., Tang, X., & Maa, J. (2019). Learning how to learn pragmatics. *East Asian*

Pragmatics, 5(2), 181-194.

Taguchi, N. (2022). Immersive virtual reality for pragmatics task development. *TESOL Quarterly*, 56(1), 308–335. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.3070>

Yan, Y. (2022). The effect of pragmatic competence on the communicative competence of second language learners. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, 673, 368–372. <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.220706.074>

Zughaibi, A. (2022). The barefoot shoemaker's son: Examining EFL teachers' pragmatic competence in a Saudi context. *Saudi Journal of Language Studies*, 2(2), 68–83.

Acknowledgments

Not Applicable.

Funding

Not Applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Macrothink Institute.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

Open access

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.