

PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE IN DIGITAL COMMUNICATION: A STUDY OF UZBEK EFL LEARNERS IN SOCIAL MEDIA CONTEXTS**Omirbaeva Arukhan Tolibekovna**

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Abstract

The rapid migration of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) interactions to computer-mediated environments necessitates a critical reevaluation of pragmatic acquisition. While traditional instructional frameworks prioritize lexical and syntactic accuracy, the deployment of contextually appropriate speech acts in digital spaces remains a significant challenge for non-native speakers. This empirical study quantifies the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence of Uzbek EFL learners operating within asynchronous social media platforms. A cohort of 150 intermediate to upper-intermediate (B1-B2) students participated in the research. The methodology integrated a corpus analysis of 450 authentic digital interactions extracted from Telegram and Instagram, alongside an online Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT) designed to elicit requests and apologies. Analytical coding adhered to the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) taxonomy. The data revealed a pronounced reliance on direct, unmitigated strategies; 68.4% of digital requests utilized bare imperatives, demonstrating a severe deficit in internal lexical modification. Furthermore, while learners successfully deployed explicit Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs) in 82% of apology scenarios, they consistently failed to provide culturally appropriate explanations or offers of repair. The compressed syntactic affordances of digital platforms actively exacerbate negative L1 pragmatic transfer. Consequently, learners project unintended assertiveness, risking interactional friction. Integrating digital pragmatics and sociolinguistic mitigation strategies into the contemporary Uzbek ELT curriculum is fundamentally necessary to bridge the gap between structural linguistic knowledge and functional communicative success.

Keywords: Interlanguage pragmatics, Computer-mediated communication, Speech acts, Sociopragmatic failure, EFL learners, Mitigation strategies, Digital discourse.

Introduction

The digitization of global communication has fundamentally rewired the functional architecture of second language acquisition. Modern language learners continuously navigate a complex matrix of asynchronous and synchronous digital platforms, demanding a high degree of sociolinguistic adaptability. Within this environment, pragmatic competence—the ability to utilize language appropriately in specific social contexts—frequently supersedes strict grammatical precision in ensuring successful interaction. Despite the proliferation of computer-mediated communication (CMC), current applied linguistics literature predominantly investigates the digital habits of European and East Asian language cohorts. Central Asian contexts, specifically the pragmatic frameworks utilized by Uzbek EFL learners in digital spaces, represent a substantial empirical void. Traditional Uzbek pedagogical paradigms prioritize structural syllabus designs, often leaving students ill-equipped to manage the nuanced relational dynamics required on platforms like Telegram and Instagram. The primary objective of this investigation is to quantitatively evaluate the speech act realization strategies of Uzbek EFL learners in digital environments, identifying specific areas of sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic failure.

Materials and Methods

The research employed a mixed-methods empirical design, standard within contemporary interlanguage pragmatics. The participant pool consisted of 150 undergraduate EFL learners (65 male, 85 female; age range 18-22) currently enrolled at tertiary institutions in Uzbekistan, possessing verified B1-B2 proficiency levels.

Data collection triangulated two primary instruments. First, an observational corpus of 450 authentic digital text messages and comments was compiled from the participants' public and semi-public interactions on Telegram and Instagram over a two-month period. Second, a highly controlled online Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT) was administered to isolate specific speech act variables. The WDCT presented six digital scenarios manipulating social distance and power dynamics, specifically targeting the formulation of requests and apologies.

The analytical apparatus utilized the established Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) coding scheme. Every speech act was categorized by its core strategy (head act) and the presence of internal and external modifications. Statistical evaluation, including frequency distributions and Pearson correlation coefficients, was executed using IBM SPSS Statistics 27.0. A significance threshold was maintained at $p < 0.05$.

Results

The quantitative analysis exposed distinct asymmetries between the participants' grammatical proficiency and their functional pragmatic execution. In the domain of requests, the corpus demonstrated a heavy gravitation toward high-imposition, direct strategies. Specifically, 68.4% of all extracted digital requests were formulated using mood-derivable imperatives (e.g., "Send me the file"). The integration of syntactic downgraders—such as conditional structures or interrogative phrasing—was remarkably low, appearing in only 14.2% of the data. Furthermore, the mean frequency of internal lexical modifiers (softeners like "possibly" or "just") was a mere 0.8 instances per speech act.

Analysis of apology realization strategies revealed a different structural pattern. Participants utilized explicit Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs), primarily the phrase "I am sorry," in 82% of the observed instances. However, these apologies were structurally impoverished. Only 18.5% of the IFIDs were accompanied by an acknowledgment of responsibility, and a negligible 6.3% included a concrete offer of repair. Statistical testing confirmed a strong inverse correlation between the informality of the digital platform and the length of the speech act ($r = -0.64, p < 0.01$), indicating that platform affordances actively drive linguistic truncation.

Discussion

The empirical dominance of direct, unmitigated strategies among the analyzed cohort aligns with prevailing hypotheses concerning interlanguage pragmatic development in constrained digital environments. By stripping away non-verbal cues, digital platforms force the entire burden of politeness onto textual syntactic structures. The high frequency of bare imperatives suggests a persistent L1 pragmatic transfer. In Uzbek communicative frameworks, directness among peers often signals solidarity and in-group closeness. When mapped directly onto English digital discourse,

however, this structural directness violates target-language politeness maxims, inadvertently projecting abruptness or entitlement.

The reliance on standalone IFIDs in apologies further illustrates a deficit in sociopragmatic depth. Participants demonstrate awareness of the semantic formula required to initiate an apology but lack the sociolinguistic repertoire to execute the accompanying relational repair mechanisms typical of native English discourse. When compared to recent CMC studies tracking European EFL learners, the Uzbek cohort exhibits a significantly lower degree of pragmatic flexibility. The technological affordances of social media—specifically the emphasis on speed and brevity—exacerbate these communicative blind spots, actively suppressing the deployment of complex linguistic mitigation.

Scientific Novelty and Practical Significance

This study establishes the first baseline empirical mapping of digital interlanguage pragmatics within the Uzbek EFL demographic. It moves beyond traditional classroom-based assessments to capture authentic, digitally mediated communicative competence. The findings provide immediate, actionable intelligence for applied linguists and curriculum developers. The persistent pragmatic failures identified dictate a necessary pedagogical shift. ELT programs in Uzbekistan must systematically integrate instruction on digital netiquette, explicit mitigation strategies, and the cultural parameters of computer-mediated politeness to ensure learners achieve true functional fluency.

Conclusion

Digital fluency requires linguistic architecture extending well beyond basic vocabulary and syntax. The data categorically demonstrates that intermediate Uzbek EFL learners struggle to modulate their speech acts appropriately within English digital contexts, relying heavily on direct strategies that risk cross-cultural friction. Addressing this systemic pragmalinguistic deficit is not an optional pedagogical upgrade but a fundamental requirement. Aligning language instruction with the realities of modern computer-mediated communication will equip learners to navigate global digital environments with sociolinguistic confidence and precision.

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