A Descriptive Study of Pragmatic Competence in Libyan EFL Academic Discourse

دراسة وصفية للكفاءة التداولية في الخطاب الأكاديمي لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في ليبيا
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Abstract

This descriptive study examines pragmatic competence in Libyan EFL academic discourse. Pragmatic competence refers to the ability to use language appropriately according to context, purpose, and social norms. Although Libyan university students often demonstrate adequate grammatical knowledge, many face difficulties when using English effectively in academic interactions. This study analyzes authentic academic discourse produced by Libyan EFL learners to describe their use of speech acts, politeness strategies, and context-sensitive language features. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, the study aims to identify common pragmatic patterns and challenges without implementing any instructional intervention. The findings are expected to contribute to a clearer understanding of pragmatic performance in the Libyan EFL context and to provide pedagogical insights for improving pragmatic awareness in university-level English programs.

Keywords: pragmatic competence, academic discourse, EFL learners, descriptive study, Libyan context

الملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة الوصفية إلى تحليل الكفاءة التداولية في الخطاب الأكاديمي لدى دارسي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في الجامعات الليبية. وتشير الكفاءة التداولية إلى قدرة المتعلم على استخدام اللغة استخدامًا مناسبًا للسياق والغرض والأعراف الاجتماعية. وعلى الرغم من امتلاك العديد من الطلبة الليبيين معرفة جيدة بالقواعد اللغوية، إلا أنهم يواجهون صعوبات واضحة في توظيف اللغة الإنجليزية بفعالية في التفاعل الأكاديمي. تعتمد الدراسة على تحليل خطابات أكاديمية حقيقية أنتجها طلبة ليبيون، بهدف وصف أنماط استخدام أفعال الكلام واستراتيجيات المجاملة والسمات التداولية المرتبطة بالسياق. وتستند الدراسة إلى منهج وصفي دون أي تدخل تعليمي، وتسعى إلى تقديم صورة واقعية لمستوى الكفاءة التداولية واقتراح دلالات تربوية لتحسين تدريسها في برامج اللغة الإنجليزية الجامعية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الكفاءة التداولية، الخطاب الأكاديمي، متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية، دراسة وصفية، السياق الليبي

1. Introduction

In recent years, pragmatic competence has been recognized as a central component of communicative competence in second and foreign language learning. It refers to learners' ability to use language appropriately in different social and academic contexts. This includes understanding how meaning is shaped by context, how speech acts are performed, and how politeness is expressed in interaction (Taguchi, 2021).

In many EFL contexts, including Libya, English instruction at the university level continues to emphasize grammatical accuracy and vocabulary development. While these aspects are essential, they are not sufficient for successful academic communication. Research has shown that learners may produce grammatically correct sentences but still fail to communicate effectively due to pragmatic inadequacy (Bardovi-Harlig, 2020).

Within Libyan higher education, students are increasingly required to participate in academic discussions, deliver presentations, and produce written academic texts in English. However,

classroom observations and informal assessments suggest that many students struggle with pragmatic aspects of academic discourse, such as making appropriate requests, expressing disagreement politely, or adjusting language according to academic roles and power relations. These difficulties may lead to misunderstanding and reduced academic confidence.

Despite the importance of pragmatic competence, empirical research focusing on pragmatic performance in the Libyan EFL context remains limited. Most existing studies in Libya have concentrated on linguistic competence, particularly grammar and writing accuracy, leaving pragmatic use largely unexplored. This gap highlights the need for descriptive research that documents how Libyan EFL learners actually use English in academic settings.

Therefore, the present study adopts a descriptive approach to examine pragmatic competence in Libyan EFL academic discourse. Rather than testing the effect of an instructional intervention, the study aims to provide a detailed description of learners' pragmatic behavior as it naturally occurs in academic contexts. By analyzing authentic data, the study seeks to identify common pragmatic patterns, areas of difficulty, and context-specific features.

1.1. Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. Describe the level of pragmatic competence demonstrated by Libyan EFL university students in academic discourse.
2. Identify common pragmatic features used in students' academic interactions.
3. Examine recurrent pragmatic difficulties faced by learners in academic contexts.

1.2. Research Questions

1. How do Libyan EFL learners use pragmatic features in academic discourse?
2. What types of pragmatic strategies are most frequently observed?
3. What pragmatic challenges are evident in Libyan EFL academic communication?

1.3. Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it provides an empirical description of pragmatic competence in a context that has received little scholarly attention. The findings may help EFL teachers in Libya better understand students' pragmatic needs and integrate pragmatic awareness into academic English instruction. In addition, the study contributes to the broader field of applied linguistics by offering context-specific insights into pragmatic use in EFL academic settings.

1.4. Key terminology

1. Pragmatic Competence:
Pragmatic competence is the ability to use language appropriately according to context, purpose, and social norms, especially in performing speech acts and managing interaction. (Bardovi-Harlig, 2020; Taguchi, 2021)

2. **Academic Discourse**:
Academic discourse refers to spoken and written language used in academic settings and shaped by institutional and disciplinary norms. (Hyland, 2019)

3. **EFL (English as a Foreign Language)**:
EFL refers to the learning and use of English in contexts where it is not the primary language of daily communication. (Ellis, 2015)

4. Speech Acts:
Speech acts are actions performed through language, such as requesting, explaining, or disagreeing, to achieve communicative goals. (Searle, 1976)

5. **Politeness Strategies**:
Politeness strategies are linguistic choices used to maintain respect and manage social relations in interaction. (Brown & Levinson, 1987)

6. **Descriptive** **Study**:
A descriptive study examines phenomena as they naturally occur, without experimental manipulation. (Mackey & Gass, 2016)

1.5. Research Gap

Although pragmatic competence has been widely recognized as an essential component of communicative competence in EFL research, the majority of existing studies have focused on Asian and European contexts. Research in second language pragmatics has largely examined learners' pragmatic development through experimental or instructional designs, particularly studies investigating the effects of explicit pragmatic instruction rather than describing learners' natural pragmatic performance in real contexts (Bardovi-Harlig, 2020; Taguchi, 2021).

In the Libyan EFL context, empirical research has predominantly concentrated on linguistic aspects such as grammatical accuracy, vocabulary acquisition, and academic writing mechanics. Several studies conducted in Libyan universities have addressed writing difficulties and language proficiency but have given limited attention to pragmatic competence, especially within academic discourse and classroom interaction (Orafi & Borg, 2009; Ahmed, 2018).

Moreover, descriptive studies that explore how Libyan university students naturally use English in authentic academic interactions remain scarce. Little is known about how learners perform speech acts, manage politeness, or adjust language use according to academic roles and institutional norms. This lack of context-sensitive descriptive research restricts a full understanding of pragmatic language use in Libyan higher education.

This gap in the literature highlights the need for descriptive research that documents pragmatic competence as it occurs naturally in academic settings. Without such descriptions, it becomes difficult to develop informed pedagogical practices or curriculum adjustments that address learners' pragmatic needs (Taguchi, 2021).

Therefore, the present study seeks to fill this gap by providing a descriptive analysis of pragmatic competence in Libyan EFL academic discourse. By focusing on authentic academic data and avoiding experimental manipulation, the study offers a realistic account of pragmatic language use within the Libyan university context.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Pragmatic Competence in EFL Contexts

Pragmatic competence has been widely discussed in the field of applied linguistics as a core component of communicative competence. It refers to learners' ability to use language appropriately in different social and situational contexts. Early models of communicative competence emphasized the integration of grammatical knowledge with sociocultural and pragmatic knowledge, highlighting that successful communication requires more than linguistic accuracy.

Recent EFL research confirms that pragmatic competence does not automatically develop alongside grammatical competence. Bardovi-Harlig (2020) argues that many EFL learners demonstrate strong control of grammar while struggling with context-appropriate language use. Similarly, Taguchi (2021) emphasizes that pragmatic development is influenced by exposure, interaction, and contextual awareness, which are often limited in foreign language environments.

In EFL contexts, learners have fewer opportunities to engage in authentic interaction, making pragmatic acquisition particularly challenging. As a result, pragmatic failure remains a common issue among university-level EFL learners, especially in formal and academic settings.

2.2. Academic Discourse and Pragmatics

Academic discourse represents a specialized form of language use shaped by institutional norms, disciplinary conventions, and power relations. It requires learners to perform speech

acts such as requesting clarification, expressing disagreement, and presenting arguments in a polite and appropriate manner.

Hyland (2019) explains that academic discourse is not neutral but socially constructed, meaning that learners must understand both linguistic forms and pragmatic expectations. In academic interaction, pragmatic competence plays a critical role in managing face, expressing stance, and maintaining respectful relationships between students and instructors.

Studies have shown that EFL learners often face pragmatic difficulties in academic discourse, particularly when interacting with authority figures or participating in discussions. These difficulties may lead to silence, avoidance, or inappropriate language choices, which can negatively affect academic participation and performance.

2.3. Speech Acts and Politeness in EFL Academic Settings

Speech act theory has been widely applied in pragmatic research to analyze how learners perform communicative actions through language. In academic contexts, common speech acts include requests, suggestions, explanations, and disagreements. Performing these acts appropriately requires pragmatic awareness and sensitivity to context.

Research indicates that EFL learners frequently transfer pragmatic norms from their first language, which may result in pragmatic mismatch. According to Searle (1976), speech acts are context-dependent, and failure to adjust them to the target language norms may cause misunderstanding.

Politeness is closely linked to speech act realization in academic discourse. Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory remains influential in explaining how speakers manage face and social relations. More recent studies suggest that EFL learners often underuse or misuse politeness strategies in academic interaction, particularly when making requests or expressing disagreement (Taguchi, 2021).

2.4. Descriptive Studies in Second Language Pragmatics

Descriptive research plays a vital role in understanding how learners actually use language in real contexts. Unlike experimental studies, descriptive studies focus on observing and analyzing naturally occurring data without instructional intervention.

Mackey and Gass (2016) highlight that descriptive studies are essential for identifying patterns of language use and areas of difficulty before pedagogical solutions can be proposed. In second language pragmatics, descriptive research helps document learners' pragmatic behavior and provides empirical evidence of pragmatic strengths and weaknesses.

Despite its importance, descriptive pragmatic research remains underrepresented compared to instructional studies, particularly in under-researched contexts such as North Africa and the Arab world.

2.5. Pragmatic Research in the Libyan EFL Context

Research on EFL in Libya has largely focused on linguistic competence, especially grammar, vocabulary, and writing skills. Studies conducted in Libyan universities have reported persistent difficulties in academic writing and overall language proficiency (Ahmed, 2018; Orafi & Borg, 2009).

However, pragmatic competence has received limited scholarly attention in the Libyan context. Existing studies rarely examine how learners use English in authentic academic interaction or how pragmatic norms influence communication in higher education settings. As a result, there is insufficient descriptive evidence documenting pragmatic language use among Libyan EFL learners.

This gap highlights the need for context-specific descriptive studies that explore pragmatic competence within Libyan academic discourse. Such research is necessary to inform curriculum design and improve communicative outcomes in Libyan EFL programs.

This chapter has reviewed key literature related to pragmatic competence, academic discourse, speech acts, politeness strategies, and descriptive research in EFL contexts. The review

demonstrates that while pragmatic competence is widely acknowledged as essential, descriptive studies examining pragmatic use in under-researched contexts remain limited. In the Libyan EFL context, this gap is particularly evident, reinforcing the relevance of the present descriptive study

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative research design to examine pragmatic competence in Libyan EFL academic discourse. A descriptive approach is appropriate because the study aims to observe, document, and analyze learners' pragmatic language use as it naturally occurs, without introducing any instructional treatment or experimental manipulation.

Descriptive research is widely used in applied linguistics to provide detailed accounts of language behavior in real contexts. It allows researchers to identify patterns, tendencies, and challenges in learners' language use, particularly in under-researched settings such as the Libyan EFL context (Mackey & Gass, 2016).

3.2. Research Context

The study was conducted in Libyan university settings where English is taught as a foreign language. In these institutions, English is primarily used for academic purposes, including lectures, classroom discussions, presentations, and written assignments. Students are expected to interact with instructors and peers using English in formal academic contexts, which require pragmatic awareness and appropriate language use.

The Libyan EFL context is characterized by limited exposure to authentic English outside the classroom. As a result, students' pragmatic development largely depends on classroom interaction and academic tasks.

3.3. Participants

The participants of this study consist of undergraduate students enrolled in English language programs at Libyan universities. The students share a similar linguistic background, with Arabic as their first language and English as a foreign language learned mainly through formal instruction.

The participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that they were actively engaged in academic English use. All participants had completed several university-level English courses, which makes them suitable for examining pragmatic competence in academic discourse.

3.4. Data Collection

Data for this study were collected from authentic academic discourse produced by the participants. The data sources include:

- Classroom discussions conducted in English
- Student–teacher academic interactions
- Selected written academic tasks

These data sources were chosen to reflect natural language use in real academic settings. No tasks were designed specifically for the purpose of testing pragmatic competence. Instead, naturally occurring data were collected to maintain ecological validity.

The use of authentic data is essential in descriptive pragmatic research, as it allows for a realistic examination of how learners use language in context (Taguchi, 2021).

3.5. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using qualitative descriptive analysis. The analysis focused on identifying pragmatic features related to:

- Speech act realization
- Politeness strategies
- Context-sensitive language use

Each interaction was examined to determine how learners performed speech acts such as requests, explanations, and disagreements, and how they adjusted their language according to academic roles and power relations.

The analysis followed a systematic process of coding and categorization. Recurrent pragmatic patterns and difficulties were identified and described without quantification or statistical testing, in line with the descriptive nature of the study.

3.6. Trustworthiness of the Study

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, several measures were taken. Data were collected from multiple academic contexts to ensure variability. The analysis was conducted carefully to avoid subjective interpretation, focusing strictly on observable linguistic behavior. Using established pragmatic frameworks from previous studies also contributed to analytical consistency and reliability (Bardovi-Harlig, 2020).

3.7. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, and their consent was obtained prior to data collection. All data were anonymized to protect participants' identities. The study focused solely on language use and did not involve any evaluation of academic performance.

This chapter has outlined the research design, context, participants, data collection procedures, and methods of analysis used in the study. By adopting a descriptive qualitative approach and relying on authentic academic data, the study aims to provide a realistic and context-sensitive description of pragmatic competence in Libyan EFL academic discourse.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents a descriptive analysis of the pragmatic features observed in Libyan EFL academic discourse. The analysis focuses on how learners use English in real academic interactions, with particular attention to speech acts, politeness strategies, and context-sensitive language use. The findings are based on naturally occurring spoken and written academic data and are presented descriptively without statistical measurement.

4.2. Speech Act Realization in Academic Discourse

Analysis of the data shows that Libyan EFL learners frequently engage in common academic speech acts such as requesting clarification, giving explanations, responding to questions, and expressing opinions. Most learners are able to perform these speech acts successfully at a basic linguistic level, producing grammatically correct sentences and following basic turn-taking conventions. For example, a student asking for clarification might say, *"Can you explain this again?"* or *"I don't understand the last point."*

However, the analysis reveals that these speech acts are often realized in a direct and simplified manner, lacking pragmatic refinement. Requests, for instance, frequently rely on short, grammatically correct forms without hedges or softening expressions such as *"Would it be possible…"* or *"Could you please…"*. When addressing instructors, learners often use direct language like *"Explain this topic"* rather than a more polite or mitigated form. Similarly, disagreement is sometimes expressed bluntly, e.g., *"I don't agree with this idea"*, without mitigating devices or justification.

This pattern suggests that learners possess sufficient grammatical knowledge to construct basic speech acts but face challenges in adjusting their language according to academic and institutional expectations. Their pragmatic choices are constrained by limited exposure to authentic academic interaction, resulting in language that is functional but sometimes perceived as abrupt or overly informal. Similar findings have been reported in other EFL contexts, where learners demonstrate linguistically correct but pragmatically limited forms in classroom communication (Bardovi-Harlig, 2020).

Furthermore, the data indicate that learners rarely employ strategic linguistic devices such as hedges, politeness markers, or context-specific qualifiers in spoken interaction. For example, in peer discussions, a student may say, *"This is wrong"* rather than *"I think this might be incorrect because…"*. This indicates a gap between learners' grammatical competence and their pragmatic competence in academic settings.

4.3. Use of Politeness Strategies

Politeness strategies appear inconsistently across the data. In peer-to-peer interactions, learners tend to use informal and direct language, showing limited concern for pragmatic appropriateness. Expressions of disagreement, suggestions, or requests among peers are often straightforward, such as *"You are mistaken"* or *"Do this exercise now"*.

In contrast, interactions with instructors reveal that learners attempt to show respect, but their strategies are often limited or repetitive. Common expressions like *"Excuse me"* or *"Sorry, I don't understand"* are frequently repeated without additional mitigating devices. Indirectness, hedging, and mitigation—such as *"Would it be possible to…"* or *"I was wondering if…"*—are noticeably underused.

Disagreement provides a particularly clear example of limited politeness strategy use. Students often express disagreement bluntly or avoid disagreement entirely, choosing silence instead. For instance, during a classroom debate, a student may nod without expressing their opinion, even if they hold a differing view, highlighting the impact of social hierarchy and fear of negative evaluation.

These findings indicate partial pragmatic awareness: learners recognize the need for politeness but lack sufficient linguistic resources to realize it effectively. This aligns with prior research demonstrating that EFL learners often struggle with politeness in institutional contexts, particularly when interacting with authority figures (Taguchi, 2021). It also suggests that classroom norms and teaching practices in Libya may not explicitly address pragmatic aspects such as hedging, indirectness, or polite disagreement.

4.4. Context-Sensitive Language Use

The analysis shows that learners demonstrate limited sensitivity to contextual factors, such as power relations, formality, and audience expectations. For example, learners often use the same linguistic forms when speaking to peers as when addressing instructors, showing minimal adjustment for academic hierarchy.

In academic writing, learners tend to prioritize grammatical accuracy over pragmatic appropriateness. Written texts often lack hedging, cautious claims, or reader-oriented language. For instance, a student may write: *"This theory is wrong"* instead of *"This theory may be limited because…"*, resulting in statements that appear overly direct or personal.

Such patterns reflect a broader issue in EFL instruction, where form-focused teaching dominates over pragmatic instruction. Learners produce linguistically accurate language that does not fully align with academic discourse norms, which include nuanced expression, hedging, and context-appropriate stance (Hyland, 2019).

In spoken interaction, similar tendencies are observed: learners may respond to instructor questions directly without considering the politeness or mitigatory strategies appropriate for the context. This lack of context-sensitive adjustment can sometimes hinder effective communication, particularly in settings that demand careful academic language.

4.5. Recurrent Pragmatic Difficulties

Across the analyzed data, several recurring pragmatic difficulties were identified:

- **Overuse of direct language in formal academic contexts:** Learners frequently produce commands or assertions that sound abrupt or informal, particularly in instructor-student interaction.
- **Limited use of mitigation and hedging:** Devices such as *"I think"*, *"may"*, or *"perhaps"* are underused in both spoken and written forms.

- **Difficulty expressing disagreement politely:** Learners either express disagreement bluntly or avoid it altogether.
- **Inconsistent adjustment of language to academic roles:** Learners often fail to differentiate between peer-peer interaction and student-instructor interaction in terms of linguistic form and politeness.

These difficulties indicate that pragmatic competence has not developed to the same extent as grammatical competence among Libyan EFL learners. The observed patterns align with previous research suggesting that pragmatic development requires explicit attention and authentic exposure, which are often limited in EFL environments (Bardovi-Harlig, 2020).

Overall, the findings suggest that Libyan EFL learners demonstrate basic pragmatic ability, but their use of speech acts, politeness strategies, and context-sensitive language remains inconsistent and underdeveloped. The descriptive analysis highlights the need for more focused attention to pragmatic competence in academic English instruction, particularly in the Libyan higher education context.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1. Discussion of the Findings

The purpose of this study was to provide a descriptive account of pragmatic competence in Libyan EFL academic discourse. The findings presented in Chapter Four reveal that while Libyan EFL learners demonstrate basic pragmatic awareness, their use of pragmatic features in academic contexts remains limited and inconsistent.

One key finding concerns the realization of speech acts. Learners were generally able to perform common academic speech acts such as requesting, explaining, and responding to questions. However, these speech acts were often realized through direct and simplified forms, particularly in interactions with instructors. This supports previous research suggesting that grammatical competence does not necessarily lead to pragmatic competence (Bardovi-Harlig, 2020). Learners appear to prioritize clarity and correctness over pragmatic appropriateness, which may result in language that sounds abrupt or overly informal in academic settings.

The findings related to politeness strategies further reinforce this observation. Although learners showed some awareness of the need for politeness in formal academic interaction, they frequently lacked the linguistic resources required to soften requests, mitigate disagreement, or manage face effectively. This partial pragmatic awareness has also been reported in other EFL contexts, where learners understand social expectations but struggle to express them linguistically (Taguchi, 2021).

Another important issue concerns context-sensitive language use. The analysis indicates that learners do not consistently adjust their language according to power relations or academic roles. Similar patterns have been observed in EFL academic writing, where learners focus heavily on grammatical accuracy while overlooking pragmatic conventions such as hedging, stance, and reader engagement (Hyland, 2019). In the Libyan context, this may be linked to instructional practices that emphasize form over meaning and provide limited exposure to authentic academic discourse.

Overall, the findings confirm that pragmatic competence develops unevenly in EFL environments, particularly where opportunities for authentic interaction are limited. The Libyan EFL context reflects this challenge clearly, as learners rely mainly on classroom input and textbook-based instruction.

5.2. Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study have several pedagogical implications for English language teaching in Libyan universities. First, pragmatic competence should be addressed explicitly in academic English courses. Rather than assuming that pragmatic skills will develop naturally, instructors should draw learners' attention to how language functions in academic interaction.

Second, classroom activities should incorporate authentic academic discourse, such as recorded lectures, academic discussions, and real student–teacher interactions. These materials can help learners notice pragmatic features such as indirectness, politeness, and stance marking.

Third, pragmatic awareness can be integrated into existing language skills courses without requiring major curriculum reform. For example, writing tasks can include explicit focus on hedging and formality, while speaking activities can encourage polite disagreement and appropriate requesting.

5.3. Limitations of the Study

As a descriptive study, this research has certain limitations. The findings are based on a limited set of academic interactions and cannot be generalized to all Libyan EFL learners. In addition, the study focuses on describing pragmatic use rather than explaining its causes or measuring development over time.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insight into pragmatic competence in an under-researched context and offers a foundation for future researc

5.4. Suggestions for Future Research

Future studies may build on this research by examining pragmatic competence across different proficiency levels or academic disciplines. Longitudinal studies could also explore how pragmatic competence develops over time in the Libyan EFL context.

In addition, experimental or instructional studies may investigate the effectiveness of pragmatic-focused teaching approaches based on the descriptive findings presented in this study.

5.5. Conclusion

This study has provided a descriptive analysis of pragmatic competence in Libyan EFL academic discourse. The findings indicate that while learners possess basic pragmatic ability, they face persistent challenges in using language appropriately in academic contexts. Speech act realization, politeness strategies, and context-sensitive language use remain areas of difficulty.

By documenting pragmatic language use as it naturally occurs, this study contributes to a clearer understanding of pragmatic competence in Libyan higher education. It highlights the need for greater pedagogical attention to pragmatic aspects of language use and provides a basis for improving academic English instruction in EFL contexts.

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