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DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE IN EFL LEARNERS

ABSTRACT

Intercultural pragmatic competence (IPC) has become increasingly important for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners as global communication expands. Learners must understand not only linguistic accuracy but also how to choose appropriate expressions in socially and culturally diverse interactions. This article examines IPC in depth by exploring theoretical perspectives, analyzing the sources of pragmatic difficulties among EFL students, and discussing principles for effective classroom instruction. It also highlights the crucial role of identity, cultural values, international interaction, and digital communication in shaping learners' pragmatic development. The article argues that fostering IPC requires a combination of explicit teaching, reflective activities, exposure to authentic materials, and opportunities for intercultural exchange. Ultimately, strengthening IPC prepares learners to communicate respectfully and effectively in academic, professional, and international contexts.

Keywords: intercultural pragmatics, pragmatic competence, EFL learners, cultural norms, communicative competence

As English continues to serve as a global language, EFL learners increasingly participate in interactions with speakers from a wide range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Communicating effectively in such environments requires more than accurate grammar and vocabulary; it also relies on an understanding of how meaning is shaped by social norms, expectations, and cultural assumptions [1]. This ability—known as intercultural pragmatic competence—enables learners to interpret intentions, manage conversational norms, and produce socially appropriate responses. However, learners often struggle with this dimension of communication because pragmatic norms are not always visible or explicitly explained, and many classrooms do not provide sufficient opportunities for real-world interaction. Despite these challenges, IPC is essential for mutual understanding, avoiding unintended offense, and maintaining positive relationships in multicultural contexts.

In many EFL classrooms, instructional practices still prioritize grammatical accuracy and written proficiency over communicative appropriateness. This

imbalance can lead to situations in which learners know how to construct grammatically correct sentences but do not know how to phrase a request politely, how to refuse an invitation without sounding abrupt, or how to use indirect language in cultures where indirectness is preferred [2]. Furthermore, globalization has changed the nature of English use itself. Learners today are more likely to interact with non-native English speakers than with native speakers, which means that pragmatic norms cannot be limited to one “standard.” Instead, learners must become flexible communicators capable of adapting to varying styles and expectations [6].

Given these realities, exploring strategies for developing IPC is increasingly important. The following expanded sections provide a deeper understanding of the theoretical background of IPC and offer a wide range of pedagogical approaches aimed at helping learners navigate cultural and pragmatic differences more effectively.

Theoretical Perspectives and Expanded Discussion of Learner Difficulties

Intercultural pragmatic competence is shaped by multiple theoretical frameworks, including sociolinguistics, speech act theory, intercultural communication theory, and cognitive pragmatics. Speech act theory emphasizes that communicative acts such as apologizing, refusing, or requesting are performed differently depending on cultural values [4]. Sociolinguistic perspectives highlight the influence of power relations, social distance, and levels of formality on language choice. For example, cultures differ widely in how directly one may speak to superiors, strangers, or peers. Meanwhile, intercultural communication theory focuses on how individuals interpret messages through culturally informed filters. When learners from different cultural backgrounds engage in conversation, they may interpret the same linguistic form in different ways. A polite suggestion in one culture may be interpreted as a firm instruction in another.

Another important perspective comes from cognitive pragmatics, which examines how individuals draw on shared knowledge—often called “common ground”—to understand meaning [3]. In intercultural situations, common ground is often limited, making it challenging for learners to infer meaning or choose appropriate expressions. Without shared cultural assumptions, even simple interactions may lead to misunderstanding. For example, an EFL learner may believe that refusing an offer directly shows honesty, while in many English-speaking contexts, softened refusals are perceived as more polite.

Learners also face difficulties because pragmatic norms are usually implicit. Unlike grammar rules, pragmatic conventions are rarely taught systematically. Textbooks may provide model dialogues, but they often fail to explain why certain expressions are used or what cultural values underlie them [5]. Learners may memorize set phrases without understanding when they are acceptable. Additionally, pragmatic norms vary even within the same language. Politeness strategies differ

between British, American, Australian, and Canadian English, and they differ even more when English functions as a lingua franca. As a result, learners often experience uncertainty about which norms to follow.

Identity also plays a major role in IPC. Learners do not simply adopt the pragmatic norms of another culture; instead, they negotiate between their own cultural identities and the expectations of the target language community. This negotiation can create tension. Some learners may resist adopting pragmatic forms they perceive as unnatural or inconsistent with their cultural values. For example, a learner from a culture that values indirectness may find it difficult to adjust to direct communication styles, or vice versa. Teachers must recognize these identity-based challenges and help students develop flexible, context-sensitive communication rather than expecting them to sound exactly like native speakers.

Finally, digital communication adds another layer of complexity. Many learners now interact internationally through social media, online gaming, academic platforms, and professional networks. Digital communication often involves different norms—shorter messages, emojis, abbreviations, varying levels of informality—and these norms vary across cultures. Understanding how to interpret tone in digital environments is therefore an important part of IPC. As learners increasingly rely on online communication, they must learn to navigate both cross-cultural and cross-platform pragmatic expectations.

Expanded Pedagogical Practices for Developing Intercultural Pragmatic Competence

Developing IPC requires intentional, sustained, and well-designed pedagogical interventions. One effective approach is raising cultural awareness through structured reflection. Teachers can encourage learners to analyze how their own cultural values influence communication and compare these values with those of other cultures. Activities such as analyzing real interactions, examining misunderstandings, and discussing differences in politeness conventions help learners become more conscious of pragmatic variation. Awareness itself, however, is not enough. Learners must also be provided with explicit instruction, as research shows that direct explanations of pragmatic norms lead to more rapid and accurate development [7]. Teachers can present speech acts in detail, showing how requests, apologies, compliments, and refusals change in form depending on context, power relations, and interpersonal distance.

Authentic materials are another essential tool for IPC development. Films, interviews, podcasts, and real online exchanges provide rich examples of naturalistic language use. These materials expose learners to tone of voice, facial expression, gesture, and conversational rhythm—elements that are often missing in textbook dialogues. Teachers can design activities that require learners to identify politeness strategies, categorize levels of directness, or analyze how speakers express

agreement, disagreement, or hesitation. Such tasks help students understand not just what is said but how meaning is shaped by context.

Role-plays, simulations, and scenario-based tasks give learners opportunities to practice pragmatic choices in controlled environments. When combined with peer or teacher feedback, these tasks help students experiment with different forms and reflect on how their choices influence communication. For instance, learners may practice refusing invitations in multiple ways—very directly, moderately directly, or politely and indirectly—and then discuss how each option might be perceived. This reflection helps learners develop sensitivity to contextual factors and supports the development of flexible communication strategies.

Intercultural contact also plays a central role in IPC development. Virtual exchanges, international group projects, and online collaborations allow learners to interact with people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Through these interactions, learners can test their pragmatic skills, receive authentic feedback, and build confidence. Structured post-interaction reflection is especially important, as it enables learners to analyze successes, challenges, and moments of misunderstanding. Research shows that learners who participate in intercultural exchanges develop stronger pragmatic awareness and greater communicative flexibility than those who rely solely on classroom instruction [1].

Teachers should also integrate metapragmatic discussions into lessons. Encouraging learners to talk about pragmatic choices—why a speaker chooses a polite request instead of a direct command, or how humor varies across cultures—helps deepen their understanding. These discussions promote critical thinking and encourage learners to consider how language reflects cultural values.

Finally, assessment plays an important role. Traditional tests rarely evaluate pragmatic competence, but teachers can use performance-based assessments, reflective journals, discourse completion tasks, and portfolio work to measure students' progress. Such forms of assessment emphasize growth rather than right-or-wrong answers and encourage learners to reflect on their development as intercultural communicators.

Intercultural pragmatic competence is a vital element of effective communication in today's multilingual and multicultural world. While EFL learners often face difficulties related to limited exposure, implicit norms, cultural differences, and negotiating personal identity, these challenges can be addressed through purposeful instruction. By integrating cultural awareness activities, explicit pragmatic teaching, authentic materials, role-plays, and opportunities for real intercultural interaction, teachers can support learners in developing the flexibility and sensitivity required for successful communication. Strengthening IPC not only enhances linguistic proficiency but also prepares learners to participate confidently and respectfully in global academic, professional, and social environments. As

international communication continues to expand, developing learners' intercultural pragmatic competence is not optional—it is essential.

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XARİCİ DİL KİMİ İNGİLİS DİLİ ÖYRƏNƏNLƏRDƏ MƏDƏNİYYƏTLƏRARASI PRAGMATİK KOMPETENSİYANIN İNKİŞAFI

Xülasə. Mədəniyyətlərarası pragmatik kompetensiya (MPK) qlobal ünsiyyətin genişlənməsi fonunda Xarici Dil kimi İngilis dili (EFL) öyrənənləri üçün getdikcə daha vacib hala gəlmişdir. Öyrənənlər təkcə dil qaydalarına düzgün əməl etməyi deyil, həm də sosial və mədəni baxımdan müxtəlif situasiyalarda uyğun ifadələri seçməyi bacarmalıdırlar. Bu məqalə MPK-nı dərinlən təhlil edir: nəzəri yanaşmaları araşdırır, EFL tələbələri arasında yaranan pragmatik çətinliklərin mənbələrini analiz edir və effektiv sinif tədrisi üçün əsas prinsipləri müzakirə edir. Məqalə, həmçinin, tələbələrin pragmatik inkişafına təsir edən kimlik, mədəni dəyərlər, beynəlxalq qarşılıqlı əlaqə və rəqəmsal kommunikasiya kimi mühüm amillərin rolunu vurğulayır. Məqalədə iddia olunur ki, MPK-nın formalaşdırılması açıq tədrisin, reflektiv fəaliyyətlərin, autentik materiallara çıxışın və mədəniyyətlərarası mübadilə imkanlarının birgə tətbiqini tələb edir. Nəticə etibarilə, MPK-nın gücləndirilməsi öyrənənləri akademik, peşəkar və beynəlxalq kontekstlərdə daha hörmətli və effektiv ünsiyyət qurmağa hazırlayır.

Açar sözlər: mədəniyyətlərarası pragmatika, pragmatik kompetensiya, EFL öyrənənləri, mədəni normalar, kommunikativ kompetensiya

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**РАЗВИТИЕ МЕЖКУЛЬТУРНОЙ ПРАГМАТИЧЕСКОЙ
КОМПЕТЕНЦИИ У ИЗУЧАЮЩИХ АНГЛИЙСКИЙ ЯЗЫК КАК
ИНОСТРАННЫЙ**

Резюме. Межкультурная прагматическая компетенция (МПК) приобретает всё большее значение для изучающих английский язык как иностранный (EFL) в условиях расширения глобальной коммуникации. Обучающимся необходимо владеть не только языковой точностью, но и умением выбирать уместные выражения в социально и культурно разнообразных ситуациях общения. В статье представлен углублённый анализ МПК посредством рассмотрения теоретических подходов, анализа источников прагматических затруднений у студентов EFL и обсуждения принципов эффективного обучения в аудитории. Особое внимание уделяется роли идентичности, культурных ценностей, международного взаимодействия и цифровой коммуникации в формировании прагматического развития обучающихся. Утверждается, что формирование МПК требует сочетания эксплицитного обучения, рефлексивных заданий, доступа к аутентичным материалам и возможностей для межкультурного обмена. В конечном итоге развитие МПК подготавливает обучающихся к уважительному и эффективному общению в академических, профессиональных и международных контекстах.

Ключевые слова: межкультурная прагматика, прагматическая компетенция, изучающие EFL, культурные нормы, коммуникативная компетентность

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