

## EVALUATING THE PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE OF CROATIAN BUSINESS ENGLISH STUDENTS

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**Abstract:** *The study investigated the pragmatic competence of Croatian Business English students and it focused on participants' ability to utilise appropriate, polite, and clear language in business communication. Thirty-seven participants completed a mixed-methods questionnaire comprised of self-assessment, discourse completion task, an email completion task, role-play scenario, and multiple-choice questions. The responses were evaluated using a fifty-point scale based on three criteria: appropriateness, politeness and tone, and grammar and clarity. Findings indicated that participants generally demonstrated a solid understanding of pragmatic strategies, especially in requests and refusals. Some challenges were detected in expressing disagreement and directness softening. Participants demonstrated a high level of self-awareness, particularly in apologies and recognizing differences between formal and informal language. Findings show differences between perceived and actual performance in more subtle tasks. There is also an indication that exposing students to communicative teaching approaches such as direct method, communicative language teaching and task-based language teaching may encourage pragmatic awareness. This study emphasises the importance of integrating explicit teaching of pragmatics in Business English and suggests further research on the use of pragmatic strategies and changes in development over a longer period.*

**Keywords:** *pragmatic competence, Business English, politeness strategies, appropriateness strategies, workplace communication*

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## Introduction

### *Definition and importance of pragmatics*

Language acquisition is a complex process with many aspects, especially for non-native speakers who are required to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers and nuances in order to communicate effectively. Pragmatics is an essential component in ensuring appropriateness of communication in a variety of contexts. For Croatian learners of English, pragmatics presents itself in unique challenges. Despite the existence of research on pragmatic competence, the targeted studies on acquisition and application of pragmatic skills in Croatian learners, and the impact of cultural and linguistic differences on the learning process remain limited.

Pragmatics is defined as a branch of linguistics concerned with language use in social contexts and the ways in which individuals convey and interpret meanings beyond literal sense of words. It includes a wide range of communicative functions such as speech acts (requests, apologies, and greetings), using context to interpret messages, and adhering to conversational norms (Dey, 2023). Pragmatics plays a crucial role in ensuring contextually appropriate communication (Zhang & Li, 2024), enabling speakers to communicate intended meanings, and listeners to interpret those meanings correctly. Still, grammatically sound utterances can lead to misunderstanding or communication breakdown without the understanding of pragmatics (Roziņa, 2011). Pragmatics enables foreign language learners to navigate social interactions through the understanding of what is implied, politeness maintenance, and interpretation of indirect speech. For example, requests such as ‘Can you pass the salt?’ are understood as polite, not as literal question about the ability, and this implies the key role of pragmatics in language use (Smith, 2024).

### *Challenges in pragmatic acquisition for non-native speakers*

Non-native speakers of English often face challenges in acquiring pragmatic competence. This is mainly due to differences in linguistic and cultural backgrounds. These challenges include understanding and usage of appropriate speech acts, understanding politeness strategies related to culture, and interpreting indirect speech and idiomatic expressions (Mokoro, 2024). For Croatian learners of English, there are additional difficulties relating to structural differences between Croatian and English such as verb tenses, articles and syntax, which can affect pragmatic interpretations (Martinović & Balenović, 1970). Additionally, different systems of tenses and aspects in Croatian can cause misinterpretation when conveying temporal relations and modality in English (Šoštarić, Hardmeier & Stymne, 2018). Croatian cultural norms also differ from

those of English-speaking countries and this can also lead to misunderstandings or perceived impoliteness in cross-cultural interactions.

### ***Cultural differences and common pragmatic errors***

Cultural differences between Croatia and English-speaking countries can significantly affect pragmatic competence. Croatian culture values directness and straightforwardness in communication, which can often be interpreted as blunt and impolite in English. However, English-speaking cultures often utilise indirect communication and euphemisms in order to maintain politeness and avoid conflicts (Nkirote, 2024). Moreover, non-verbal communication such as eye contact, gestures and personal space differ culturally. These often influence interpretation of pragmatic meaning (Mušura, 2020), which leads to frequent pragmatic errors among Croatian learners of English. The errors include inappropriate use of speech acts, not adhering to conversational norms and misunderstandings of language use in context (Šoštarić, Hardmeier & Stymne, 2018). An example of the latter is an excessive use of formal or direct language in casual situations, which can be perceived as impolite or awkward, or literal interpretation of English idiomatic expressions and indirect requests.

### ***Context-sensitive pragmatics – Importance of context and types of contextual factors***

Context is crucial in the understanding of pragmatics because it determines the meaning and appropriateness of language use. Context-sensitive pragmatics includes language interpretation based on factors such as the social roles or social setting, the relationship between interlocutors and goals of the interaction (Bach, 2008). For example, greetings in formal business situations differ from casual greetings used among family and friends, and adjusting to these contextual variations is vital for effective communication, especially for non-native speakers of English. Key contextual factors include social context, which includes language use based on the roles, social status and relationships; cultural context, in which norms are determined by politeness, non-verbal cues and conversation topics; and situational context, which encompasses the setting, time and goal of the interaction (Chemmel & Phillipe, 2018).

### ***Assessment of pragmatic proficiency***

Assessing pragmatic proficiency evaluates the ability of non-native speakers to use and interpret language appropriately in context (Laughlin, Wain & Schmidgall, 2015), using methods such as performance-based assessments (e.g. role play, interactive tasks, simulations), discourse completion tasks (DCTs) using prompts asking to use appropriate language for specific functions such as requests or refusals, and observational assessments which include

observing interactions in real-life settings. The challenges of these assessments can include subjectivity of the assessor, contextual variations which hinder assessment standardisation and cultural bias which may favour norms of the target language, and in turn affect learners from different cultural backgrounds (Cohen, 2019).

## Previous research in the field

### *Research questions*

The aim of the current study is to expand the understanding of the way Croatian speakers use Business English in pragmatic situations with a special focus on pragmatic strategies used in spoken and written communication in different contexts. The study includes the analysis of responses in simulated business scenarios, interaction tasks by e-mail, multiple-choice questions (MCQs) based on business scenarios, and self-perceived pragmatic knowledge of participants.

Current study aims to clarify the following research questions:

1. How effectively do Business English students demonstrate pragmatic competence in workplace communication, specifically in terms of appropriateness, politeness, and clarity?
2. What are the common challenges Business English students face when applying pragmatic strategies (e.g., making requests, refusals, negotiations) in professional communication?
3. How does self-perceived pragmatic competence compare to actual performance in Business English communication tasks?
4. Which pragmatic strategies are applied most and least effectively by Business English students in professional contexts?

### *Findings on communicative competence development*

The importance of pragmatics in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms and how it can help develop communicative competence in language learners has been discussed in many studies conducted globally. There has been a particular focus on the increasing attention on pragmatics in language studies in recent years, including the use of pragmatics as a theory to help EFL learners develop real communication skills both inside and outside the classroom (Khansir & Pakdel, 2021).

The integration of discourse, pragmatics and culture into EFL teaching is considered a crucial step in pragmatic competence, with the stress on the need

to adopt a cross-cultural pragmatic approach (the functional one<sup>1</sup>) in EFL teaching as well as an approach based on idealisation traditions (the formalist one<sup>2</sup>) (Neddar, 2012). To support this, a recent study shows that grammar and pragmatics, as well as learners' grammatical and pragmatic competence develop simultaneously (Celaya & Barón, 2017). This implies there is no need to reach a certain level of grammar knowledge in order to develop pragmatic competence. Additionally, teaching speech acts in EFL classrooms is mentioned as essential in gaining pragmatic competence, with focus on the need for a balanced approach between theory and practice, cultural awareness, feedback and effective assessment (Darong, 2024). This allows learners to effectively communicate in various social and cultural contexts.

Investigation of competency levels, perceptions, challenges and the personal views and experiences of both students and teachers on the importance of pragmatics in the classroom indicates a general lack of cross-cultural knowledge in pragmatics amongst learners and confirms the classroom activities as necessary to develop communicative competencies (Bardis et al, 2021). Moreover, there is an indication that "EFL teachers pay little attention to cross-cultural pragmatic knowledge and classroom activities in the EFL context" (Bardis et al, 2021, p. 14). Previous studies provide suggestions on how teaching context could be improved in order to facilitate a better development of pragmatic competence among students, such as methods and exercises developed to help students attending non-linguistic universities identify and use idiomatic expressions in a foreign language, as well as the use of dictionaries and linguistic corpora, which are determined to be effective for developing intercultural competence (Vetrinskaya, 2020).

Previous studies also include the investigation of specific strategies such as the use of refusal strategies by Taiwanese EFL learners at different proficiency levels in comparison with Mandarin Chinese speakers as well as the communicative context which influences those refusal strategies (Yupin, 2020). The results show that EFL learners use refusals consistently in various situations in a similar way to Mandarin speakers, while intermediate EFL learners use more pause-fillers and refusals mainly when refusing requests from a subordinate (Yupin, 2020). Other strategies, which were examined, include pragmatic failures of Chinese tertiary EFL learners (Zheng & Huang, 2010) to provide suggestions for teaching improvement to develop students' pragmatic and communicative competence. The study shows that all Chinese EFL learners at different learning levels have poor pragmatic competence leading to pragmatic failures varying in degree. It is suggested that cultural and pragmatic knowledge

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1. The functional approach views language use as incorporated in cultural and situational contexts, stressing authentic communication and sociocultural variation.

2. The formalist approach focuses on idealised norms and rule-oriented use of language, often lacking context of a specific social interaction.

be incorporated into English classes to improve pragmatic competence (Zheng & Huang, 2010). Similarly, a study with the focus on assessment of Turkish EFL learners' pragmatic competence in the context of their understanding of conversational implicatures and production of speech acts, demonstrates a better comprehension of implicatures than production of speech acts regardless of gender (Kentmen et al, 2023).

Martínez-Florand and Alcón Soler (2007) examined the effects of explicit and implicit teaching approaches on the teaching and developing EFL learners' pragmatic awareness of the speech act of suggestions. According to the study, both explicit and implicit instructional approaches were effective in the improvement of learners' pragmatic awareness of suggestions, and there were no significant differences between the students from the explicit and implicit groups in their pragmatic ability. A research on pragmatic competence of Croatian EFL students, focusing on request modification at three proficiency levels shows infrequent use of lexical and phrasal downgraders other than "please" and past tense modals by advanced learners, indicating a small degree of pragmalinguistic development (Jbegedin Borovina, 2017).

### *Challenges of learning and teaching pragmatics*

Challenges mentioned in previous studies also focus on EFL textbooks, which are still mostly not adapted to include pragmatics (Neddar, 2012) providing very little exposure to cross-cultural pragmatic knowledge (Bardis et al, 2021). Inadequate teaching materials, lack of teacher knowledge and training, and absence of valid assessment methods were also frequently mentioned as obstacles for pragmatic competence (Sharif et al, 2017). EFL teachers are reluctant to teach pragmatics due to a lack of knowledge and awareness about pragmatics and how to effectively teach it in the classroom (Sharif, 2017, p. 51). The issue of the future of pragmatics in EFL learning is also discussed in previous research as English becomes the dominant language of international communication. However, it is acknowledged that it is not possible to design testing materials for pragmatic knowledge without reference to the native speaker's culture, as no alternative standard exists, thus this remains the most reasonable norm to be used (Neddar, 2012, p. 5690).

Previous studies highlight the importance of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge as a focus of research in SLA (second language acquisition) (Neddar, 2012) confirming the challenges of learning pragmatics in the EFL context due to EFL learners having less exposure to authentic language use and fewer opportunities to practice English outside the classroom compared to ESL learners (Sharif, 2017, p. 50). EFL students may also face challenges in understanding and using speech acts, especially those with lower language proficiency or limited exposure to the target language outside the classroom (Darong, 2024).

A quasi-experimental study which investigated the effectiveness of a blended learning model, combining face-to-face instruction and an interactive website, in developing the pragmatic competence of EFL learners indicates that the blended learning model was proven to be effective as it resulted in improvement of the pragmatic competence amongst the participants, who outperformed the control group in all aspects of pragmatic competence (perception, comprehension and production, see Bouftira & El Messaoudi, 2022).

### ***Limitations of previous studies***

A small sample size and limitation of participants to either one level or one nationality are the most frequently mentioned limitations in pragmatic competence research. Need to use more direct measures of learner awareness, such as interviews or think-aloud protocols, lack of delayed post-tests to assess long-term effects of the instruction and potential influence of different instructors for the treatment and control groups are also mentioned in previous studies (Martínez-Flor & Alcón Soler, 2007).

There are other potential issues such as the usage of elicited data through a discourse completion test, which may not fully reflect real-life request performance, narrow focus, e.g. request modification (Jbegegin Borovina, 2017), as well as use of convenience sampling rather than random sampling and potential testing effects due to pre-post design (Bouftira, El Messaoudi & Li, 2022)

### **Methods**

This study included 37 Croatian learners of Business English at the tertiary level. Delivery occurred through a communicative approach that combined the direct method (focusing on immersion and oral practice), communicative language teaching (CLT), and task-based language teaching (TBLT), all of which prioritise interaction and real-life task completion. All participants were students at the Faculty of Tourism and Rural development in Pozega, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, attending the professional undergraduate study programmes Electronic business and software engineering, and Accounting. The participants were from the first and second year of study.

The participants were provided with the questionnaire via Microsoft Forms designed to assess pragmatic competence in Business English, and focusing on key communicative functions including requests, refusals, and negotiations. The structure of the questionnaire ensured reliability and validity through the inclusion of eight tasks to gather sufficient data without overburdening the participants, and consideration of crucial business communication skills, which included requests, handling refusals, and engaging in negotiations. Five Likert scale questions were used to assess perceived pragmatic competence of the participants in order to provide an insight into the participants' confidence

in business communication, however this section of the questionnaire did not contribute towards the final score.

Once collected, the data were exported to Microsoft Excel for descriptive and basic qualitative analysis. Coded responses for open-ended questions were manually categorised and analysed for frequency and pattern detection.

Participants' responses to production and recognition tasks were evaluated based on the following: appropriateness (Is the response appropriate for the situation?), politeness and formality (Is the response professional and business-appropriate?), and grammar and clarity (Is the response grammatically correct and easily understood?).

The scoring was based on a three-point scale as follows: 1 – needs improvement, 2 – adequate, and 3 – excellent.

**Table 1. Scoring of tasks**

| Criteria            | Score 3 (excellent)                   | Score 2 (adequate)                    | Score 1 (needs improvement)       |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Appropriateness     | fully appropriate for the situation   | partially appropriate, some issues    | inappropriate or unclear response |
| Politeness and tone | fully polite and business-appropriate | somewhat polite but could be improved | too direct or impolite            |
| Grammar and clarity | well-structured and clear             | some minor errors but understandable  | difficult to understand           |

The tasks included DCTs, an email completion task, a role play task and MCQs. Each section was scored separately and performance bands were applied in order to provide more detailed view of the participants' strengths and improvement areas. Score bands were expressed both as raw numbers and in percentages.

Production tasks including DCTs, and email completion task and a role-play task, were scored as shown below.

**Table 2. Scoring of production tasks**

| Section               | Tasks   | Maximum points per task | Total |
|-----------------------|---------|-------------------------|-------|
| DCTs                  | 3 tasks | 9 points each           | 27    |
| Email completion task | 1 task  | 9 points                | 9     |
| Role-play task        | 1 task  | 5 points                | 5     |

For the role-play task, the total score was scaled proportionally to 8 points using the following formula  
 final score = (raw score/9) x 8.

This was done in order to adjust its contribution to the final score including all tasks.

While open-ended tasks such as DCTs, email and role-play were assessed across three criteria of appropriateness, politeness and tone, and grammar and clarity, the two MCQs were assessed only on pragmatic appropriateness with responses scored on a three-point scale 1 (inappropriate), 2 (partially appropriate) and to 3 (fully appropriate). Consistency in evaluating pragmatic awareness in both production and recognition tasks was ensured in this way as well as consideration for differences in the format. This type of scoring also ensured consistency with the overall scoring system.

**Table 3.** *Scoring of recognition task*

| Section | Tasks       | Maximum points per task | Total |
|---------|-------------|-------------------------|-------|
| MCQs    | 2 questions | 3 points each           | 6     |

The two multiple-choice questions were assessed based on the pragmatic appropriateness of the selected responses. The scoring in Table 3 followed a three-point scale as shown in Table 4.

**Table 4.** *Scoring criteria for MCQs*

| Score                     | Interpretation                                                                                      |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 3 (fully appropriate)     | selected the best, most professional and polite response, business-appropriate tone and strategy    |
| 2 (partially appropriate) | selected an adequate or neutral response, somewhat polite, but not ideal                            |
| 1 (inappropriate)         | selected an inappropriate or impolite response, e.g. too direct, unprofessional or socially unaware |

**Table 5.** *Total scoring of tasks and questions*

| Section               | Tasks       | Maximum points per task | Total |
|-----------------------|-------------|-------------------------|-------|
| DCTs                  | 3 tasks     | 9 points each           | 27    |
| Email completion task | 1 task      | 9 points                | 9     |
| Role-play task        | 1 task      | 8 points                | 8     |
| MCQs                  | 2 questions | 3 points each           | 6     |
| Total possible score  |             |                         | 50    |

The final scoring was based on the total of fifty points and interpreted as follows: 45–50 (90–100%) – high pragmatic competence, 35–44 (70–89%) – moderate competence, and below 35 (<70%) – needs improvement.

## Results

Each task (DCTs, email completion, role-play and MCQs), excluding perceived pragmatic competence, is summarised using score bands and descriptive statistics.

### *Perceived pragmatic competence in Business English*

Before doing task-based assessment regarding pragmatic competence, participants answered questions on perceived pragmatic competence in Business English. Figure 1. shows that the vast majority of participants felt confident softening requests in a business email (75.7%) and apologising effectively (81.1%). However, participants provided more varied responses when it comes to expressing disagreement politely, which indicated an area of potential challenge.

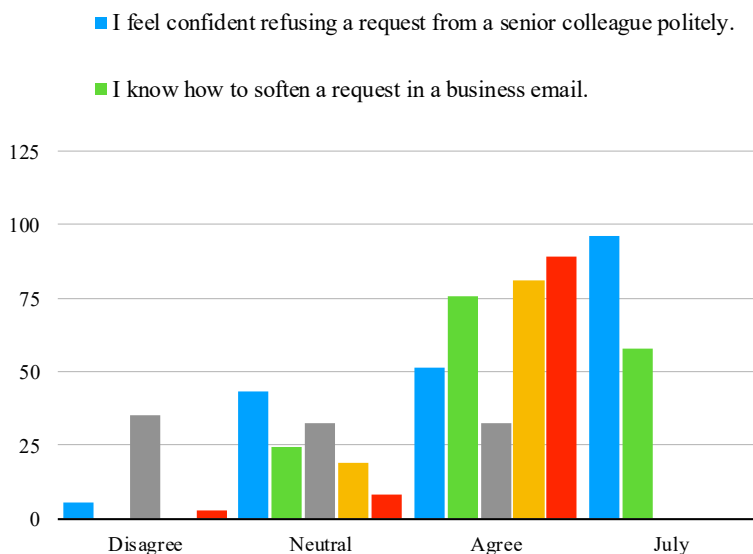


Figure 1. Participants' self-assessed pragmatic competence in Business English

### *Discourse completion tasks (DCTs)*

The assessment based on the scoring system shows strong performance with the average score of 22.3 points. Twenty participants scored between 24 and 27 points, which demonstrates very high pragmatic competence. Seven participants scored between 15 and 19 points, which indicates the need for further development, particularly in maintaining politeness and formality

in refusals, requests and negotiations. Only 2 participants scored below 15, pointing to significant challenges with pragmatic appropriateness.

**Table 6.** *Participant response distribution for DCTs*

| <b>DCT total range</b> | <b>Participants (n=37)</b> | <b>General performance</b>        |
|------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 24-27 points           | 20 participants (54%)      | very strong pragmatic competence  |
| 20-23 points           | 8 participants (22%)       | good pragmatic performance        |
| 15-19 points           | 7 participants (19%)       | moderate/needs improvement        |
| below 15 points        | 2 participants (5%)        | significant issues with responses |

The three written scenarios included asking for an extension, addressing interruptions in meetings, and refusing a client discount. In all three scenarios, 75% of participants demonstrated awareness of key pragmatic strategies with responses showing appropriate use of softeners, indirectness and formal tone, pointing to developing pragmatic competence in business communication.

In the request scenario, approximately 73% of participants used past modals (e.g. could, would) and workload justification. For example: “I’m currently managing multiple deadlines and want to give this report the attention it deserves. Could I get some extra time to finish the report?” This example demonstrated strong use of politeness, direct reference to workload and indirect phrasing (past modals). In comparison, a different response such as “Can I please have an extension” showed polite intent, but also a lack of formality which is expected in a business context.

In the meeting interruption scenario, about 65% of responses were tactful and appropriately phrased, for example, “Let me quickly finish, and then I’d love to hear your perspective”. About 10% were too direct or informal (e.g. “Shut up”), which indicates the importance of tone management in confrontational situations.

The responses in the refusal task were generally more confident. Over 75% of participants referred to company policy in a respectful way (“Unfortunately, our policy does not allow for discounts, but I’d be happy to explore other ways we can add value”) and only 8% demonstrated blunt refusals or vague reasons (“We can’t give a discount. Sorry”).

### ***Email completion task***

The results based on the scoring system show that the average score was 7.5 out of 9. Twenty-two participants (59%) achieved full score of 9, indicating excellent pragmatic awareness in polite business communication. Ten participants (27%)

scored between 7 and 8 points, showing generally good performance with some minor issues. Four participants (11%) scored between 4 and 6 points, and 1 participant (3%) scored 3 points, suggesting significant challenges with polite phrasing and formality

**Table 7.** *Participant response distribution for the email completion task*

| Score range | Participants          | Performance interpretation                                            |
|-------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 9 points    | 22 participants (59%) | excellent performance (excellent use of appropriate, polite language) |
| 7-8 points  | 10 participants (27%) | good performance (minor errors or slight tone issues)                 |
| 4-6 points  | 4 participants (11%)  | moderate performance (some gaps in politeness or clarity)             |
| 0-3 points  | 1 participant (3%)    | needs significant improvement                                         |

In this task, participants were asked to complete a business email by filling in three gaps which aimed at making a polite request to reschedule a meeting. Each gap aimed at a key pragmatic function: gap 1: polite introduction of request, gap 2: polite request for a specific alternative, and gap 3: apology for the inconvenience. 70–80% of participants demonstrated appropriate use of polite and formal language, more specifically in expressing apologies and introducing their request.

Gap 1 focused on the politeness marker when introducing request (e.g. “I would like to request”), and 57% of the participants used appropriate expressions for the context including “would like to” and “kindly”. In contrast, 38% of the participants used less appropriate or blunt language such as “want to” and “need to” which made the request sound forceful or informal for the business context. In gap 2, which focused on making the request to reschedule, 49% of the participants used indirect, polite constructions such as “Would it be possible to...” or “Could we...”. The rest of the participants used more direct phrases such as “Can we” or “Are you willing to”, and 41% in particular did not use formal register at all. Five percent of the participants left this gap blank. In gap 3, aiming at apology, 59% of the participants used appropriate phrases such as “I sincerely apologise” and “I’m terribly sorry”. However, 30% of the participants either did not use an apology or used informal, vague language (e.g. “can” and “did”) which affected formality of the email.

### ***Role-play task***

In the role-play task, participants were asked to respond professionally to a colleague's idea they disagreed with during a meeting. Approximately 24% of responses indicated diplomatic disagreement using softening strategies such as "I see where you're coming from, but...", appreciation "Thank you for your input...", and collaborative phrasing "Perhaps we could explore another approach...". 52% of responses demonstrated polite intent but lack structure, tone or linguistic accuracy. For example, responses such as "That's a good idea, but I think we should..." or "I have another suggestion" are clear, but the use of more tactful phrasing is recommended. Less appropriate or overly blunt language such as "I disagree" or "That won't work" which may be interpreted as confrontational, was used by 16% of participants. Eight percent of responses were incomplete or missing altogether.

The role-play task final scores were scaled to a maximum of 8 points to align with the total fifty-point scoring. This task assessed the participants' ability to express diplomatic disagreement, and the results based on the scoring system showed that the average scaled score was 6.5 out of 8, with 65% of participants scoring 6 or higher. This indicates a generally good ability to express disagreement with appropriate politeness and clarity. Approximately 30% of participants scored between 4 and 5.9 points, pointing to some difficulty using professional tone or clarity. Only 5% of the participants score below 4 points, displaying significant challenges in applying diplomacy in language use.

**Table 8.** *Participant response distribution for the role-play task*

| Score range  | Participants          | Performance interpretation                 |
|--------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| 6-8 points   | 24 participants (65%) | good to excellent pragmatic competence     |
| 4-5.9 points | 11 participants (30%) | moderate pragmatic competence, some issues |
| Below 4      | 2 participants (5%)   | needs significant improvement              |

### ***Multiple-choice pragmatic awareness***

Based on the scoring system, the results show the average score 5.9 out of 6, with 92% of the participants achieving full 6 points. Only 3 participants (8%) scored lower with minor errors in pragmatic awareness. The results suggested that most participants accurately recognised polite, business-appropriate responses in professional scenarios.

**Table 9.** *Participant response distribution for the MCQs*

| Score range | Participants | Performance interpretation |
|-------------|--------------|----------------------------|
|-------------|--------------|----------------------------|

|            |                       |                               |
|------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|
| 6 points   | 34 participants (92%) | excellent pragmatic awareness |
| 4-5 points | 2 participants (5%)   | minor pragmatic issues        |
| 3 points   | 1 participant (3%)    | needs improvement             |

Participants filled in two MCQs which assessed their awareness of polite and contextually appropriate business communication strategies. In the first question, a manager requested a report by the next day, and 92% of participants correctly selected the most polite and professional response: “Would it be possible to extend the deadline? I want to make sure the report is thorough.” A small percentage of participants selected more direct alternatives, which points to strong pragmatic awareness of how to make a polite request in a hierarchical business setting. The second question involved a colleague requesting help, and 95% of participants selected a polite refusal: “I’m currently busy, but I can help you tomorrow if that works.” This shows a high level of awareness regarding tone towards colleagues and managing refusals without offending. Only 2% of the participants selected the most direct response: “Not my problem.”

### *Summarised assessment results*

The final results suggested that most participants have moderate to high pragmatic competence. The average final score was approximately 41.3 out of 50. High pragmatic competence was achieved by 10 participants (27%), and moderate pragmatic competence was demonstrated by 27 participants (54%). Seven participants (19%) scored below 35 points, suggesting need for further development in pragmatic strategies.

**Table 10.** *Participant final scores based on overall pragmatic competence (out of 50 points)*

| Score band      | Participants          | Performance interpretation    |
|-----------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|
| 45-50 points    | 10 participants (27%) | High pragmatic competence     |
| 35-44 points    | 20 participants (54%) | Moderate pragmatic competence |
| below 35 points | 7 participants (19%)  | Needs improvement             |

## **Discussion**

The results of the current study stress the growing importance of pragmatic competence in Business English communication with the focus on requests, refusals, and negotiations. This includes appropriate politeness, tone and clarity. In regards to how effectively students demonstrate pragmatic competence, the results showed that participants performed well in general in both productive

and receptive tasks, which suggests a solid foundation in usage of pragmatic strategies. When it comes to dealing with common challenges, the results showed that participants managed politeness and appropriateness effectively, however some participants had difficulties in using softening strategies in disagreement or refusals. Regarding self-perceived competence in comparison to actual competence, participants' self-assessment results were in line with their task performance, however there was some overestimation in more refined pragmatic control. Lastly, regarding pragmatic strategies that are applied most and least effectively, participants most effectively utilised strategies connected to polite requests and workload justification. In contrast, the least effective usage was related to maintaining politeness during disagreements.

Prior to the current study, the participants had been taught in the communicative teaching environment which included a blend of the direct method, CLT and TBLT. The combination of these elements likely supported the development of pragmatic awareness due to learners being encouraged to use English spontaneously, engage in meaningful interactions, and complete tasks which reflect realistic business contexts. The blended teaching approaches are aligned with global trends in second-language teaching due to focus on pragmatic competence as an essential goal apart from grammatical and lexical accuracy.

## **Conclusion**

The current study examined the pragmatic competence of Business English students at tertiary level. It focused on appropriateness, politeness and clarity in professional communication tasks. Participants generally demonstrated solid pragmatic awareness, more specifically in managing requests, refusals and negotiations, which suggests that pragmatic strategies were mainly well understood and applied, however there were some challenges in using indirectness during disagreements. The study findings point to the essential role of pragmatic competence in professional communication, as well as its importance with grammatical and lexical skills.

## **Implications**

The results of the current study suggest that the exposure of students to authentic models of professional communication, including input from proficient speakers, appears to encourage pragmatic development. Greater emphasis should be placed on raising pragmatic awareness through activities promoting appropriate tone, softening strategies and politeness. A mixture of communicative approaches such as direct method, CLT and TBLT appear to be effective in encouraging real-life communication skills.

Future research could focus on exploring pragmatic competence development over a longer period of time through longitudinal research which would record students' progress in a workplace. In addition, the effectiveness of different teaching methods in development of pragmatic skills could be examined, as well as the role of self-perception in comparison to pragmatic performance in different cultural backgrounds for the purposes of designing more effective Business English courses.

### Data availability statement

Raw data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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