

# Teaching Pragmatic Appropriateness in EFL Using AI-mediated Contextual refinement

Miysaa Mustafa Alriyami<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Buraimi University College, Oman  
[miysaaalriyami1@gamil.com](mailto:miysaaalriyami1@gamil.com)

## ABSTRACT

While AI tools are increasingly used in EFL, most current applications focus on grammatical correction and lexical simplification, with limited attention to pragmatic appropriateness. This paper seeks to explore the efficacy of prompt-engineered LLMs in augmenting the sociopragmatic abilities of EFL learners, with specific focus on the speech act of "requesting". A quantitative survey design was adopted for this research. A total of 24 undergraduate students enrolled in English language major in Oman participated. They were asked to rate AI-generated sentences for sentence improvements in three different social contexts using a 3-point Likert scale based on "clarity," "politeness," and "level of confidence in use. The AI prompt were designed based on Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, taking into consideration "Social Distance" and "Relative Power". Participants shows preference for AI mediated sentences in academic and professional scenarios, though it faces limitations in casual scenario. This paper argues that LLMs have the potential to function as adaptive tools for EFL learners but also emphasizes the need for learner autonomy to prevent "uncanniness" in low social distance situations.

## KEYWORDS

sociopragmatics, Large language models, EFL Learners ,request speech act, Pragmatic Appropriateness,

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In current era of AI enhancements, tools like ChatGPT and other large language models (LLMs) have reshaped the sense learners interact with the language, especially in the context of English as a Second Language education. While pragmatic appropriateness has been extensively examined in interlanguage, its systematic integration into AI-driven EFL tools remains limited. Sociopragmatic competence concerns learners' understanding of social norms, values, and contextual variables such as power and distance [1] Many L2 learners are able to produce grammatically accurate sentences, but these sentences often lack the politeness, tone, or contextual sensitivity expected in formal or intercultural situations such as academic discussions, professional communication, or cultural dialogue.

Pragmatic competence refers to the ability to use language appropriately in various social contexts; it's a central component of communicative competence. Learners may accidentally sound rude, overly direct, or inappropriate while having correct syntax and word choice. This may lead learners to use the language ineffectively due to a disconnect between linguistic form and social meaning. It also reflects a gap: traditional EFL educators tend to focus on structure and vocabulary, leaving tone, politeness strategies, and social norms.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. The Rise of AI in ESL Instruction

In recent years, artificial intelligence has transformed second language education, specifically in domains such as grammatical correction and lexical simplification. Tools like ChatGPT and other AI-powered platforms are now commonly used to scaffold learners' writing and reading skills [2]. [3] introduced a method for non-parallel sentence simplification, enabling AI to adapt input texts to CEFR levels without requiring human-annotated data. Their model achieved enhanced

lexical diversity and improved readability; however, it remained primarily focused on surface-level textual changes. According to [4] study compared the human authored and AI generated texts simplifications in terms of their effects on L2 understanding. The findings show no clear advantage for AI generated simplification, suggesting that linguistic simplification alone may be insufficient, pointing to the importance of pragmatic and contextual clarity in facilitating comprehension. These developments demonstrate the promise of AI in simplifying text for learners, but they also expose a critical gap specifically the absence of pragmatic awareness in AI-generated outputs according to [5]

## **2.2. Pragmatic Competence in L2 Learning**

Pragmatic competence defined as the ability to use language appropriately in different social and cultural contexts. It's a cornerstone of communicative competence [5]. This study is grounded in Interlanguage pragmatics, which distinguishes between two dimensions of communicative success: pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics [1]. Where pragmalinguistics specialises in linguistic tools used to convey intended meaning (e.g. apologies, requests), sociopragmatics focuses on how social norms (e.g. distance, power) influence communication. Pragmalinguistic resources are more teachable than sociopragmatic norms, according to the interlanguage pragmatic perception [1] Recent technological developments in language learning and teaching have shown potential in supporting learner's access to pragmalinguistics forms, while sociopragmatic competence less effectively addressed. [6] found that Iraqi EFL learners have less communicative competence when communicating in the English language, specifically when performing speech acts (e.g. requesting and apologising). Research in Saudi EFL contexts suggests that instructional practices and L1 pragmatic transfer may contribute to challenges in acquiring English politeness strategies. Moreover, this study addresses the challenges highlighted in specific EFL contexts faced by Saudi learners [7]. This finding highlights a persisting issue: existing AI tools are not yet sufficiently attuned to the exact cross-cultural pragmatics. Thus, there is a growing call for pedagogical approaches and technologies that can more effectively support learners' development of pragmatic awareness.

## **2.3. Limitations of Existing AI-Based Tools**

Although generative AI systems have shown potential in content generation, they often fail to reflect the contextual differences required in pragmatic interaction. [8] argues that because of how AI systems understand human language, they lack the lived social experience in language usage required for social awareness as humans, and that systems' output, such as ChatGPT, fail to generate pragmatically appropriate language. Moreover, previous studies indicate that improvements in pragmatic appropriateness in LLM are associated with guidance and prompting.

## **2.4. The Research Gap**

While interest in AI supported EFL instruction is rising, the role of AI in assisting learners develop pragmatic competence is still limited. Current systems often fail to adjust feedback based on learner's language proficiency or cultural background. They also lack sentence level support to help learners express themselves in socially appropriate ways. Furthermore, few tools are designed to monitor progress in sociopragmatic awareness over time. These gaps highlight the need for more research at the intersection of AI in language and pragmatic language use. Additionally, this study aims to investigate the extent to which AI-mediated refinement improves learner confidence and perceived appropriateness across different levels of social distance (D) and power (p).

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

This study follows a quantitative survey method aims to investigate EFL learner's evaluation of AI generated sentences, and their reception of AI assisted support for pragmatic appropriateness in English. Participants included 24 university EFL undergraduate learners enrolled in English

language major in Oman. Ethical approval for this study was granted by department of scientific research and higher studies, BUC, Ref. No:165. Data were collected through a Google Form . All participants were informed of the purpose of the study and agreed to take part. participants evaluated AI sentences compared to the original using 3-point Likert scale. The methodology focuses on common speech act which is request (face threatening act) in three contexts based on [9]Brown and Levinson's politeness theory using this formula: Distance+ power +rank of imposition = weightiness. The prompt used for ChatGPT (GPT-40) to produce the appropriate level of face-saving language is : rewrite the following sentence so that it is clear, polite and appropriate for the situation described. (context:), (relationship between speakers:), (level of formality:), (communicative purpose: request). The AI-prompted tool is expected to identify the request speech act and use strategies to reduce the threat to the listener's face. This selection provided a focused scope for this study, with the possibility to expand to various contexts in the future. Furthermore, rating numbers refer to (1)= worse than the original, (2)= about the same as the original, (3)= clearly better than the original. The AI-generated versions were produced using ChatGPT as a common platform used by educators and learners. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 Quantitative Findings

Each AI simplified sentence and its original counterpart was rated by learners using a 3-point Likert scale (1, 2,3), focusing on three criteria: clarity, politeness and confidence in use.

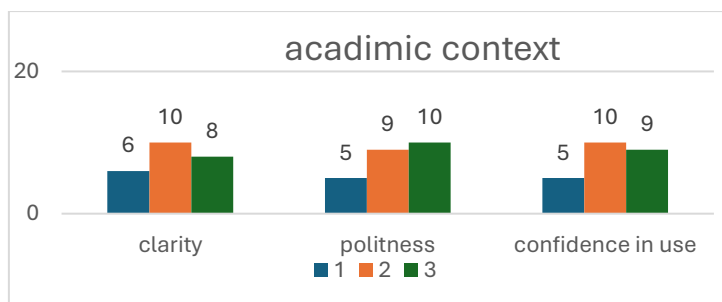


Figure.1 Learner's ratings for clarity, politeness, and confidence in academic email context.

Original: I need your feedback on this.
AI Simplified: I would appreciate your feedback on this.

The chart shows participants' rating for clarity where the AI sentence is as clear as the same or clearer than the original, with fewer participants finding it worse. A similar pattern was observed for politeness, where the AI version was rated as clearer than the original, indicating appropriateness for an academic context. For confidence in use, participants rated better or equal in using the AI-simplified sentence. The AI sentence's preference suggests that the LLM mitigated the face-threatening act of the request.

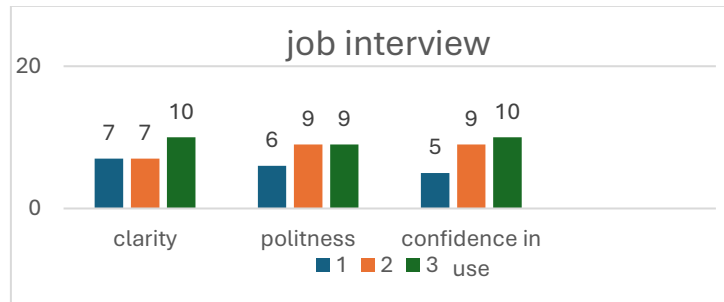


Figure 2. Learner’s ratings for clarity, politeness, and confidence in job interview context.

Original: I just want a stable job to earn money.
AI Simplified: I’m seeking a stable job position that allows me to earn a reliable income.

The findings in this chart indicates preference for AI sentence across the three criteria. For clarity, the AI sentence was rated as clearly better than the original. politeness ratings similarly shows preference for the AI sentence. Confidence in use shows that participants may use the AI version confidently in the context suggesting that the LLM is able to mitigate the face threatening act of request.

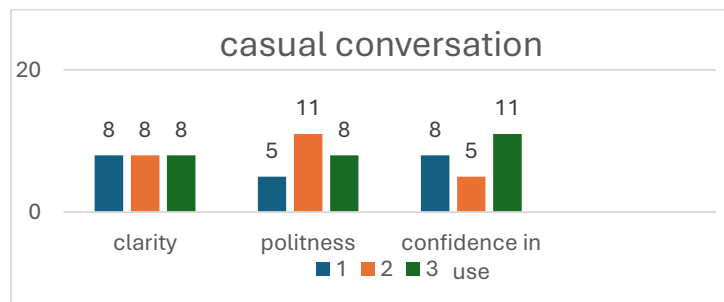


Figure 3. Learner ratings for clarity, politeness, and confidence in casual context.

Original: You are talking too much.
AI Simplified: You’ve been talking a lot. Mind if I jump in for a second?

Perceptions were mixed: While clarity ratings were distributed across the three criteria, politeness ratings show that some participants pointed for AI sentences as less appropriate than the original. Confidence in use was rated higher for the AI version, and a number of participants rated it as clearly better than the AI sentence, which was somehow perceived as overly polite, suggesting that the AI’s tendency for over-politeness may result in “pragmatic over correction in low (D) settings.

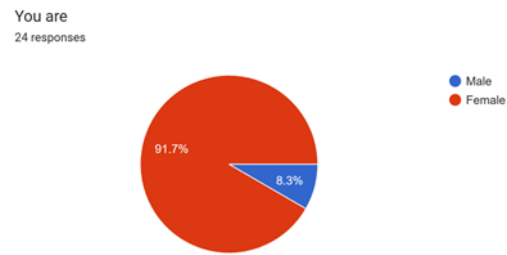


Figure 4. Participant's gender.

Based on the data, 91.73% of participants were female, while only 8.3% were male. According to the major, most English majors are female.

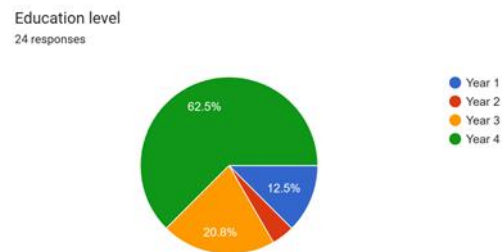


Figure 5. participant's education level.

The findings demonstrate that the majority of participants were from year 4, with 62.5%. Where year three was 20.8%, years two and one were the lowest, at 12.5% for year one and 4.2% for year two.

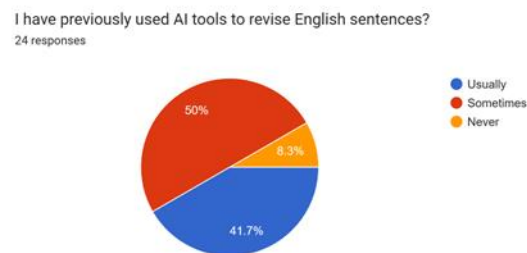


Figure 6. Participant's average usage of AI tools to revise English sentences.

The responses show that 50% of students sometimes use AI tools to revise sentences, 41.7% of them use it usually, and 8.3% of them never use it. The chart suggests that most students use AI tools to revise sentences for appropriateness.

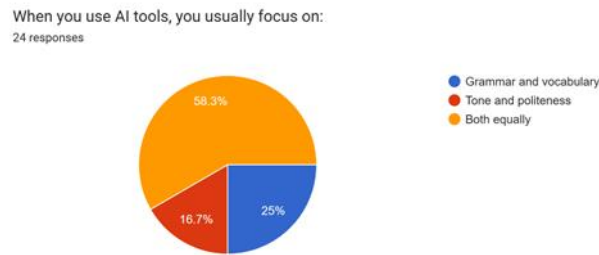


Figure 7. The criteria that students focus on while revising their sentences using AI tools.

Most participants focus on both grammar and vocabulary beyond tone and politeness corrections. While 25% focuses on grammar and vocabulary only, where 16% focus on tone and politeness.

## 4.2 Qualitative Reflections

Most participants in open-ended responses reported that AI-modified sentences were more respectful and aligned with appropriate tone and social norms. Several learners mentioned learning new expressions and ways to make requests more politely. Examples of learner reflections include that “The AI version is more polite and respectful.”, also “I learned how to ask for help more appropriately.”, moreover some of the pointed “AI sometimes makes sentences too long or complex.” While many expressed interest in using AI to develop their writing and speaking, others stated concerns about overreliance or loss of originality. A student also pointed out, “it sounds out of the book”. Still, the majority affirmed that AI-prompted tools were helpful for improving vocabulary, tone, and communication in academic settings.

## 5 DISCUSSION

The results of this study show the role of generative AI in scaffolding interlanguage pragmatics . Overall, the results indicate a clear correlation between the “weightiness “ of a speech act and participants' preference for AI assistance, mainly in contexts with a higher level of formality, distance and power. In both academic email context and job interview scenarios, the LLM employed negative politeness strategies such as “I would appreciate” and indirectness. According to the politeness theory, these strategies minimize the imposition in the hearer’s face. Participants rated AI sentences as more confidently usable, showing that while EFL learners often produce direct “ bald on record” statements that sound accidentally blunt, the AI adds “hedging”. In contrast, in casual conversation where social distance and power are low, the AI's tendency to use negative politeness resulted in pragmatic overcorrection. This highlights a limitation of AI-prompted tools, where strategies that enhance politeness in formal contexts lack sociopragmatic flexibility because being formal with a friend is socially awkward and can increase social distance. Moreover, the demographic data (91.7% female) provides a lens into the usage patterns of AI tools in the Omani EFL context, indicating that learners are becoming increasingly aware that communicative competence extends beyond syntax. A large number of participants use AI tools to revise sentences to sound appropriate in different contexts, specifically females, revealing that females tend to use AI tools more frequently to sound appropriate in different contexts and situations. Regarding how often learners use these tools to revise their sentences, most learners varied between sometimes and usually, with a small percentage of them never using them. This clearly shows that AI tools are widely adopted by learners to support their communication, but

they are not used consistently by all learners, suggesting this is due to lack of familiarity of these tools usage and AI broad outputs which may does not meet their expectations .

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that LLMs can bridge the gap between an EFL learner's grammatical knowledge and their socio pragmatic performance. By integrating social variables into AI prompts, learners can generate appropriate request that align with target language norms. While AI revisions significantly enhance learner confidence in professional settings, the tendency for "pragmatic over correction" remains a hurdle for natural informal communication. Future research should explore large-scale implementation, long term retention of pragmatic strategies, and integration into curriculum design.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank all participants for providing support!

## REFERENCES

- [1] G. Kasper, S. Blum-Kulka, I. Pragmatics, and E. Bialystok, "Copyright C 1993 by Oxford University Press, Inc.," 1993.
- [2] R. Godwin-Jones, "Distributed agency in second language learning and teaching through generative AI," *Language Learning and Technology*, vol. 28, no. 2, pp. 5–31, Mar. 2024, Accessed: Sep. 20, 2025. [Online]. Available: <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2403.20216>
- [3] G. Li, Y. Arase, and N. Crespi, "Aligning Sentence Simplification with ESL Learner's Proficiency for Language Acquisition," pp. 492–507, Feb. 2025, doi: 10.18653/v1/2025.naacl-long.21.
- [4] D. Murphy Odo, "Comprehensibility of AI-generated and human simplified texts for L2 learners," *Language Learning & Technology*, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 1–18, May 2025, doi: 10.64152/10125/73627.
- [5] J. Fathi, M. Rahimi, and A. Derakhshan, "Improving EFL learners' speaking skills and willingness to communicate via artificial intelligence-mediated interactions," *System*, vol. 121, p. 103254, Apr. 2024, doi: 10.1016/J.SYSTEM.2024.103254.
- [6] N. Obaid Hussein *et al.*, "Developing undergraduate EFL Students' Communicative Competence through Using Pragmatic Instruction," *International Journal of English, Literature and Social Sciences (IJELS)*, vol. 5, no. 1, doi: 10.22161/ijels.51.42.
- [7] Khalid Al-Seghayer, "Pragmatic Competence in Saudi EFL Learners: Challenges, Consequences, and Strategies for Overcoming Barriers," *Journal for the Study of English Linguistics*, vol. 12, pp. 2329–7034, Dec. 2024.
- [8] S. C. L. Penelope Brown, *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*, vol. Vol. 4). Cambridge university press, 1987.