



# Pragmatic Competence of EFL and ESL Learners and its Influencing Factors: A Systematic Review

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## Abstract

Research on pragmatic competence involving various approaches has received increasing attention since 1980 when interlanguage pragmatics began to flourish. The aim of this systematic review was to examine and categorize contemporary studies on pragmatic competence of EFL and ESL students and to reveal potential moderators, compare results of studies, and offer a balanced summary of the topic. The data selection procedure followed PRISMA guidelines in which forty-two studies published from 1993 to 2023 were selected from the Web of Science and Scopus databases. The findings revealed that the concept of pragmatic competence has witnessed dramatic attention worldwide in the last three decades, especially in EFL context. The overall pragmatic competence of EFL learners is at a low level, while most ESL learners have a relatively higher level. The relationship between language proficiency and pragmatic competence is inclusive, requiring further investigation. This review also highlights the influencing factors which require further exploration in relation to EFL and ESL learners' pragmatic competence. The study also pointed out the gaps, overlooked variables and constraints in previously published research. This systematic review contributes to the research agenda for future studies seeking to progress the knowledge and practice of quality language education in this respect.

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**Keywords:** Pragmatic Competence, EFL and ESL Learners, Systematic Review, Influencing Factors, Quality Language Education.

## Introduction

Pragmatic competence refers to the ability of a language user to apply appropriate language in use in certain social settings. Pragmatic competence is the knowledge of the ability to use the language with fluency

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in socio-cultural interactions. For this reason, Pragmatic knowledge is significant for EFL and ESL learners because it dictates how they can understand complex social relationships in a target language (Taguchi, 2022). Owing to globalization, intercultural communication research has soared bringing language learners closer and hence a dire need of pragmatic competence is felt. Studies in the domain of pragmatics has received much attention in EFL and ESL research, especially after the recognition of interlanguage pragmatics in 1980s, which necessitated to look into the nature of pragmatic competence in EFL or ESL. Previous studies however have indicated that no integrative literature review has been carried out to provide a clearer insight into how this competence evolves and whether there are differences across two groups of learners (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013; Chang, 2011; Gioia & Thomas, 1996).

Most of the prior research has dealt with individual components of pragmatic competence with little attention paid to general trends in development, potential mediators, and comparisons between these two groups of learners (Asif et al., 2019; Martínez Flor, 2004). Additionally, pragmatic competence has also been studied from various research paradigms and theoretical orientations with great interest by EFL and ESL researchers (Ifantidou, 2011; Mao, 2020). However, there is a scarcity of critical and comprehensive reviews of language learners' pragmatic competence in EFL and ESL contexts. This paper is designed as a systematic literature review that seeks to present an impartial analysis of current trends of research on pragmatic competence of EFL and ESL learners by categorizing previous studies and assessing their defining and influencing factors. Following the PRISMA guidelines, the studies selected for this review have been published over three decades between 1993 and 2023. Thus, this review helps to fill in the gap and helps in understanding pragmatic competence of EFL and ESL learners, by revealing research concerns such as socio-cultural factors, instructional methods, and learner demographics, which would direct future studies in advancing educational mechanisms in language teaching.

Thus, conducting a systematic review within this paradigm is urgently required as it helps researchers develop a comprehensive understanding of pragmatic competence in EFL and ESL contexts. Therefore, we intend to bridge this gap by critically reviewing studies on learners' pragmatic competence in the past three decades to identify the main problems, including the factors that influence pragmatic competence. By examining these studies, this review offers guidelines for future research which can most likely concentrate on several related themes of pragmatic competence and provide some practical ramifications for pragmatic competence learning and teaching, thus improving the quality of language education in pragmatic competence for the stakeholders (learners, educators, and curriculum designers). This systematic review also helps conduct an empirical analysis of the shortcomings of the previous research. Specifically, this study framed the following objectives: (1) To explore the research trends of pragmatic competence in EFL and ESL contexts; (2) To analyze and synthesize the emerging themes in the pragmatic competence studies; and (3) To identify the influencing factors of pragmatic competence in EFL and ESL contexts for practical guidelines for future research.

## Literature Review

### *Theoretical Background of Pragmatic Competence*

Thomas (1983) has defined pragmatic competence as “the ability to use language effectively to achieve a specific purpose and understand language in context” (p. 92). Benattabou (2020) also stated that pragmatic competence referred to the ability to use language with a particular goal and reciprocally, the capability of perceiving language in context. Previous studies on pragmatic aptitude focused on foundational ideas which placed a great value on pragma-linguistics which creates a set of linguistic tools in a specific language, and on socio-pragmatics which earmarks the social norms of interaction (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013; Gioia & Thomas, 1996). Eventually, it became particularly important, and distinction was indeed used to drive the entire line of research on problems faced by EFL and ESL learners with regard to mastering socio-pragmatics, because cultural variation perceives different aspects of language use in different ways (Chang, 2011).

Some recent studies (Mao, 2020; Marcet i Torrijos, 2022; Ou, 2020) have attempted to provide more comprehensive explications of what pragmatic competence refers to, and proffer pragmatic and metapragmatic awareness among EFL/ESL learners. More recently, Marcet i Torrijos (2022) offered a broader conception of pragmatic competence adding that it entails understanding not only inferred meanings, but also metapragmatic understanding by recognizing the connection between language and context. This view gives meaning of pragmatic competence from two perspectives, the primary functional language abilities and the interpretive comprehension. Likewise, Ou (2020) put forward an integrative model including both micro and macro characteristics linking the pragmatic competence to socio-cultural environment of communication. With the help of combining the syntactic and organic sub-modules with external socio-cultural factors, Mao's (2020) model has advanced the multilingual and multicultural environment by emphasizing the pragmatic competence. Such a categorization distinguishes itself from previous studies and provides new ideas for scholars to continue to delve into pragmatic competence.

The richness and variety of pragmatic epistemologies have expanded, while empirical investigations have increasingly become enriched in terms of multimodal approaches which reflects pragmatic competence in authentic practices. The multimodal approach for the measurement of pragmatic competence entails not only

verbal language, but also non-verbal language. It is claimed that while amalgamating the pragmatic features of multiple modalities, it adapts the competence concept of face-to-face communication comprising of the body language, hand gestures, and facial expressions. This seems to point a shift from single features of language to the ecology of interaction generally, a much closer match to what pragmatic competence is required to overcome in real time.

### *New Directions in The Study of Pragmatic Competence*

One of the most important distinctions in pragmatic competence research is the one between the concepts of pragmatic awareness and pragmatic production. Despite EFL and ESL learners demonstrate an understanding of appropriate pragmatic norms, they are unable to use them during interaction. This situation confirms the existing divide between theory and application of the knowledge in producing practical products that can be utilizable in the real settings. One of the themes is concerned with instructional practices and whether they promote pragmatic competence. Some studies (Martínez Flor, 2004; Ziafar, 2020) have compared the use of explicate and implicit instructions and encouraged the use of role-plays and Discourse Completion Tasks to improve the existing concerns of learners. On the other hand, other studies (Asif et al., 2019) suggested that practices in setting-like contexts where learners engage in genuine communication play a major role in the enhancement of pragmatic competence. These thoughts support the knowledge and practice of culture knowledge within and outside classroom practices rather than only relying on the technicality of language learning and mastery.

### *Sources of Input in Pragmatic Competence Pursuit*

Various factors such as language mastery, socio-cultural contact, training techniques and learner variables have been found affecting the growth of pragmatic competence. Grammar does matter, but research shows that even high-intermediate EFL and ESL students have difficulties with pragmatic development (Laughlin, Wain, & Schmidgall, 2015). This indicates that knowledge of language is mandatory but not sufficient for achieving pragmatic skills without sociocultural cognition. Therefore, socio-cultural exposure has a crucial impact on pragmatic competence as learning in real context assists learners to observe pragmatic behaviors and mimic them. According to Matsumura (2003), learners who get more exposure to real-life interaction with native speakers or in authentic English-speaking contexts are pragmatic competent. This implies that pragmatic competence can be best developed through exposure in real situations where learners can complete a number of different language transactions.

Other potentially important teaching variables have to do with instructional methods. In particular, it is concerned with the way that explicit instruction appears to enhance learners' consciousness and usage of pragmatic norms, for instance by providing the learners with examples of the appropriate use of certain forms in given contexts. Moreover, past research demonstrated that combining explicit learning by applying conversation for practice and immersion activities is also effective. This is in tandem with the integrative model where internal and external factors bear a positive relationship with pragmatic development (Norouzzian & Eslami, 2016). Relatedly, Kasper (2001) also found that there is a significant correlation between learners with positive orientation toward the target community and uptake of socio-cultural learning that in turn enhance pragmatic competence. Moreover, learners' willingness to change and accept various social norms helps them to gain proper pragmatic norms. These factors suggest that culture-sensitive learning environment enhances pragmatic competence.

### *Concluding the Research Gaps*

Despite the increase in the amount of information concerning pragmatic competence in EFL and ESL learners, several issues still remain to be investigated. Firstly, the effectiveness of the proposed instruction is confirmed by the fact that pragmatic competence is higher with ESL learners. Moreover, the existing studies failed to investigate several particular socio-cultural factors which contribute to pragmatic development in EFL settings as the cultures of the respective regions. Future research may investigate how different cultural contexts influence pragmatic perception and use because this may help to understand whether cultural fit or mismatch determines social language production in L2. Secondly, overall, teaching methods impact language competence globally; however, the literature lacks evidence of particular pedagogical practices that affect pragmatic proficiency in EFL and ESL contexts. It would be more helpful to identify and examine previous research that has focused on the comparison of explicit, immersion and tasks-based instruction in the development of pragmatic knowledge. Furthermore, more empirical studies of how explicit pragmatic pedagogy (i.e. teaching of speech acts and politeness strategies) influences learners' proficiency in actual use are warranted. Thirdly, the nature of connection between proficiency and pragmatics remains unclear and some studies (Asif et al., 2019; Yang, 2015) indicated that even higher-level learners are likely to fail pragmatics if they lack enough contextual background. Focusing on this relationship at a finer-grained level of analysis for different levels of proficiency and in various learning contexts may help to elucidate the way in which and the extent to which linguistic knowledge influences pragmatic competence.

## Methodology

### Research Design

This study adopted the systematic and detailed literature review method focusing on specific research issues to provide a comprehensive and objective assessment of many related studies in a single document (Needleman, 2002). The review process was guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 flowchart (as shown in Figure 1) to filter the search results of articles (Page et al., 2021). PRISMA protocol is a high-standard guideline in systematic review studies and has been widely used in various disciplines due to its comprehensiveness and accuracy to improve review accuracy and reduce bias (Needleman, 2002). Pertaining to the rationale of conducting a systematic literature review, it systematically reviews a range of studies on EFL and ESL learners' pragmatic competence in this study. Applying the systematic PRISMA framework ensures the coverage of all relevant areas, reduction of biases, prioritization of the findings, purposeful generation of research gaps and it offers a comprehensive and credible foundation for future research in the field consolidated in one easily traceable document.

### Eligibility Criteria and Databases

The review process was conducted following eligibility criteria which include (1) publications from 1993 to 2023; (2) research articles; (3) written in English; (4) research on pragmatic competence (5) English as the target language (6) EFL or ESL context. The retrieval timeframe for the literature has been confined to three decades, from 1993 to 2023, because we found a small number of studies before 1993 without fully meeting the eligibility criteria. Hence, this systematic review critically reviews studies on learners' pragmatic competence in the past thirty years. We also imposed the document type as research articles to minimize data collection bias. English as a written language was chosen to reduce language bias as it is the most popular language in academic discourse. We targeted learners from EFL and ESL contexts as most language studies consider their participants' level either EFL or ESL.

For electronic searches, the primary databases were the Web of Science and Scopus. These databases were selected due to their reputation for including Social Sciences Citation Indexed (SSCI) with high-quality and high-impact publications. The two databases were searched with the keywords "pragmatic", "pragmatics", "pragmatic competence" and using the Boolean operator "and". The search was produced in "Topic" which searches titles, abstracts, and indexing of potential publications, given that this search strategy can include the most relevant and significant number of articles in each database. The latest search was conducted on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2024, but yielded no studies found in 2024 until this date.

### Selection of Articles

The article selection followed three stages required for PRISMA protocol: identification, screening, and eligibility. In the first stage, 3,864 and 2,572 studies were identified on the Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus, respectively. Based on the eligibility criteria of research articles published between 1993 and 2023 in English, 3,459 studies were included. Then, the duplicate records (n=1,033) were removed, and 2,426 studies were included before screening. In the second stage, the selected studies were screened by titles and abstracts, resulting in 187 studies for further eligibility assessment. The third stage was eligibility. These 187 studies were given a full-text review for eligibility. Among these studies, 145 were excluded due to the insufficient data and outcome provided, and the objectives did not focus on learner's pragmatic competence. Ultimately, 42 studies were included (as shown in Figure 1) and their relevant information in Table 1.

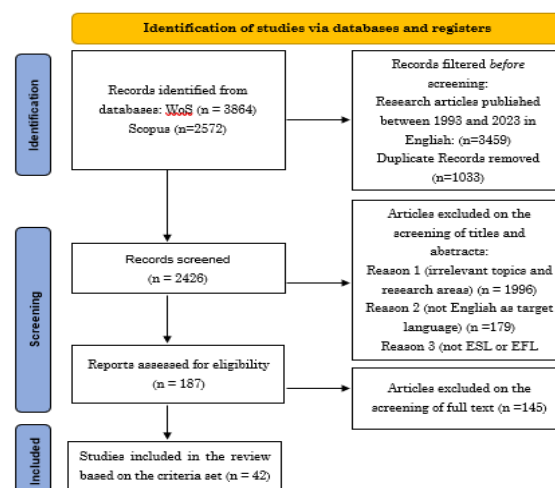


Figure1: PRISMA Flowchart of the Study Selection Process (Page et al., 2021).

**Table 1:** A Summary of the Relevant Information Extracted From the 42 Studies Presented Chronologically.

No.	Author(s)/Year	Contexts	Methodologies	Approach(es)/ Instruments used	Participants/ Materials	Key Results
1	Brice & Montgomery (1996)	ESL	Quantitative	The Adolescent Pragmatic Screening Scale	Latinos (n= 40)	Difficulties in acquiring pragmatic skills
2	Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei (1998)	EFL	Quantitative	Discourse completion task & Videotape test	Hungarian (n=370) ESL learners in the U.S. (n= 173)	ESL learners are more sensitive to pragmatic infelicities and have better performance of pragmatic competence than EFL learners.
3	Matsumura (2003)	EFL	Quantitative	Multiple-choice questionnaire & self-report questionnaire	Japanese (n= 137)	language proficiency is not an essential component for developing pragmatic competence.
4	Nguyen (2008)	EFL	Mixed-method	peer-feedback task & questionnaire & interview	Vietnamese Learners (n=48); Australian (n =12)	Vietnamese EFL learners lack critical thinking skills and pragmatic competence.
5	Ghobadi & Fahim (2009)	EFL	Quantitative	discourse completion test & role-plays	Iranian (n= 60)	Instruction has a positive effect on improving pragmatic competence; and explicit instruction is better than implicit instruction.
6	Xu, Case, & Wang (2009)	ESL	Quantitative	Discourse Completion Test	Mixed first language speakers (n=126)	The language proficiency, length of residence, and grammatical competence influenced pragmatic competence significantly.
7	Allami & Naeimi (2011)	EFL	Quantitative	Discourse Completion Test	Iranian (n= 61)	Iranian EFL learners used indirect speech acts strategies in response to both equal and higher status of interlocutors to show more politeness.
8	Taguchi (2011)	EFL	Quantitative	Pragmatic listening & oral discourse completion tests	Japanese (n= 64)	Language proficiency significantly correlates with pragmatic competence.
9	Nguyen, Pham, & Pham (2012)	EFL	Quantitative	Discourse completion test & role play & oral peer-feedback task	Vietnamese (n=69)	The explicit group performed better than the implicit group with all measures.
10	Allami & Montazeri (2012)	EFL	Quantitative	Discourse Completion Test & Oxford Quick Placement test	Iranian (n=40)	Iranian EFL learners lack pragmatic knowledge.
11	Al-Gahtani & Roever (2011)	EFL	Qualitative	Role plays	Saudi Arabian (n= 26)	The higher language proficiency of learners, the better pragmatic competence is.
12	Youn (2014)	ESL	Quantitative	Written pragmatic assessment tasks	Mixed first language speakers (n=402)	Pragmatic competence is not closely associated with language proficiency.
13	Fordyce (2013)	EFL	Quantitative	Written production test & explicit intervention & implicit intervention	Japanese (n= 81)	The explicit instruction is significantly more beneficial than the implicit instruction.
14	Eslami, Mirzaei, & Dini (2015)	EFL	Mixed-methods	discourse completion test & quasi-experimental design	Iranian (n= 74)	ACMC instructional tasks help EFL students improve their pragmatic competence effectively.
15	Limberg (2015)	EFL	Qualitative	Content analysis	EFL Textbooks series (n= 3)	There is a lack of pragmatic competence on speech act apology.

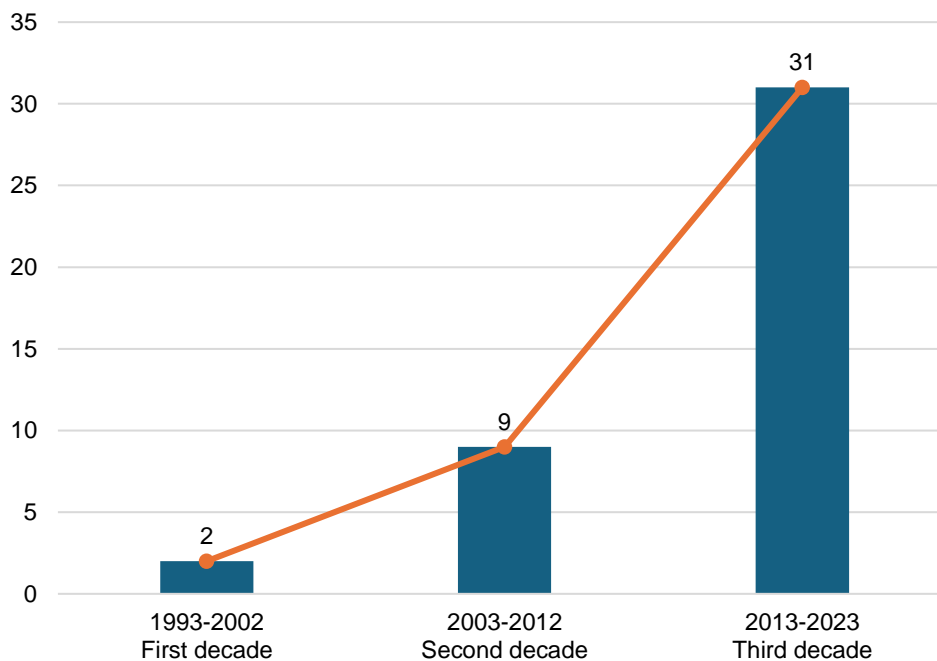
16	Ren & Han (2016)	EFL	Qualitative	Content analysis	EFL Textbooks (n=10)	The pragmatic knowledge is still under-represented in most textbooks. Lack of attention on learners' pragmatic competence in textbooks.
17	Babai Shishavan & Sharifian (2016)	EFL	Mixed-methods	Discourse Completion Test & Focus group interview	Iranian (n=24), Australian (n= 24)	Both groups used more indirect strategies of speech act refusals influenced by cultural schemas of first language.
18	Yuan & Zhang (2018)	EFL	Quantitative	Discourse Completion Test	Chinese (n= 20)	Learners maintained the average level of speech acts complaints, and showed similar language patterns of socio-pragmatic competence in response to complaints.
19	Soler & Hernández (2017)	ESL	Quantitative	vocabulary knowledge scale & written discourse completion task	Mixed first language speakers (n=122)	Different proficiency levels did not influence pragmatic competence.
20	Farashaiyan, Tan, & Shahragard (2018)	ESL	Mixed-methods	Content analysis	Intermediate Cutting -Edge textbooks (n= 3)	Pragmatic knowledge in textbooks is inadequate to facilitate learners' pragmatic competence.
21	Nguyen et al. (2018)	EFL	Quantitative	DCT pre-test & immediate post-test	Vietnamese (n= 79)	The treatment group performed better than the control group.
22	Ajabshir (2019)	EFL	Quantitative	Written discourse completion test & Pre-test and post-test	Iranian (n= 106)	Both synchronous and asynchronous CMC instructions have positive effects on developing L2 learners' pragmatic competence.
23	Alrefaee, Alghamdi, & Almansoob (2019)	EFL	Quantitative	Written Discourse Completion Task	Yemeni (n=40)	Yemeni English speakers lack an adequate command of speech act refusals, and use general and vague excuses when refusing acts.
24	Wijayanto (2019)	EFL	Mixed-methods	DCT & semi-structured interview	Indonesian (n=100)	Length of time spent learning English affected pragmatic competence positively.
25	Tabatabaei (2019)	EFL	Quantitative	Preliminary English Test & DCT	Iranian (n=95)	Language proficiency is not a significant determinant of pragmatic competence.
26	Asif et al. (2019)	ESL	Quantitative	Oxford Quick Placement Test & Questionnaire	Pakistani (n= 80)	There is a significant relationship between pragmatic competence and language proficiency.
27	Morady Moghaddam, Murray, & Mirfendereski (2020)	EFL	Quantitative	pragmatic protocol & IELTS speaking test	Iranian (n=180)	Pragmatic competence significantly correlates with language proficiency.
28	Alsuhaibani (2022)	EFL	Quantitative	Discourse Completion Test	Saudi Arabian (n= 136)	Pragmatic instructions are effective on speech act compliments.
29	Ton Nu & Murray (2020)	EFL	Qualitative and quantitative methods	Content analysis	Vietnamese EFL National Textbooks series	This series of textbooks contain low degree of explicit information about pragmatics competence.

30	Qari (2021)	EFL	Quantitative	Pre-test and post-test & questionnaire & explicit and implicit intervention	Saudi Arabian (n= 30)	Explicit instruction is a helpful measure in developing learner's pragmatic competence.
31	Alfge & Mohammadzadeh (2021)	EFL	Quantitative	Discourse Completion Test	Libyan (n=87)	Request, suggestion, and apology acts showed some notable gender disparities in learners' performance of speech acts strategies.
32	Bardis, Silman, & Mohammadzadeh (2021)	EFL	Mixed-methods	questionnaire & interview	North Cyprus (n=200)	Learners lack cross-cultural pragmatic knowledge.
33	Jakupčević & Čavar Portolan (2024)	EFL	Qualitative	Coding scheme	Croatia EFL textbooks (n= 18 sets)	Some textbooks proving extremely lack of scope and treatment of pragmatic content. Students using different textbooks should follow same curriculum which emphasizes pragmatic competence.
34	Wang & Ren (2022)	EFL	Quantitative	computer-animated elicitation task	Chinese (n=90)	language proficiency significantly affects pragmatic competence.
35	Alharbi (2022)	EFL	Mixed-methods	questionnaire & interview & Multiple-choice Discourse Completion Test	Saudi Arabian (n= 40)	Pragmatic competence and implicatures are unsatisfactory.
36	Youn & Chaipuapae (2022)	ESL	Quantitative	role-play task	Mixed first language speakers (n=102)	Successful performance of pragmatic competence with role-play tasks
37	Zhang (2022a)	EFL	Quantitative	synchronous messaging & Skype & questionnaire	Chinese (n= 62)	The combination of CALL and instructional intervention has a lasting effect on the learners' pragmatic development.
38	Zhang (2022b)	EFL	Mixed methods	Questionnaire & interview	Chinese (n= 65)	CMC instruction has positive effects on improving learners' pragmatic competence.
39	Alhadi Ali Ahmed, Mohammadzadeh, & Mazlum (2023)	EFL	Qualitative and quantitative methods	Content analysis	Libyan EFL textbooks (n=10)	There are certain deficiencies in the pragmatic competence of Libya EFL English textbooks.
40	Bui & Nguyen (2023)	EFL	Qualitative and quantitative methods	Coding scheme	Upper-secondary Vietnamese EFL textbooks (n=3 sets)	The pragmatic competence input in textbooks do not match with EFL learners' actual language usage.
41	Fareh et al. (2023)	EFL	Quantitative	Discourse completion task	Arab EFL Learners (n= 115)	The Arab EFL are lack of speech act apology competence.
42	Kentmen, Debreli, & Yavuz (2023)	EFL	Quantitative	Multiple-choice discourse test (MCDT) & Discourse completion test (DCT)	Turkish (n= 54)	The Turkish EFL learners showed relatively lower level of pragmatic competence and there is no gender difference.

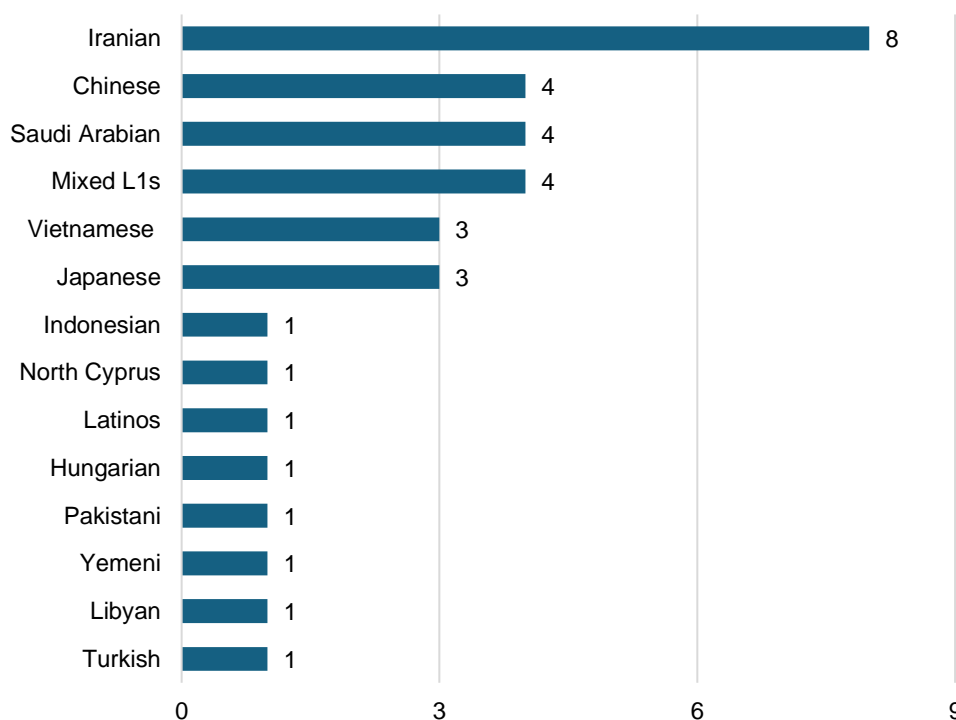
## Results

### *Research Trends of Pragmatic Competence in EFL and ESL Contexts*

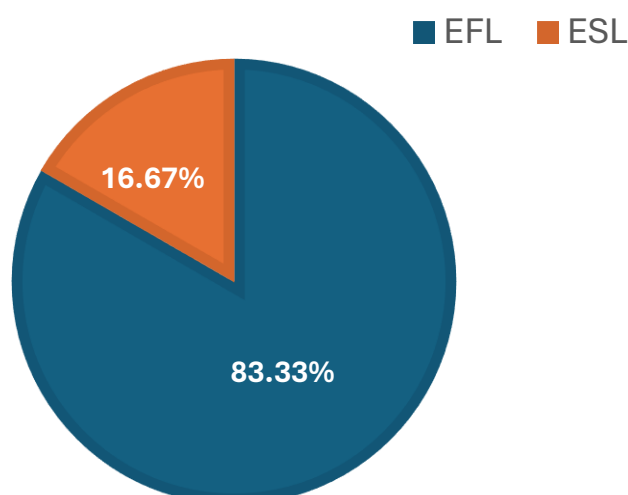
The first objective of this review was to explore the research trends of pragmatic competence in EFL and ESL contexts. To achieve this objective, we provided an overview to cover the following aspects of the 42 studies: distribution of studies by year (Figure 2), by country of participants (Figure 3), studies in EFL or ESL contexts (Figure 4), and by research methodologies used (Figure 5). These figures illustrate the research trends to understand the pragmatic competence in EFL and ESL contexts.



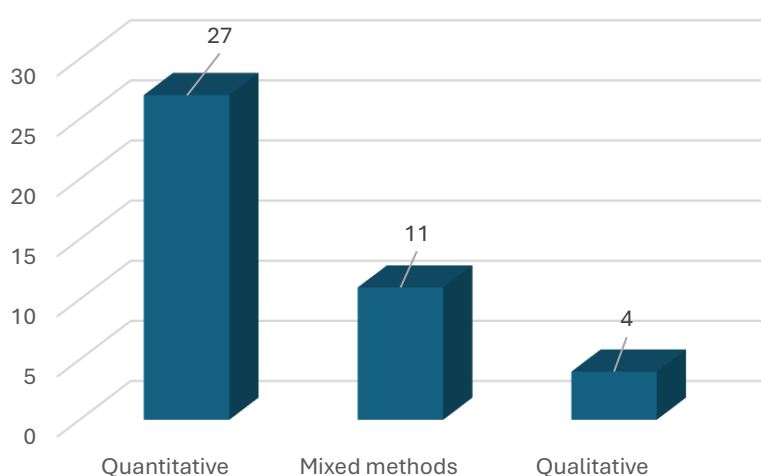
**Figure 2:** *Distribution of 42 Studies by Year.*



**Figure 3:** *Distribution of 42 Studies by Country of Participants.*



**Figure 4:** Distribution of 42 Studies by EFL and ESL Contexts.



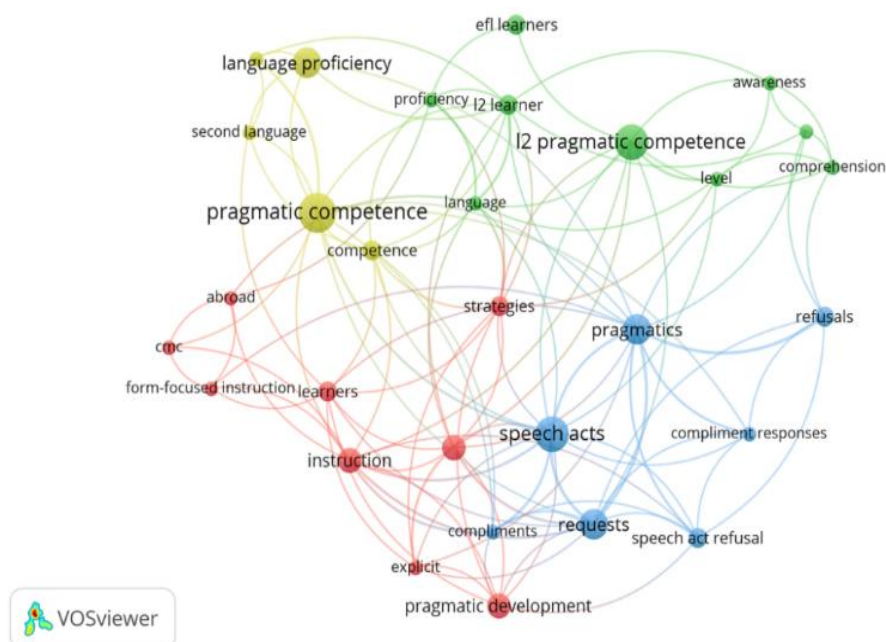
**Figure 5:** Distribution of 42 Studies by Research Methodologies.

2 shows the number of studies distributed over three decades. Two studies were selected from 1993-2002, nine studies from 2003-2012, and thirty-one studies from 2013-2023. This increasing trend of publications indicates that the research of pragmatic competence has become a hot topic and has progressively garnered attention from researchers in the past decade (2013-2023), suggesting a growing interest in pragmatic competence studies. The distribution of studies by country of participants is shown in Figure 3. The researchers involved different participants in their sampling, especially for those EFL learners such as Iranians, Chinese, and Saudi Arabians. A total of eight studies sampled Iranians as their participants, while four studies chose Chinese learners as their sample. Other studies selected Vietnamese, Japanese, Indonesian, North Cyprus, Pakistani, Hungarian, Latinos, Yemeni, Libyan, and Turkish as their sample. Figure 4 illustrates the distribution of studies in EFL or ESL contexts, where thirty-five studies are undertaken in the EFL context, and seven studies are undertaken in the ESL context. As for the research methodologies as seen in Figure 5, twenty-seven studies employed quantitative methods, eleven studies employed mixed methods, and four studies employed qualitative methods.

### *The Emerging Themes in The Selected Studies*

The second objective was to analyze and synthesize the emerging themes in forty-two studies on pragmatic competence. To achieve this objective, we performed a thematic analysis to identify and summarize the emerging themes from the included studies (Kiger & Varpio, 2020; Lorenc et al., 2014). Through thematic analysis, we conducted an in-depth analysis of various concepts that are commonly present in selected studies. VOS viewer software was adopted to construct a data-driven map of the keywords and networks of the emerging themes (Noor et al., 2020; Zupic & Čater, 2015). According to the results of the thematic analysis, we categorized them into four clusters: Cluster 1, identified in red represents the theme, pragmatic competence teaching and instruction; Cluster 2, identified in green, represents the theme, learners' level of

pragmatic competence in EFL and ESL contexts; Cluster 3, identified in blue, represents the theme, pragmatic competence and speech acts performance; and Cluster 4, identified in yellow, represents the theme, the relationship between pragmatic competence and language proficiency. [Figure 6](#) presents these themes which pose significant challenges that have captured the attention of researchers and given rise to some research areas in this respect.



**Figure:6:** A Summary of the four Emerging Themes of the 42 Selected Studies.

The theme of pragmatic competence teaching and instruction includes fifteen studies. The theme of the relationship between pragmatic competence and language proficiency includes ten studies. In the end, there are nine studies on learners' level of pragmatic competence in EFL and ESL contexts and eight studies on pragmatic competence and speech acts performance. Table 2 presents the frequency of four clustered emerging themes.

**Table 2:** *The Distribution of the 42 Studies with the 4 Emerging Themes Organized by Frequency.*

No.	Emerging Themes	Frequency of themes	Studies involved with Author(s)/Year
1	Pragmatic competence teaching and instruction	15	Ghobadi & Fahim (2009), Nguyen et al. (2012), Fordyce (2013), Eslami et al. (2015), Limberg (2015), Ren & Han (2016), Farashaiyan et al. (2018), Ajabshir (2019), Ton Nu & Murray (2020), Jakupčević & Čavar Portolan (2024), Qari (2021), Zhang (2022a, 2022b), Alhadi Ali Ahmed et al. (2023), Bui & Nguyen (2023)
2	Relationship between pragmatic competence and language proficiency	10	Matsumura (2003), Xu et al. (2009), Taguchi (2011), Al-Gahtani & Roever (2011), Youn (2014), Soler & Hernández (2017), Tabatabaei (2019), Asif et al. (2019), Morady Moghaddam et al. (2020), Wang & Ren (2022)
3	Learners' level of pragmatic competence in EFL and ESL contexts	9	Brice & Montgomery (1996), Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei (1998), Allami & Montazeri (2012), Nguyen et al. (2018), Wijayanto (2019), Bardis et al. (2021), Alharbi (2022), Youn & Chaipupae (2022), Kentmen et al. (2023)
4	Pragmatic competence and speech acts performance	8	Nguyen (2008), Allami & Naeimi (2011), Babai Shishavan & Sharifian (2016), Yuan & Zhang (2018), Alrefae et al. (2019), Alsuhaibani (2022), Alfge & Mohammadzadeh (2021), Fareh et al. (2023)

Figure 7 shows the summary of the 4 emerging themes, and each theme is followed with a brief description.

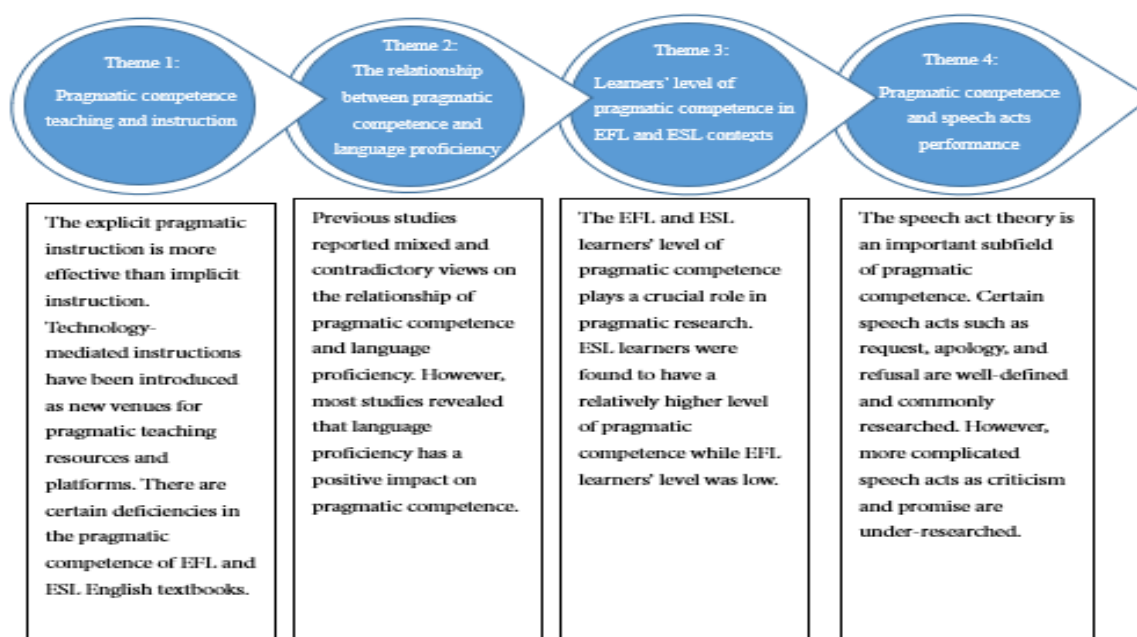


Figure 7: Summary of 4 Key Themes.

#### Four Emerging Themes

This section presents an in-depth analysis of the studies based on the emerging themes organized by frequency. Each sub-section summarizes the literature of each theme, including objectives, methods, data, key findings, and conclusions.

#### Pragmatic Competence Teaching and Instruction

Language academics and foreign language pedagogies increasingly focus on the value of teaching and instruction in developing learners' pragmatic competence (Sharif et al., 2017). Based on the results from the selected articles, we found that the previous literature on pragmatic competence teaching and instruction can be divided into two research orientations: English teaching methods and English curriculum content. The English teaching methods include two paradigms: the explicit and implicit methods and the technology-mediated approach. The explicit teaching approaches entail directly explaining pragmatic features followed by practice. Previous studies generally discovered that explicit pragmatic instruction is more effective than implicit instruction because the latter requires more cognitive effort. For example, Nguyen et al. (2012) investigated the impacts of explicit and implicit teaching on the enhancement of pragmatic competence. They found that explicit and implicit instructions are effective for pragmatic competence teaching and learning and that explicit instruction produces more positive effects than implicit instruction. Fordyce (2013) has also stressed that there are slight differences between explicit and implicit instruction in enhancing the pragmatic competence of language learners. However, explicit instruction is more beneficial than implicit instruction, as discussed below. Likewise, a comparative study of explicit and implicit instruction of English compliments on Iranian EFL learners' pragmatic competence was conducted by Ghobadi & Fahim (2009). A series of role-play tasks examined the participants' sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge of pragmatic interactions. Their findings indicated that the group with explicit instruction performed better than the implicit instruction group. Similarly, the finding from Qari (2021) is consistent with Ghobadi & Fahim (2009), who reported that explicit instruction of L2 requests facilitated learners' development of pragmatic competence and was shown to be an effective instrument in enhancing learners' pragmatic competence.

Technology-mediated instruction, on the other hand, involves Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) which has introduced new venues for pragmatic teaching resources and forms. This is primarily due to the instructional qualities inspired by technology, such as multimedia environment, interaction, and simulation which are crucial for pragmatic competence learning (Cunningham, 2019). For instance, Zhang (2022a) suggested that the combination of CALL and instructional intervention has a lasting effect on the pragmatic development of L2 learners. Zhang's study (2022a) contributed to the positive and long-lasting effects of integrating CALL with instruction for the pragmatic development of EFL students and provided practical implications for teaching pragmatic competence. Additionally, CMC with both synchronous and asynchronous is another instructional technology suitable for pragmatics learning. For instance, Eslami et al. (2015) investigated form-focused training on the acquisition of requests by Iranian EFL learners to assess the efficacy of pragmatics instruction through Asynchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (ACMC). They found that EFL learners in Iran can benefit from the instructional and communicative affordability aided by ACMC as they work to improve their pragmatic

competence, especially those CMC-oriented instructional tasks, and the activities provided by the native teacher of English could help students improve their pragmatic competence effectively. Likewise, [Ajabshir \(2019\)](#) conducted a comparative study examining the effects of synchronous and asynchronous CMC on pragmatic instruction and found that synchronous and asynchronous CMC instructions positively affect L2 learners' pragmatic competence development. Similar findings were also demonstrated by [Zhang \(2022b\)](#), stating that implementing CMC has positive effects on learners' pragmatic development.

Within the EFL context, in particular textbooks, instructional materials can serve as a vital source for teaching L2 pragmatic norms since learners frequently interact with their textbooks, and their teachers use textbooks as a guide ([Sharif et al., 2017](#)). In a relevant study, [Jakupčević & Čavar Portolan \(2024\)](#) examined pragmatic materials' role in developing learners' pragmatic competence. They selected 18 English textbooks used for Croatian EFL learners and compared those textbooks in terms of the proportion of pages devoted to pragmatics and speech acts. The finding revealed significant variance and deficiency of pragmatic content in many textbooks and material. Such conclusions are congruent with that of [Limberg \(2015\)](#), who showed in empirical research that textbooks are a rich source of input, providing many chances to learn and practice pragmatic competence in certain areas of language usage. Limberg's study focused on how German textbooks for EFL students provide information about apologies with activities and exercises for practicing and performing in the classroom. Furthermore, Limberg found the presence of some apologetic input, but there is a lack of variation in terms of apology expressions; alternatively, EFL textbooks might provide resources for teaching pragmatic competence. EFL educators need to know what textbooks provide pragmatic competence input activities with flexible modifications. In another relevant study, [Ren & Han \(2016\)](#) presented a quantitative and qualitative analysis of 10 English textbooks used by Chinese EFL college learners, emphasizing their inclusion of pragmatic knowledge. The research findings suggest that most textbooks still do not sufficiently represent pragmatic knowledge. The range of covered speech acts is notably restricted, and the emphasis on pragmatic knowledge is inadequate.

[Bui & Nguyen \(2023\)](#) studied Vietnamese EFL textbooks' pragmatic input in the case of disagreement speech act. They selected three series of EFL English textbooks and adopted quantitative and qualitative methods, respectively. They found a mismatch between textbook pragmatic competence input and actual language usage. The limited range of interference resources in textbooks for handling speech acts of disagreement restricts students' exposure to pragmatic input. Consequently, they emphasized that English textbooks should be designed to prioritize the development of pragmatic competence. Such findings are similar to those found in the studies by [Ton Nu & Murray \(2020\)](#) and [Alhadi Ali Ahmed et al. \(2023\)](#). These studies also report that the content and materials in existing textbooks are insufficient to support EFL learners' development of pragmatic competence. On the other hand, [Farashaiyan et al. \(2018\)](#) examined the pragmatic content and classroom implementation of the contemporary ESL textbook series using mixed methods. They selected three intermediate Cutting-Edge textbooks as research materials and found that the materials related to pragmatic knowledge in the textbooks are inadequate to facilitate the development of students' pragmatic competence.

### *The Relationship Between Pragmatic Competence and Language Proficiency*

The relationship between pragmatic competence and language proficiency has dramatically attracted attention among scholars. However, previous studies on the linkage between the two are still ambiguous, reporting mixed opinions of agreement and disagreement. Some studies have highlighted positive effects of language proficiency on pragmatic competence. For example, [Xu et al. \(2009\)](#) investigated how language proficiency and length of residency in the target language community impacted learners' pragmatic competence. In their study, they selected 126 international college students from the USA and divided them into two groups of English language proficiency based on their intermediate and advanced TOEFL scores. It was discovered that the level of language proficiency could be considered a requirement for pragmatic competence. Both language proficiency and length of residence demonstrated a strong correlation with learners' level of pragmatic competence. This result is similar to another two studies ([Morady Moghaddam et al., 2020](#); [Taguchi, 2011](#)) in which various participants with advanced English showed a relatively satisfactory level of pragmatic competence. For example, [Taguchi \(2011\)](#) selected 64 Japanese EFL learners and conducted a comparative study on the learners' pragmatic competence and the effects of language proficiency and experience in studying abroad. She discovered that language proficiency significantly correlates with their pragmatic competence level. Hence, learners' language proficiency level helped them develop their pragmatic competence. Similar findings were also reported by [Morady Moghaddam et al. \(2020\)](#). Their results suggested that the learners' pragmatic competence significantly correlates with language proficiency in spoken English. This is because various components of pragmatic competence are engaged depending on the communication requirements.

The positive language proficiency effect was also evident in [Asif et al. \(2019\)](#). They found a significant relationship between pragmatic competence and language proficiency. The result indicates that learners with a high level of language proficiency showed better performance in the pragmatic competence questionnaire. In another relevant study, [Wang & Ren \(2022\)](#) found that pragmatic competence and language proficiency are inseparable and complementary in effective language learning. Although there is a positive relationship between the two, only by coordinating their relationship, they can meet the needs of learners and accomplish

the most significant communication effect. This is also stressed by Al-Gahtani & Roever (2011), who argued that learners with higher language proficiency have better pragmatic competence performance. On the other hand, other researchers hold a different view, stating that language proficiency has a relatively weak relationship with pragmatic competence and is not necessarily a primary factor in developing learners' pragmatic competence. For instance, Matsumura (2003) observed 137 Japanese English language learners at various levels of pragmatic competence and those with undergraduate-level English proficiency and amount of exposure to English. The findings revealed that the level of pragmatic competence is not primarily affected by the performance of language proficiency. Improving language proficiency is not an essential component for developing pragmatic competence. Furthermore, it is indicated that extensive exposure to English exhibited a more significant potential to explain pragmatic competence development than proficiency level.

Addressing such limitations, Youn (2014) designed an authentic pragmatic test to evaluate learners' pragmatic competence and applied TOEFL (iBT) scores to classify learners into different proficiency levels. The findings revealed that syntactically complicated structures are more important than language proficiency level in learners' pragmatic competence. Thus, learners' pragmatic competence was not closely associated with their levels of language proficiency. A similar point of view was also proved by Tabatabaei (2019) who reported that language proficiency was not a significant determinant of pragmatic competence, indicating that higher language proficiency learners did not do noticeably better than their low competitors in pragmatic output. Findings from Soler & Hernández (2017) also reinforced the view that the level of language proficiency does not essentially influence the level of pragmatic competence.

### *Learners' Level of Pragmatic Competence in EFL and ESL Contexts*

Learners' level of pragmatic competence has been an essential component in pragmatics research. This section reviews previous studies identifying learners' levels and perceptions of pragmatic competence in EFL and ESL contexts. Some scholars examined learners' pragmatic competence and their perceptions in EFL contexts. For instance, Bardis et al. (2021) employed a mixed-methods approach with a questionnaire for EFL students and interviews for both EFL instructors and students in North Cyprus. They found that students have poor levels of pragmatic competence and a lack of consciousness of intercultural pragmatics. In another similar study, Alharbi (2022) investigated Saudi Arabian EFL learners' pragmatic competence awareness and suggested that the average level of pragmatic competence of these learners remained unsatisfactory and encountered difficulties in understanding pragmatic implicatures. Likewise, Allami & Montazeri (2012) found that pragmatic competence and linguistic knowledge are insufficient among Iranian EFL learners, and this makes them frequently resort to interlanguage forms. Wijayanto (2019) examined the level and performance of pragmatic competence among Indonesian EFL learners and explored the reasons. The study reported that pragmatic input, language proficiency, pragmatic instruction, and length of time spent learning English affect pragmatic competence.

Apart from studies conducted in the EFL context as in North Cyprus, Vietnam, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Indonesia, little research has been conducted in ESL contexts. For instance, Brice & Montgomery (1996) selected 40 Latino ESL learners to determine their level of pragmatic competence. They applied the Pragmatics Screen Scale to measure learners' pragmatic competence. The findings indicated that Latino ESL learners have difficulties acquiring pragmatic knowledge and remain unsatisfied with pragmatic competence. Youn & Chaipupae (2022) investigated ESL learners' level of pragmatic competence in conversation. The findings revealed that ESL learners demonstrated successful performance of pragmatic competence in role-play tasks. Furthermore, the high-level pragmatic performance showed interactional competence in taking turns step-by-step, fluency in interactions, and interactional strategies. However, in Youn and Chaipupae's (2022) study, the participants were international undergraduates and graduates at a university in America with various first languages. They were studying in a native English context and were not born nor raised in an ESL context which is a limitation of participants' selection.

### *Pragmatic Competence and Speech Acts Performance*

Speech act theory is an essential theoretical foundation and a subfield of pragmatic competence. The concept of speech acts, which refers to implementing certain acts (e.g., request, refusal, compliment), is crucial to language communication. Accordingly, research addressing the realization of speech acts by foreign language learners has highlighted the necessity of investigating speech act performance in pragmatic competence settings (Limberg, 2015). Studying speech acts of refusal is the most popular aspect of pragmatics among scholars. For instance, Alrefae et al. (2019) investigated the pragmatic competence of Yemeni EFL learners. They utilized the Written Discourse Completion Task to gather information from varying participants from three groups. The findings showed that Yemeni English speakers lack an adequate command of pragmatic competence of refusals. Moreover, the Yemeni participants used general and vague excuses when refusing individuals of equal or lower social status, whereas native speakers of English were found to provide detailed and comprehensible excuses to people with different social statuses. In another relevant study, Allami & Naeimi (2011) found that refusal of speech acts in pragmatic competence is challenging because it requires learning the sociocultural norms of the target culture. Additional empirical

support for this result comes from Babai Shishavan & Sharifian (2016) who found that Iranian participants (n=24) used more indirect strategies of speech act refusals in interaction with higher and equal-status interlocutors. This is because the cultural norms of the first language Persian significantly impact the Iranian students' refusals and thus largely influence their choice of responses with different levels of social status.

Several studies have examined other speech acts such as request, suggestion, apology, compliment, and complaint to evaluate learners' pragmatic competence. For instance, the Amazigh and Libyan Arab EFL undergraduate students' use of the three speech act strategies of request, suggestion, and apology was examined by Alfghe & Mohammadzadeh (2021). The findings showed that these learners are more skilled in functioning than in organizing strategies of speech acts of request, suggestion, and apology. Moreover, Alsuhaibani (2022) examined how consciousness-raising method and corpus-based teaching affect EFL learners' speech act of compliment responses. The findings demonstrated the value of teaching compliment replies pragmatically using both corpus-based and consciousness-raising teaching.

As for the speech act of complaint, Yuan & Zhang (2018) conducted longitudinal research of L2 complaints involving 20 Chinese university EFL learners. The data were collected in two consecutive academic years using a DCT for complaints. They found that students demonstrated an average level of performance in speech acts of complaints and showed a similar language pattern of socio-pragmatic competence in their responses to complaints. Another study conducted by Nguyen (2008) clearly illustrated the pragmatic competence of speech act of criticism. The results showed that Vietnamese EFL learners lack criticizing skills and perform differently from native speakers of English. Nguyen also reported some factors that may have contributed to the level of pragmatic competence, such as learner's L2 language proficiency and a dearth of fluency which may have strained their capacity for processing information under communicative pressure. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that Vietnamese EFL learners similarly experience considerable difficulties in this respect.

## Discussion

Based on the results of research trends, emerging themes and in-depth analysis of the selected studies, this section discusses the findings based on the three research objectives and compares the results with previous studies.

### *The Research Trends of Pragmatic Competence*

The first objective was addressed by exploring the research trends of pragmatic competence in terms of the distribution of studies by year, country of participants, studies in EFL and ESL contexts, and research methodologies used. The results of the distribution of studies by year revealed that research on topics related to pragmatic competence is gradually increasing and has become a new research trend. Additionally, there is growing interest in pragmatic competence in English learning and teaching. The finding of the country of participants revealed that 19 studies focused on the pragmatic competence of EFL learners in Iran, China, Saudi Arabia, and Vietnam. This suggests that scholars from these countries are also deeply concerned about the performance and characteristics of their learners in various aspects of pragmatic competence. There are 83.3% of studies conducted in EFL contexts (see Figure 4). This finding is consistent with Taguchi's (2011) study which found that research in the context of EFL has a prominent role in English education and English linguistics, particularly pragmatics. This is mainly because EFL learners are urgently required to enhance their English language and communication abilities (Akbari, 2015; Alharbi, 2021). Even though EFL learners have specific deficiencies in pragmatic competence, they still attract the attention and focus of many scholars (Bardis et al., 2021). As for research methodologies, 27 of 42 selected studies applied quantitative methods to examine learners' pragmatic competence (see Figure 5). However, there is a lack of qualitative studies to understand this concept better and examine the influencing factors of pragmatic competence. This finding is consistent with the study conducted by Zhang & Aubrey (2024) who reported that many studies on pragmatic competence adopt quantitative rather than qualitative methods. Therefore, future researchers need to address this dearth of research qualitatively.

### *The Emerging Themes and in-Depth Analysis of Pragmatic Competence Studies*

The second objective was to identify and synthesize the emerging themes in pragmatic competence. Four dominant themes related to pragmatic competence have been identified as: pragmatic competence teaching and instruction, the relationship between pragmatic competence and language proficiency, learners' level of pragmatic competence in EFL and ESL contexts, pragmatic competence and speech acts performance. The in-depth review and analysis of the selected articles on emerging themes yielded the following findings. First, the EFL learners were found to have a relatively lower level of pragmatic competence which also echoes the findings from studies conducted by Yang (2015), and Kentmen et al. (2023). The lack of pragmatic competence has gradually become one of the major barriers to intercultural communication, causing significant problems for EFL learners (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013). The main reason is that, in contrast to native speakers, non-native language learners have a difficult time acquiring pragmatic knowledge due to its complex nature which encompasses more than only form-focused learning as it is inherently linked to social and cultural contexts.

Meanwhile, some English education standards worldwide, such as China's Standards of English Language Ability (2018) and The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2020) consider pragmatic competence as one of the critical competencies of English language learning. Therefore, as Taguchi (2022) pointed out, improving pragmatic competence is urgently required and has become one of the important objectives of EFL language teaching.

Second, as for the relationship between pragmatic competence and language proficiency, studies conducted by Xu et al. (2009), Taguchi (2011), Asif et al. (2019), Morady Moghaddam et al. (2020), and Wang & Ren (2022) reported that language proficiency has significant positive effects on pragmatic competence. However, findings from few studies (Soler & Hernández, 2017; Tabatabaei, 2019; Youn, 2014) concluded that there is a weak relationship between the two. Therefore, the relationship between language proficiency and pragmatic competence is inconclusive, requiring further investigation. This finding is similar to Taguchi's (2011) and Zhang and Aubrey's (2024) point of view that there is a complex relationship between language proficiency and pragmatic competence. Third, previous studies on speech acts have not given equal attention to all speech acts and have been limited to investigating certain speech acts such as request, suggestion, apology, refusal, and compliment which are regarded as well-defined and commonly used. Even though more complicated speech acts as criticism and promise may cause more significant difficulties in intercultural communication, very little is known about them. Different groups of EFL learners expressed some difficulties performing speech acts. This is consistent with the findings in Alsuhailani (2022) in that speech acts competence is insufficient for many learners, including those with advanced language ability.

Fourth, studies of pragmatic competence teaching and instruction revealed that explicit and implicit instructions are beneficial for teaching pragmatic competence, and the explicit form-focused participants performed significantly better than the implicit ones for developing L2 pragmatic competence. On the contrary, Ziafar (2020) reported that both implicit and explicit teaching successfully promote learners' pragmatic competence without showing the statistical significance of the difference between implicit and explicit teaching groups. This finding also coincides with Taguchi's (2011) and Sharif et al.'s (2017) point of view that instructional materials and resources have a favorable influence on the development of pragmatic competence and have become a prevalent trend in pragmatic competence teaching research. We also found that pragmatic content and knowledge are still not sufficiently represented in many existing English textbooks in both EFL and ESL contexts. Such inadequacy hinders the development of learners' pragmatic competence. This is mainly because the scope of such resources in current English textbooks is more limited than in real-life interactions, thereby restricting learners' pragmatic input and exposure to pragmatic knowledge (Bui & Nguyen, 2023).

### *The Influencing Factors of Pragmatic Competence in EFL and ESL Contexts*

The third objective was addressed by synthesizing the influencing factors of pragmatic competence, including language proficiency, study-abroad experience, length of residence, exposure to English, English teaching methods, and English curriculum content. Table 3 presents the six influencing factors of pragmatic competence categorized in three dimensions.

**Table 3:** The Six Influencing Factors of Pragmatic Competence in EFL And ESL Contexts.

Dimensions	Influencing factors	Studies involved
Learner's individual factor	Language proficiency	Matsumura (2003), Xu et al. (2009), Taguchi (2011), Al-Gahtani & Roever (2011), Youn (2014), Soler & Hernández (2017), Asif et al. (2019), Tabatabaei (2019), Morady Moghaddam et al. (2020), Wang & Ren (2022)
External environmental factors	Study-abroad experience	Taguchi (2011), Soler & Hernández (2017)
	Length of residence	Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei (1998), Xu et al. (2009)
	Exposure to English	Matsumura (2003)
Teaching-related factors	English teaching methods	Ghobadi & Fahim (2009), Nguyen et al. (2012), Fordyce (2013), Eslami et al. (2015), Ajabshir (2019), Qari (2021), Zhang (2022a, 2022b)
	English curriculum content	Limberg (2015), Ren & Han (2016), Farashaiyan et al. (2018), Ton Nu & Murray (2020), Jakupčević & Čavar Portolan (2024), Alhadi Ali Ahmed et al. (2023), Bui & Nguyen (2023), Fareh et al. (2023)

The most frequent influencing factor is language proficiency which is categorized under the first dimension (the learner's individual factor). Six studies reported a positive effect of proficiency on pragmatic competence, and four studies reported that pragmatic competence does not correlate significantly with language proficiency level. This also echoes the findings as stated above, although language proficiency has an overall positive effect on learners' pragmatic competence, the correlation between pragmatic competence and language proficiency is still inconclusive.

The external environmental factors, including study-abroad experience, length of residence, and exposure to English fall under the second dimension. Two studies investigated study-abroad experience (Soler & Hernández, 2017; Taguchi, 2011). They found positive effects of study-abroad experience on learners' pragmatic competence. As for the length of residence in the target language community studied by Xu et al. (2009), this factor has a positive and robust correlation with pragmatic competence. Matsumura (2003) studied exposure to English factor and found that the amount of exposure to the target language has a more significant impact on the development of learners' pragmatic competence than language proficiency level. English teaching methods and curriculum content factors fall under teaching-related factors. English teaching methods include technology-mediated instruction and explicit and implicit methods. The technology-mediated instruction which involves Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) was reported to have positive effects on learners' pragmatic competence in English teaching classrooms (Ajabshir, 2019; Eslami et al., 2015; Zhang, 2022a, 2022b). Moreover, explicit and implicit teaching methods positively affect learners' pragmatic competence. However, the explicit method is significantly more effective than the implicit method (Fordyce, 2013; Ghobadi & Fahim, 2009; Nguyen et al., 2012; Qari, 2021). The English curriculum content mainly refers to English textbooks as an essential instructional material in EFL teaching classrooms which play a crucial role in developing pragmatic competence (Taguchi, 2011).

## Conclusion

The current study systematically reviewed forty-two studies on learners' pragmatic competence in EFL and ESL contexts in the past three decades. The findings contributed to some pedagogical implications. Firstly, the results of the level of EFL learners' pragmatic competence are beneficial for English educators to better recognize the status quo of learners' pragmatic competence in EFL context. Due to the deficiency of pragmatic competence, English educators should focus on improving learners' pragmatic competence by paying more attention to pragmatic knowledge input for their students. EFL and ESL learners should spend more time and efforts on English learning both inside and outside the classroom to improve their pragmatic competence. Secondly, the relationship between pragmatic competence and language proficiency highlights the importance of pragmatic competence teaching. Language educators should teach students based on their language and pragmatic competence, tailoring classroom teaching to address individual needs in developing pragmatic competence. Thirdly, language learners and educators should pay attention to under-researched speech acts, including complicated ones. It is better to enhance the learners' awareness of speech acts and comprehensively enhance their pragmatic competence. Fourthly, the findings of pragmatic competence teaching and instruction suggested that enhancing English textbooks' pragmatic competence development with supplementary materials and exercises is essential. Simultaneously, textbook designers should integrate pragmatics into the textbooks. The English language educators should consider the distribution of pragmatic knowledge in the existing textbooks and allocate classroom lessons reasonably. As for the teaching methods of pragmatic competence, language educators should focus on explicit teaching methods and technology-mediated approaches to better develop L2 pragmatic competence in English teaching classrooms.

Some limitations are also highlighted based on our review. As for the pragmatic competence assessment tools, 21 out of 42 studies used discourse completion tests or questionnaires to assess learners' pragmatic competence. Although the discourse completion test remains the most popular approach among pragmatic competence studies, other approaches such as role-play tasks and self-assessment tasks still need to be explored further to give a comprehensive overview of learners' pragmatic competence (Hudson, 2001). As for the research methods, there is a lack of qualitative studies in pragmatic competence research. Therefore, more qualitative studies are also required to reveal the intrinsic attribute of pragmatic competence and thoroughly examine the interrelationship among the influencing factors of pragmatic competence. Moreover, there is a limitation on the selection of research participants. Most studies merely selected advanced-level L2 learners from universities as participants. Future studies can cover a broader range of participants to understand pragmatic competence comprehensively. Overall, we hope this review leads to more empirical studies to address the limitations and issues identified in the previous research.

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