

## Testing Interlanguage Pragmatic Ability through Discourse Completion Tests in the Schools of Iraq

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### Abstract

*The study examines the testing of Interlanguage Pragmatic (ILP) abilities among English Language Learners (ELLs) in Iraqi schools, focusing on the integration of English in non-native contexts, particularly in Iraq. It aims to evaluate current ILP abilities, the effectiveness of teaching and assessment methods, and proposes strategies for improvement. The methodology involves the use of the Discourse Completion Test (DCT) to assess students' ILP abilities, particularly in making requests in English. The test results were analyzed based on directness, use of politeness markers, and sentence structure, offering insights into the students' pragmatic competence. The study reveals a range of abilities among the students and suggests that factors like exposure to English-speaking cultures and formal education impact their performance. The findings have implications for future pedagogical approaches and policy formulations in EFL education globally, especially in settings where English is an emerging component of the educational framework.*

**Keywords:** *Interlanguage Pragmatics, English as a Foreign Language, Iraq, Pragmatic Competence, Discourse Completion Test.*

### 1. Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, the role of English as a lingua franca in non-native contexts has garnered significant academic interest, especially in the domain of language education (Kohn & Hoffstaedter, 2017; Ardiç Kiyak, 2021). This study delves into a crucial aspect of this phenomenon by examining the Interlanguage Pragmatic (ILP) abilities of English Language Learners (ELLs) in Iraqi schools. The focus on Iraq, where English is emerging as a significant component of the educational framework, offers a unique perspective to explore the integration of English in non-native settings (Azeem & Daleure, 2018).

The primary aim of this research is to evaluate the current state of ILP abilities among ELLs in Iraq. This involves an in-depth analysis of how these learners comprehend and utilise English in pragmatic contexts, specifically in making requests. The study also investigates the effectiveness of existing teaching methodologies and assessment strategies in fostering these abilities (Saputra, 2022). Furthermore, it proposes strategies for enhancing ILP competencies, which are crucial for effective communication in English.

To achieve these objectives, the study employs the Discourse Completion Test (DCT), a widely recognized tool in pragmatic research, to assess the ILP abilities of students. This approach allows for a systematic evaluation of how learners use English in specific communicative situations, focusing on elements such as directness, the use of politeness markers, and sentence structure (Sifakis, 2014). These factors are instrumental in understanding the learners' pragmatic competence, a vital component of language proficiency.

The findings of this research are expected to shed light on the range of ILP abilities among Iraqi ELLs, highlighting the influence of various factors such as exposure to English-speaking cultures and formal education on their performance (Young & Walsh, 2010; Hou, 2020). The implications of these findings are far-reaching, offering valuable insights for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers. They underscore the need for tailored pedagogical approaches and policy formulations in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, not only in Iraq but also in other global contexts where English is becoming an integral part of the educational landscape (Chung et al., 2023).

## 2. Literature Review

The study of Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP) forms a crucial domain within the broader field of pragmatics, focusing on how second language learners interpret and employ linguistic forms within various pragmatic contexts. This field is particularly significant in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, where language mastery extends beyond grammatical correctness to the nuanced use of language in diverse social and cultural scenarios. Kasper & Rose (2002) define ILP as a scholarly exploration of mechanisms by which second language learners comprehend and use linguistic forms across different social and cultural environments, emphasizing its link to broader language learning objectives like communicative competence and cultural sensitivity.

The theoretical underpinnings of ILP draw from linguistics and social psychology, incorporating theories such as speech act theory, politeness theory, and relevance theory. Speech Act Theory, for instance, is essential for understanding how language performs various actions, such as making requests or offering apologies, and is crucial in contexts where learners navigate linguistic and cultural nuances. The theory's categorization of speech acts into locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts provides a framework for analyzing the complexities of ILP in language learning and communication.

Relevance Theory, proposed by Sperber and Wilson, is another cornerstone in ILP, emphasizing the importance of contextual understanding in determining relevance, particularly in cross-cultural settings. This theory is instrumental in understanding implicatures and indirect speech acts, which are often challenging for L2 learners due to the need for contextual interpretation.

Contextual factors play a pivotal role in pragmatic competence, encompassing the sociocultural environment, the educational system, and exposure to the target language. Díez-Bedmar and Papp (2008) highlight the importance of understanding these contextual influences, which significantly affect how learners acquire and use pragmatic knowledge. Huang (2010) further underscores the need for context-specific teaching methods in foreign language teaching, especially in non-Western settings where learners may have limited exposure to the target language and its associated cultural norms. His emphasis on pragmatic competence being more than just knowledge of linguistic forms, but the ability to apply this knowledge effectively in real-world situations, calls for an incorporation of cultural education into language teaching.

In the context of Iraq, EFL education presents unique challenges due to political instability, limited educational resources, and an outdated curriculum. Research indicates that Arab EFL learners, including those in Iraq, often struggle with the pragmatic aspects of language use, attributed to limited exposure to English-speaking cultures. This gap is significant, considering the importance of English as a lingua franca in international contexts. The political unrest in Iraq complicates the situation further, affecting the quality and continuity of language education and necessitating context-specific solutions.

The literature also reveals gaps in focusing on context-specific factors affecting ILP abilities. Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor (2003) and Rasouli Khorshidi & Bagherzadeh Nimchahi (2013) point out that teaching methodologies effective in one context may not necessarily translate to another, highlighting the need for context-specific research, particularly in challenging educational contexts like Iraq.

### **3. Methodology:**

This research employs the Discourse Completion Test (DCT) to investigate the Interlanguage Pragmatic (ILP) abilities of English language learners in Baghdad, Iraq. The DCT, a tool recognized for its efficacy in pragmatic studies, is used to analyze how students construct requests in English in specific situations.

#### **3.1. Research Instrument**

The core instrument of this study, the DCT, presents a scenario in a library setting where students are required to borrow a pen from a stranger. This scenario is designed to replicate a real-life situation demanding the use of pragmatic skills, particularly in making a request. The choice of a library environment is intentional, as it is a familiar context to most students and requires a level of politeness and formality in interaction.

#### **3.2. Data Collection**

Students' responses to the DCT scenario were collected and analyzed to assess their range of pragmatic abilities. The responses varied significantly, with some students demonstrating the ability to formulate polite and context-appropriate requests, while others struggled with the required formality level. The responses were methodically coded and classified based on three criteria: Directness, Use of Politeness Markers, and Sentence Structure. These criteria were selected for their relevance to assessing ILP abilities and their importance in pragmatic and second language acquisition literature. The study conducted a statistical analysis of the frequency distribution of the linguistic parameters. This analysis provides insights into the learners' use of linguistic features in interlanguage pragmatics. The findings contribute to shaping pedagogical strategies and guiding future research in this area.

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1. Discourse Completion Test (DCT)

The Discourse Completion Test (DCT) serves as a pivotal component of our research methodology, specifically designed to evaluate the Interlanguage Pragmatic (ILP) abilities of English language learners in Baghdad, Iraq. This section offers a comprehensive analysis of the data collected through the DCT, with a particular focus on how students formulate requests in English within a given context. The DCT is a widely used tool in the field of pragmatics and has been validated for its reliability and effectiveness in measuring ILP abilities (Taguchi, 2011; Aryanto et al., 2020).

The scenario presented to the students for the DCT was situated in a library, where the students were required to borrow a pen from a stranger. The scenario was crafted to simulate a real-life situation that would necessitate the use of pragmatic skills, specifically the ability to make a request. The choice of a library setting was deliberate, as it is a context that most students can relate to and one that demands a certain level of politeness and formality.

The students' responses to the DCT scenario were diverse, revealing a range of pragmatic abilities. While some students were able to formulate polite and context-appropriate requests, others struggled with the level of formality required by the situation. This finding aligns with the work of Bardovi-Harlig & Dornyei (1998), who emphasized the importance of assessing learners' production of speech acts, such as requests, in various contexts (Bardovi-Harlig & Dornyei, 1998).

The analysis also indicated that the students' responses were influenced by a variety of factors, including their level of exposure to English-speaking cultures and the extent of their formal education in English. These findings corroborate the research of Rose (2000), who argued that cultural and contextual factors significantly influence language use, including the production of speech acts like requests (Rose, 2000).

The data from the DCT offer valuable insights into the pragmatic competence of the students and highlight areas where targeted instruction may be beneficial. For instance, the struggle with formality suggests a need for more focused teaching on the nuances of politeness strategies in different contexts, a point also emphasized by Martínez Flor (2005) in their study on the teaching of speech acts (Martínez Flor, 2005).

The following table provides an overview of each student's response and how it was coded based on the parameters of directness, use of politeness markers, and sentence structure:

Student No.	Response	Directness	Use of Politeness Markers	Sentence Structure
1	"Give me your pen."	Direct	No	Statement
2	"Can I have your pen, please?"	Indirect	Yes	Question
3	"Excuse me, could I possibly borrow your pen for a moment?"	Indirect	Yes	Question
4	"Would you mind if I borrowed your pen?"	Indirect	Yes	Question
5	"Sorry to bother you, but may I use your pen?"	Indirect	Yes	Question
6	"I need a pen, can you give me yours?"	Direct	No	Statement
7	"Could I take your pen?"	Indirect	No	Question
8	"I hope it's not too much trouble, but could I use your pen for a bit?"	Indirect	Yes	Question
9	"Can I use your pen?"	Indirect	No	Question
10	"Do you have a pen that I could borrow?"	Indirect	No	Question

## **4.2. Coding and Classification**

The process of coding and classifying data is a crucial step in qualitative research, particularly in the field of linguistics where the nuances of language and communication are under scrutiny. This section will elaborate on the coding criteria I have outlined: Directness, Use of Politeness Markers, and Sentence Structure.

### **4.2.1. Directness**

The first criterion, Directness, aims to categorize the responses based on the straightforwardness of the request. Direct requests are often explicit and leave little room for interpretation, while indirect requests are more nuanced and may require contextual understanding for accurate comprehension. The importance of directness in interlanguage pragmatic ability cannot be overstated, as it often reflects the learner's cultural background and understanding of social norms in the target language (Kasper, 1997).

### **4.2.2. Use of Politeness Markers**

The second criterion, Use of Politeness Markers, focuses on the employment of phrases that serve to soften the request and adhere to social norms of politeness. Such markers are essential in understanding the pragmatic competence of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. The use or omission of these markers can significantly impact the perception of the request's politeness and, by extension, the speaker's social competence (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

### **4.2.3. Sentence Structure**

The third criterion, Sentence Structure, involves the analysis of whether the request is framed as a question or a statement. This is particularly relevant in a pedagogical context, as the choice of sentence structure can influence the perceived politeness and formality of the request. Research has shown that the ability to appropriately select sentence structures is a key component of pragmatic competence in language learners (Taguchi, 2011).

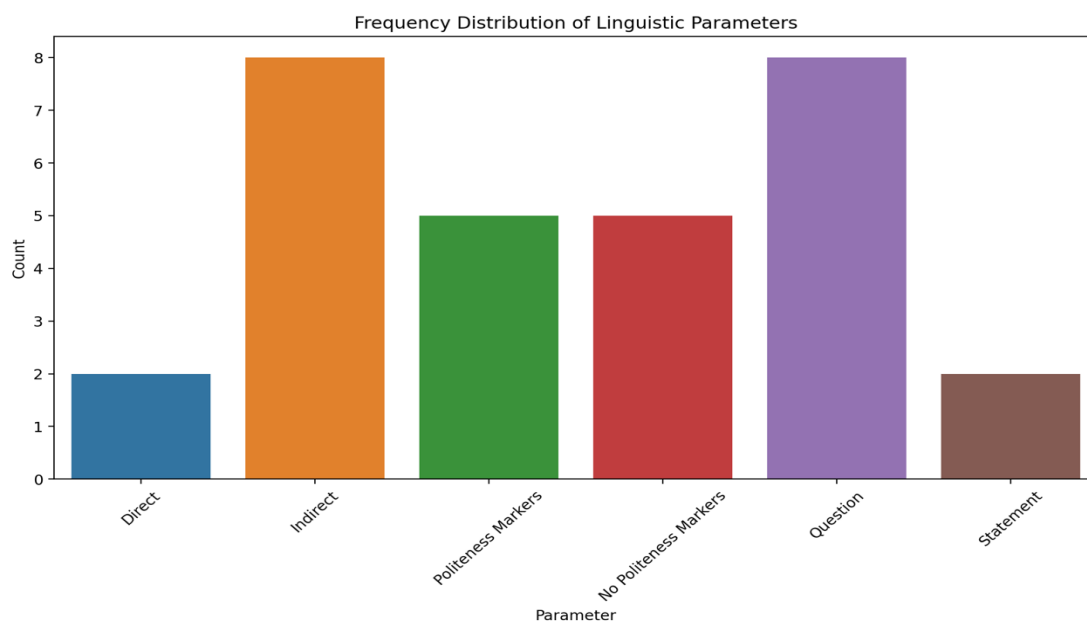
The coding and classification of these features serve as a robust framework for analyzing the interlanguage pragmatic ability of EFL students. By examining Directness, Use of Politeness Markers, and Sentence Structure, researchers can gain valuable insights into the pragmatic competence of language learners, which is essential for effective communication in real-world contexts.

The following summary table shows the overall frequency of each category:

Parameter	Direct	Indirect	Politeness Markers	No Politeness Markers	Question	Statement
Count	2	8	5	5	8	2

#### 4.2.4. Data Visualization

The bar plot below provides a visual representation of the frequency distribution of the linguistic parameters.



The statistical analysis conducted in this study reveals the intricate utilization of various linguistic parameters within the domain of interlanguage pragmatics among learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). These findings hold considerable importance for the formulation of pedagogical strategies and the direction of future scholarly inquiries. It is imperative, however, to recognize the necessity of engaging with a diverse array of academic perspectives to further enrich this analysis and expand its implications.

The observed moderate variability in data, as denoted by standard deviation and variance metrics, points to an inconsistent application of linguistic parameters among the student cohort. This phenomenon resonates with the findings of Amiri and Birjandi (2015), who underscored the criticality of deploying reliable testing methods to accurately capture the spectrum of variability inherent in interlanguage pragmatics within academic contexts (Amiri



&Birjandi, 2015). Such variability is likely influenced by an array of factors, including the learners' native language (L1) background, the contextual environment of language usage, and their extent of exposure to the target language.

Notably, the infrequent utilization of 'Direct' and 'Statement' categories within student responses aligns with broader theoretical frameworks in the study of interlanguage pragmatics. These frameworks suggest a propensity among learners to favor indirect strategies as a means of maintaining politeness or attenuating potentially face-threatening situations. This observation is in harmony with the research of Ogiermann and Bella (2020), who discovered a prevalent inclination among English learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds towards indirect modes of request formulation (Ogiermann& Bella, 2020).

The pedagogical implications derived from this data are multifaceted. Echoing the advocacy of Uneke Enyi and Edwin Orji (2019), there is a compelling argument for integrating interlanguage pragmatic principles into Nigeria's secondary language (L2) educational frameworks to bolster communicative competence (Uneke Enyi & Edwin Orji, 2019). Similarly, these insights could significantly influence the curriculum design in Iraqi educational institutions, with an emphasis on enhancing students' proficiency in employing direct speech acts and statements. Such pedagogical adjustments promise not only to augment linguistic precision but also to cultivate a deeper cultural fluency within English-speaking milieus.

This study lays a robust foundation for an array of future research endeavors. Firstly, it advocates for the implementation of longitudinal studies aimed at monitoring the evolution of linguistic parameter usage over time. Secondly, it invites comparative analyses across various educational landscapes and cultural contexts. Lastly, it highlights the exigency for more refined instruments in measuring interlanguage pragmatic capabilities, advocating for a shift beyond mere quantitative metrics to encompass qualitative dimensions.

## 5. Findings of DCT

The Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was instrumental in assessing the Interlanguage Pragmatic (ILP) abilities of English language learners in Baghdad, Iraq. The test, set in a library scenario requiring students to borrow a pen from a stranger, revealed a diverse range of pragmatic abilities among the students.

- **Frequency Distribution:** The study found that indirect requests and questions were more frequently used than direct requests and statements. This suggests a preference among learners for indirect strategies, potentially as a form of politeness or to mitigate face-threatening acts.
- **Variability in Responses:** There was a moderate level of variability in the use of linguistic parameters among students, attributable to factors like first language background, context of language use, and level of exposure to the target language.
- **Pedagogical Implications:** The findings have significant implications for English language teaching in Iraq. They suggest the need to enhance students' abilities in using direct speech acts and understanding the nuances of English politeness norms.
- **Future Research Directions:** The study highlights the need for longitudinal and comparative studies in different educational and cultural settings. It also calls for the development of more nuanced instruments for measuring interlanguage pragmatic abilities.

The DCT findings offer an overall understanding of the utilization of linguistic parameters in interlanguage pragmatics among EFL students. The insights gained are crucial for shaping effective pedagogical strategies and guiding future research in this field.

## 6. Conclusion

This research, centered around the use of the Discourse Completion Test (DCT) to assess Interlanguage Pragmatic (ILP) abilities in English language learners in Baghdad, Iraq, has yielded significant insights into the complex dynamics of language acquisition and pragmatic competence. The study's findings not only contribute to the existing body of knowledge in the field of second language acquisition but also offer practical implications for language pedagogy.

The analysis of student responses within the DCT framework revealed a diverse range of pragmatic abilities. This diversity underscores the influence of various factors such as

cultural background, exposure to English-speaking environments, and formal education in English on the development of ILP skills. The findings align with existing research, particularly emphasizing the role of cultural and contextual factors in shaping language use and pragmatic proficiency.

A key observation from the study is the learners' tendency to favour indirect request strategies, which resonates with broader theories in interlanguage pragmatics. This preference for indirectness, while serving as a politeness strategy, also highlights potential areas for pedagogical intervention. Specifically, there appears to be a need for more focused instruction in the nuances of directness and the use of politeness markers in different contexts. Such instruction could enhance learners' ability to navigate various social interactions more effectively, thereby improving their overall communicative competence.

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