Pragmatic Competence and Its Role in Overcoming Speaking Difficulties Among Efl Learners at Sabha University

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الكفاءة التداولية ودورها في التغلب على صعوبات التحدث لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في جامعة سبها

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Abstract:

This study explores the role of pragmatic competence in overcoming speaking difficulties among EFL learners at Sebha University. While many learners possess adequate vocabulary and grammar, their communicative effectiveness is often limited by a lack of pragmatic strategies, including turn-taking, politeness, and negotiation of meaning. A mixed methods design was employed, combining questionnaires, Oral Discourse Completion Tasks (ODCTs), and classroom observations to capture both quantitative and qualitative insights. Fifty Libyan EFL learners participated in the study. Results revealed that psychological factors such as anxiety, fear of mistakes, and hesitation amplified linguistic limitations, while pragmatic deficits further constrained interaction. ODCT findings showed stronger performance in compliments and apologies but persistent difficulty with refusals and suggestions. Observations highlighted reliance on repair strategies, long pauses, and cultural transfer from Arabic, which sometimes caused pragmatic misfits in English. The triangulated results demonstrated that speaking challenges are multidimensional, involving psychological, linguistic, and pragmatic components. The study recommends integrating explicit pragmatic instruction, interactive tasks, intercultural awareness, and confidence-building approaches to improve both appropriateness and fluency. These findings underscore the importance of pragmatics in preparing learners to become confident and effective English communicators.

Key words: classroom interaction, oral communication, pragmatic competence, pragmatic strategies, speaking difficulties.

الملخص

تستكشف هذه الدراسة دور الكفاءة التداولية (استخدام اللغة حسب السياق) في التغلب على صعوبات التحدث لدى دارسي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في جامعة سبها. فبينما يمتلك العديد من الدارسين مفردات وقواعد نحوية كافية، غالبًا ما تكون فعاليتهم التواصلية محدودة بسبب نقص الاستراتيجيات التداولية ، بما في ذلك تبادل الأدوار، واللباقة، والتفاوض على المعنى. استُخدم في هده الدراسة تصميمٌ متعدد الأساليب، يجمع بين الاستبيانات، ومهام إكمال الخطاب الشفوي، والملاحظات الصفية لجمع رؤى كمية ونوعية. شارك في الدراسة خمسون طالب ليبي من دارسي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. كشفت النتائج أن العوامل النفسية، مثل القلق والخوف من الأخطاء والتردد، زادت من القيود اللغوية، بينما زادت العيوب التداولية من تقييد التفاعل. أظهرت نتائج مهام إكمال الخطاب الشفوي أداءً أقوى في المجاملات والاعتذارات، ولكن مع صعوبة مستمرة في الرفض والاقتراحات. أبرزت الملاحظات الاعتماد على استراتيجيات الإصلاح، والتوقفات الطويلة، والانتقال الثقافي من اللغة العربية، مما تسبب أحيانًا في عدم توافق براغماتي في اللغة الإنجليزية. تُظهر النتائج المُثلّثة أن تحديات التحدث متعددة الأبعاد، وتشمل مكونات نفسية ولغوية وعملية. توصي الدراسة بدمج التعليم العملي، والمهام التفاعلية، والوعي الثقافي، وأساليب بناء الثقة لتحسين كلٍّ من الملاءمة والطلاقة. تُؤكد هذه النتائج على أهمية التداولية في إعداد المتعلمين ليصبحوا متحدثين واثقين وفعالين باللغة الإنجليزية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التفاعل الصفي، التواصل اللفظي، الكفاءة التداولية، الاستراتيجيات التداولية، صعوبات التحدث.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Language learning requires mastery of four fundamental skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These skills are interconnected, and weakness in one often affects the others (Christopher, 2016). Among them, speaking is often prioritized because it serves as the most immediate medium for communication in daily life, both in formal and informal contexts. For learners of English as a foreign language (EFL), speaking represents not only the ability to produce grammatically correct sentences but also the competence to communicate effectively with others.

Speaking is therefore more than a linguistic skill; it is also a pragmatic skill. Pragmatics is concerned with how language is used appropriately in context, how learners perform speech acts, negotiate meaning, maintain politeness, and manage interaction. As Leong and Ahmadi (2017) argue, speaking is both transactional (exchanging information) and interpersonal (building social relationships). These functions cannot be achieved without pragmatic competence. For example, learners need to know how to make requests politely, how to respond to disagreement without offending, or how to use fillers and turn-taking strategies in conversation.

In many EFL contexts, however, students struggle not only with vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation but also with the pragmatic aspects of communication. They may hesitate to speak for fear of making mistakes, worry about how their peers or teachers will perceive them, or remain silent to avoid miscommunication (Paakki, 2013; Abrar et al., 2018). Such behaviors reflect pragmatic difficulties: challenges in expressing intentions clearly, interpreting others' meanings, and maintaining social appropriateness.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Based on classroom observations and experiences while teaching at Faculty of Languages, Sebha University, many Libyan EFL learners continue to face challenges in speaking English fluently and confidently. These challenges include fear of correction, nervousness in public speaking, and a tendency to remain silent when communication breakdowns occur. While these problems are often described as linguistic or psychological, they also reveal a pragmatic gap: learners are not sufficiently trained to handle communication strategically, to negotiate meaning, or to use interactional norms effectively. With no attention pragmatics, learners risk focusing excessively on grammatical accuracy at the expense of communicative effectiveness. This can compromise their ability to participate in classroom discussions, collaborate with peers, and engage confidently in interactions beyond the classroom.

1.3 Research Question

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

Q1.What linguistic and psychological challenges do Libyan EFL learners face in speaking English in the classroom?

Q2.How do these challenges reflect limitations in pragmatic competence, particularly in areas such as turn-taking, politeness, and negotiation of meaning?

Q3.What instructional strategies can be suggested to enhance both the linguistic and pragmatic aspects of learners' oral communication?

1.4 Objectives of the Study

The study aims to:

1-Identify the linguistic and psychological challenges faced by Libyan EFL learners in speaking English.

2-Examine how these challenges reflect limitations in pragmatic competence, particularly in turn-taking, politeness, and negotiation of meaning.

3-Propose instructional strategies to enhance both the linguistic and pragmatic dimensions of classroom oral communication.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This research is significant for several reasons. First, it provides insight in encompassing both linguistic and pragmatic aspects. Second, it offers guidance to instructors on designing classroom activities that build not only vocabulary and grammar but also pragmatic skills, such as role-plays, group discussions, and intercultural communication tasks. Finally, it contributes to the growing body of research that emphasizes the importance of pragmatic competence in second language learning, preparing students to become not just grammatically accurate but also pragmatically effective communicators.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Speaking is widely recognized as one of the most crucial skills for second language learners, as it directly reflects their ability to communicate effectively. However, speaking competence goes beyond producing grammatically correct sentences; it also requires learners to use language appropriately in context. This contextual use of language falls under the domain of pragmatics, which examines how meaning is constructed, negotiated, and interpreted in social interaction. Understanding the challenges of speaking through a pragmatic lens provides a

more comprehensive perspective on why learners struggle and how instructional interventions can be designed to support them.

2.2 Speaking and Pragmatic Competence

Pragmatic competence refers to the ability to use language effectively and appropriately according to social and cultural norms (Kasper & Rose, 2002). It involves knowledge and use of speech acts (e.g., making requests, giving advice, apologizing), management of politeness strategies, and turn-taking in conversation. Leong and Ahmadi (2017) argue that speaking serves both transactional purposes, which involve exchanging information, and interpersonal purposes, which focus on relationship-building. Both dimensions require pragmatic awareness: transactional interactions depend on clarity and negotiation of meaning, while interpersonal communication relies on sensitivity to politeness norms and social expectations.

EFL learners often have limited exposure to authentic communication, which constrains their pragmatic development. Many learners place excessive emphasize on grammatical accuracy while underdeveloping strategies for handling miscommunication, hedging statements, or expressing disagreement politely. This imbalance helps explain why learners, despite having adequate vocabulary and grammar, frequently experience speaking anxiety or avoid oral participation altogether (Paakki, 2013).

2.3 Challenges Faced by EFL Learners in Speaking

Research has consistently highlighted the barriers EFL learners face, including psychological, linguistic, and contextual factors.

1-Lack of confidence and fear of mistakes: Learners often avoid speaking because they fear negative evaluation by peers or teachers (Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021). From a pragmatic perspective, this relates to face-threatening acts where communication risks damaging one's social image.

2-Limited vocabulary and fluency: Learners struggle to find appropriate expressions in context, which hinders both meaning-making and pragmatic effectiveness (Fitriani & Apriliaswati, 2015).

3-Anxiety and silence in communication breakdowns: Abrar et al. (2018) found that Indonesian learners often preferred silence to negotiating meaning indicating underdeveloped pragmatic strategies for repair and clarification.

4-Influence of cultural background: Geria (2022) notes that learners' reliance on their mother tongue affects their confidence and expression in English. Pragmatically, this reflects the challenge of transferring politeness norms and conversational conventions across cultures.

These challenges demonstrate that speaking difficulties are not limited to linguistic knowledge but extend to the pragmatic management of interaction.

2.4 Pragmatic Dimensions of Speaking Challenges

Several theoretical perspectives help frame these challenges in pragmatic terms:

1-Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969): Learners may know the grammar of a request but fail to phrase it in a socially acceptable way (e.g., "Give me your book" vs. "Could I borrow your book?").

2-Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987): Fear of correction and peer judgment highlights learners' sensitivity to face needs. Their silence often reflects avoidance of face-threatening acts.

3-Interlanguage Pragmatics (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993): Learners develop a pragmatic system influenced by both their L1 and the target language. Miscommunication arises when learners transfer norms inappropriately.

4-Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978): Interaction is the key for pragmatic development. Without collaborative dialogue, learners cannot internalize the strategies needed to manage communication breakdowns.

Together, these frameworks underscore the interplay of linguistic, cognitive, and social factors in learners' pragmatic development, providing a foundation for designing targeted interventions to improve EFL speaking competence.

2.5 Review of Related Studies

Several studies have directly or indirectly examined the pragmatic dimensions of speaking difficulties among EFL learners. Ohata (2005) argued that Japanese learners often struggle with fear of negative evaluation and the social pressure of speaking, highlighting that these issues extend beyond grammar or vocabulary into pragmatic concerns of face-saving and interactional risk. Similarly, Park and Lee (2005) demonstrated that anxiety and self-confidence were closely tied to oral performance, reinforcing the idea that pragmatic factors such as self-presentation and sensitivity to peer judgment strongly shape communicative behavior. Liu and Jackson (2008) also observed that Chinese learners' unwillingness to communicate was frequently linked to worries about mistakes and judgment, both of which constrain learners' ability to negotiate meaning during real-time interaction.

From a pragmatic perspective, these difficulties reflect limited confidence in managing interactional strategies. For instance, learners often fail to use repair moves such as clarification requests, fillers, or paraphrasing, which are crucial for sustaining conversation (cf. Tanveer, 2007). Later studies support this trajectory: Paakki (2013) investigated Finnish and Japanese learners and found that speaking problems were tied

to both fear of mistakes and performance pressure, while Fitriani and Apriliaswati (2015) identified psychological challenges, anxiety and self-consciousness, as dominant barriers to oral performance, all of which connect to pragmatic concerns involving politeness, face-saving, and peer evaluation. Building on these findings, Abrar et al. (2018) emphasized that anxiety, insufficient vocabulary, and reluctance to practice are recurring themes that inhibit oral proficiency. Their study also highlighted that many learners lack pragmatic strategies necessary for sustaining interaction, such as asking for clarification, using fillers to maintain conversational flow, or paraphrasing when lexical gaps arise.

Collectively, these studies suggest that speaking difficulties are not purely linguistic but also pragmatic in nature, encompassing learners' ability to manage interaction and maintain communicative effectiveness.

Recent research continues to reinforce the interplay between pragmatic and socio-psychological factors in speaking. Hammouri and Al-Momani (2025), for example, examined 160 Jordanian learners' production of various speech acts (e.g., requests, suggestions, threats, farewells) and reported frequent pragmatic failures, particularly in situations requiring sociocultural sensitivity and politeness awareness. Similarly, Al-Hozali (2024) demonstrated that pragmatic competence does not always align with general language proficiency: even students with high grammatical and lexical knowledge struggled with implicatures and implied meanings, underscoring the complex and distinct nature of pragmatic ability. Alsmari (2024) further highlighted the importance of task design in pragmatic development, showing that learners performed better when multimodal input (e.g., videos, images) was provided, suggesting that context-rich and varied materials enhance learners' comprehension and production of pragmatic forms.

Supporting evidence also comes from Iraq, where Hasan (2025) examined pragmatic challenges in politeness expressions among Iraqi EFL students. His study found that learners frequently misapplied norms related to requests, refusals, apologies, and expressions of gratitude due to cultural differences and insufficient pragmatic input, leading to pragmatic breakdowns in actual communication. In Indonesia, Ambawani, Astasari, and Rukiati (2025) highlighted how pragmatic competence interacts with psychological and pedagogical factors, noting that anxiety, large class sizes, and limited speaking opportunities exacerbate learners' difficulties and restrict oral proficiency development.

Taken together, these studies illustrate that pragmatic difficulties in speaking are multifaceted, emerging from a dynamic interaction of linguistic, cognitive, affective, and contextual factors. While existing research provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by EFL learners, little attention has been given to Libyan learners, creating an important space for further exploration.

Despite the growing body of research on pragmatic competence and speaking difficulties, several gaps remain. First, few studies have systematically examined how pragmatic difficulties manifest among Libyan EFL learners, a population with distinct linguistic and sociocultural influences. Second, much of the existing research emphasizes either general speaking anxiety or isolated aspects of pragmatics (e.g., requests or refusals), with limited attention to the interplay between linguistic, psychological, and pragmatic factors in real communicative performance. Finally, while task-based and technology-mediated interventions have shown promise in other contexts, there is still a lack of evidence on how structured, context-rich instruction can enhance both pragmatic awareness and oral confidence in under-researched regions.

2.6 Alignment with Previous Research

The present study aligns with a substantial body of previous research highlighting the role of pragmatic competence in overcoming speaking difficulties among EFL learners. Studies by Ohata (2005), Park and Lee (2005), and Liu and Jackson (2008) consistently demonstrate that anxiety, fear of mistakes, and self-consciousness are central barriers to oral communication, which are strongly connected to pragmatic concerns such as face-saving and interactional risk. Similarly, Paakki (2013), Fitriani & Apriliaswati (2015), and Abrar et al. (2018) reinforce that pragmatic strategies including clarification requests, politeness markers, and repair moves are crucial for sustaining conversation but often underdeveloped among learners. More recent work (e.g., Hammouri & Al-Momani, 2025; Al-Hozali, 2024) further confirms that pragmatic competence does not automatically accompany linguistic proficiency, and that explicit instruction is necessary. These findings collectively align with the current study's focus on the Libyan EFL context, where speaking difficulties are understood as both linguistic and pragmatic in nature, and where pedagogical interventions are needed to build learners' confidence and communicative effectiveness.

Addressing these gaps, the present study investigates how Libyan EFL learners experience and manage pragmatic challenges in speaking, aiming to provide insights that extend beyond linguistic deficits to the broader socio-pragmatic and affective dimensions of oral communication.

3 Material and methods

3.1 Research design

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative components to provide a comprehensive understanding of learners' speaking difficulties.

1. Quantitative descriptive design: A structured questionnaire was used to collect data on learners' perceptions of linguistic and pragmatic challenges. This allowed the identification common patterns in barriers to speaking, including vocabulary limitations, grammatical errors, and fear of miscommunication.

2. Performance-based observation: To complement self-reported data, learners' actual pragmatic performance was assessed through role-play and oral discourse completion tasks (ODCTs). This enabled the researcher to capture how learners negotiate meaning, employ politeness strategies, and manage interactional repair in real-time communicative contexts.

3.2 Participants

The study involved 50 EFL students enrolled in the Department of English at Sebha University. Participants included both male and female students randomly selected from different academic levels. All participants had several years of English study and were at an advanced stage of language learning, making them suitable for exploring persistent speaking and pragmatic difficulties despite extended exposure to English.

3.3 Instruments

Data were collected using three complementary instruments:

1. Questionnaire:

Linguistic items: Items assessing difficulties in vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, and fluency.

Pragmatic items: Items addressing fear of miscommunication, avoidance of interaction, anxiety, and peer sensitivity.

2. Oral Discourse Completion Tasks (ODCTs):

Participants completed a set of speaking tasks simulating real-life speech acts (requests, suggestions, refusals, apologies, and compliments).

Tasks were designed to evaluate pragmatic competence, including politeness strategies, interactional repair, and context-appropriate language use.

3. Observational Checklist:

During the ODCTs, learners' behaviors were observed for signs of engagement, hesitation, strategic repair (e.g., paraphrasing, clarification requests), and use of multimodal cues (gestures, intonation).

3.4 Instrumentation

The primary instrument for data collection was a questionnaire adapted and developed based on prior research on EFL speaking difficulties, pragmatic competence, and learner anxiety. The items were primarily adapted from the frameworks and findings of Paakki (2013), Fitriani and Apriliaswati (2015), Abrar et al. (2018), Kasper and Rose (2002), and Leong and Ahmadi (2017), and then modified to align with the local EFL context at Sebha University. The questionnaire consisted of two main sections:

1. Psychological challenges: Items measured learners' affective states related to speaking, including nervousness, fear of making mistakes, anxiety about peer evaluation, and reluctance to speak due to communication risks.

2. Pragmatic challenges: Items assessed learners' ability to use English appropriately in context, including politeness, negotiation of meaning, and the influence of L1 cultural norms on English interactions.

Respondents indicated their level of agreement using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). This adaptation ensured that the questionnaire captured both affective and pragmatic dimensions of speaking challenges, while remaining grounded in established research

3.5 Procedure

1. Participants completed the questionnaire to report their perceived linguistic and pragmatic challenges.

2. Students then engaged in role-play and ODCT sessions, conducted individually in a controlled classroom setting.

3. Observers recorded learners' strategies and performance using the checklist, with particular focus on interaction management, politeness, and negotiation of meaning.

4. Both quantitative (questionnaire responses, ODCT scores) and qualitative (observational notes) data were collected for subsequent analysis.

3.6 Summary

This study used a mixed-methods design to explore speaking challenges among Libyan EFL learners, incorporating both self-reported perceptions and observed performance. By combining questionnaires, ODCTs, and observational analysis, the methodology captures both learners' awareness of pragmatic difficulties and their actual ability to manage communication in authentic contexts. This dual approach addresses the identified

literature gap by providing empirical evidence on pragmatic competence in an under-researched context and offering insights into instructional strategies to enhance EFL speaking skills.

4 Results and discussion
4.1 Data analysis
Quantitative data: Questionnaire responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentages, frequencies) to identify the most common linguistic and pragmatic challenges. ODCT scores were analyzed to assess learners' actual pragmatic performance across various speech acts.

Qualitative data: Observational notes were analyzed thematically to identify patterns in learners' interaction strategies, repair behaviors, and responses to pragmatic challenges. Integration of findings: Quantitative and qualitative results were triangulated to provide a comprehensive understanding of learners' speaking difficulties and pragmatic competence.

4.2 Linguistic challenges (questionnaire results)
Learners reported varying degrees of difficulty with core linguistic features of English speaking. Table 4.1 shows the percentage distribution across the five-point Likert scale.

Table 4.1. Reported linguistic challenges

Item	Statement	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	Mean	S.D
1	I find it difficult to recall the right vocabulary during conversation	6%	12%	40%	28%	14%	3.32	1.05
2	I struggle with grammar accuracy when speaking	4%	10%	36%	32%	18%	3.42	1.03
3	I hesitate because I am unsure about correct sentence structure	4%	10%	36%	32%	18%	3.42	1.03
4	I have difficulty pronouncing words clearly	10%	20%	38%	22%	10%	3.12	1.1
5	I often pause or stop speaking because I lack fluency.	6%	14%	32%	30%	18%	3.44	1.11

Analysis of the questionnaire
1. Overall difficulty level
The mean scores ranged from 3.12 to 3.44, indicating that learners experience moderate difficulty across all five linguistic areas. Scores above 3 suggest that, on average, learners sometimes to often encounter challenges with vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, pronunciation, and fluency.

2. Vocabulary retrieval
Item 1 (Mean = 3.32) demonstrates that recalling appropriate vocabulary is a notable challenge for learners, consistent with findings in EFL contexts where lexical access in real-time communication is often difficult.

3. Grammar and sentence structure
Items 2 and 3 both had means of 3.42, highlighting frequent struggles with grammar and correct sentence construction. This suggests that even advanced learners may make errors in complex sentence forms, which can affect overall clarity.

4. Pronunciation
Item 4 had the lowest mean (3.12), indicating that pronunciation is slightly less challenging than vocabulary and grammar but still presents moderate difficulty. The relatively high standard deviation (1.11) reflects variability among learners, with some experiencing significant pronunciation difficulties while others are more confident.

5. Fluency
Item 5 (Mean = 3.44) indicates that hesitation and pausing due to fluency issues are common. This aligns with the high cognitive load that learners face when attempting to produce grammatically and pragmatically appropriate speech simultaneously.

6. Variability among learners
Standard deviations ranged from 1.03 to 1.11, showing moderate variation in responses. Some learners consistently experience difficulties, whereas others perform better, indicating heterogeneous skill levels within the sample.

Summary of results
The results confirm that linguistic difficulties constitute a significant component of the broader challenges EFL learners face in speaking. Vocabulary retrieval, grammar, sentence structure, and fluency pose moderate difficulties, whereas pronunciation is somewhat less problematic but still present. These findings complement the subsequent analysis of pragmatic and psychological challenges, offering a holistic view of the multifaceted barriers to oral proficiency.

4.3 Psychological and pragmatic challenges (questionnaire results)
The questionnaire measured learners' psychological barriers and pragmatic difficulties in speaking English. Items focused on anxiety, fear of mistakes, peer evaluation, cultural transfer, and challenges in managing interaction. Table 4.2 presents the percentage distribution of responses across the five-point Likert scale.

Table 4.2. Reported Psychological and Pragmatic Challenges

Item	Statement	1	2	3	4	5	Mean	S.D
1	feel nervous when speaking English in front of others	8%	14%	24%	32%	22%	3.52	1.14
2	I avoid speaking English for fear of making mistakes	10%	12%	28%	30%	20%	3.38	1.16
3	I prefer silence to risking miscommunication.	12%	16%	26%	28%	18%	3.22	1.19
4	I worry about how my peers will react if I make an error	6%	14%	30%	34%	16%	3.46	1.07
5	I feel anxious about being misunderstood in English conversations.	8%	18%	22%	28%	24%	3.44	1.18
6	I find it difficult to respond politely in English (e.g., making requests, refusals, apologies).	10%	20%	26%	28%	16%	3.26	1.16
7	I hesitate when I need to negotiate meaning (e.g., clarifying, correcting, or repairing communication).	12%	16%	30%	28%	14%	3.18	1.17
8	I sometimes transfer cultural norms from Arabic into English and feel it causes misunderstanding.	14%	20%	24%	26%	16%	3.10	1.19

Analysis of the questionnaire
1. Overall difficulty level
Mean scores ranged from 3.10 to 3.52, suggesting that learners generally experience moderate psychological and pragmatic challenges. Scores above 3 indicate that learners "sometimes" to "often" encounter anxiety, hesitation, or pragmatic difficulties when speaking English.

2. Nervousness and fear of mistakes
Item 1 (Mean = 3.52) shows that learners frequently feel nervous during speaking tasks, aligning with the literature on affective factors affecting pragmatic performance (Paakki, 2013; Fitriani & Apriliaswati, 2015). Item 2 (Mean = 3.38) reflects avoidance behaviors due to fear of errors, confirming that anxiety directly influences learners' willingness to speak.

3. Preference for silence
Item 3 (Mean = 3.22) demonstrates that some learners choose silence over risking miscommunication, illustrating the pragmatic concern of face-saving in EFL speaking.

4. Peer evaluation and misunderstanding
Items 4 and 5 (Mean = 3.46 and 3.44) reveal that learners are highly sensitive to peer reactions and fear being misunderstood, highlighting the role of social and contextual pressures in speaking performance.

5. Politeness and negotiation of meaning

Items 6 and 7 (Mean = 3.26 and 3.18) indicate that learners find it moderately challenging to respond politely or manage interactional repair. These findings confirm that pragmatic competence does not automatically follow general linguistic knowledge (Al-Hozali, 2024).

6. Cultural transfer

Item 8 (Mean = 3.10) shows that learners occasionally transfer cultural norms from L1 to L2, causing pragmatic misunderstandings. This aligns with Interlanguage Pragmatics theory (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993).

7. Variability among learners

Standard deviations (SD = 1.07–1.19) reflect moderate individual differences, showing that some learners are more confident and pragmatically competent than others.

4.4 Pragmatic Performance in ODCTs

The ODCTs measured learners' ability to perform speech acts appropriately in context. Each Oral Discourse Completion Task (ODCT) response was rated using an analytic rubric across three dimensions: Pragmatic Appropriateness, Politeness Strategy, and Interactional Management (see Table 4.2).

Table 4.3. ODCT analytic scoring rubric

Criterion	Excellent (4)	Good (3)	Fair (2)	Poor (1)	No Attempt (0)
Pragmatic Appropriateness	Utterance fully matches the context; correct speech act type and form.	Mostly appropriate, minor contextual mismatch.	Limited contextual fit; speech act partially realized.	Largely inappropriate; meaning unclear or mismatched.	No response or irrelevant utterance.
Politeness Strategy	Consistently applies effective politeness strategies (hedges, mitigation, indirectness).	Uses politeness markers but not always consistent.	Minimal politeness; tends toward directness.	Inappropriate or impolite form.	No evidence of politeness strategy.
Interactional Management	Skillfully maintains flow (fillers, clarification requests, self-repair, paraphrasing).	Some use of interactional devices, minor breakdowns.	Limited strategies; frequent breakdowns.	No attempt to sustain interaction.	No response given.

Scoring scale: Maximum = 12 points per speech act (3 criteria × 4 points). Five speech acts = 60 points total. Examples by Speech Act.

1. Request

Prompt: You are late for class and need to borrow your friend's notes. What do you say?
Excellent (4): "I'm really sorry I missed class today. Could I please borrow your notes and return them tomorrow?" (Appropriate, polite, clear interactional management)
Poor (1): "Give me your notes." (Impolite, no mitigation, inappropriate register)

2. Refusal

Prompt: A classmate asks you to help with homework, but you are too busy.
Excellent (4): "I'd love to help, but I have a deadline today. Maybe tomorrow we can go over it together?" (Polite refusal + alternative)
Poor (1): "No, I can't." (Direct, face-threatening, lacks politeness)

3. Apology

Prompt: You accidentally step on someone's foot in a crowded hallway.
Excellent (4): "Oh, I'm so sorry! I didn't see you there. Are you okay?" (Expresses regret and concern)
Poor (1): "Oops." (Minimal, lacks apology force)

4. Compliment

Prompt: Your classmate gives a successful presentation.
Excellent (4): "That was a really well-organized presentation. I especially liked how you explained the examples." (Specific praise, supportive)
Poor (1): "Good." (Minimal, vague, socially weak compliment)

5. Suggestion

Prompt: Your group project is behind schedule. Suggest a way to catch up.

Excellent (4): "Why don't we meet an extra day this week to finish the draft? That way we'll be on track." (Collaborative, polite suggestion)

Poor (1): "Do it faster." (Rude, unhelpful, ineffective suggestion)

Scoring Illustration

For example, Learner A scored: Request = 9/12, Refusal = 7/12, Apology = 10/12, Compliment = 11/12, Suggestion = 8/12. The total of 45/60 (75%) was interpreted as high pragmatic competence.

To better understand learners' pragmatic performance across different speech acts, the mean scores, standard deviations, and adequacy percentages were calculated for each ODCT category. Table 4.4 summarizes these descriptive statistics, providing a comparative overview of learners' strengths and weaknesses in performing requests, refusals, apologies, compliments, and suggestions.

Scoring illustration and ODCT results

For example, Learner A scored as follows: Request = 9/12, Refusal = 7/12, Apology = 10/12, Compliment = 11/12, Suggestion = 8/12. The total score of 45/60 (75%) was interpreted as indicating high pragmatic competence.

To better understand learners' pragmatic performance across different speech acts, the mean scores, standard deviations, and adequacy percentages were calculated for each ODCT category. Table 4.4 summarizes these descriptive statistics, providing a comparative overview of learners' strengths and weaknesses in performing requests, refusals, apologies, compliments, and suggestions. These results directly address the research question, which examined whether learners' pragmatic performance varied across different types of speech acts.

Table 4.4. ODCT Pragmatic Performance

Speech Act	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Percentage
Requests	13.8	2.1	56%
Refusals	12.5	2.5	48%
Apologies	14.2	1.9	62%
Compliments	14.2	1.7	68%
Suggestions	12.9	2.3	52%

As shown in Table 4.4, learners performed most successfully on compliments and apologies, while refusals proved the most challenging. To determine whether these differences were statistically significant, a repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted in SPSS.

Learners demonstrated relative strength in compliments (68% adequate) and apologies (62%), whereas refusals were the most difficult (48% adequate). The repeated-measures ANOVA confirmed significant differences across speech acts ($F(4, 96) = 8.72$, $p < .001$). Post hoc tests indicated that refusals were significantly weaker than compliments ($p < .01$) and apologies ($p < .05$).

Taken together, these findings suggest that while learners exhibited competence in producing compliments and apologies, they struggled to perform refusals appropriately, highlighting the uneven development of pragmatic competence across different speech acts.

4.5 Observation findings

Observation during the ODCTs provided qualitative insights into learners' interactional strategies. Thematic analysis revealed three recurring patterns:

1. Repair Strategies: Learners frequently employed self-repair (e.g., "I mean…") or appeals for help (e.g., "How do I say…?"), indicating pragmatic awareness but limited linguistic resources.

2. Hesitation and Silence: Anxiety manifested through long pauses, avoidance of elaboration, and reliance on minimal responses.

3. Cultural Transfer: Arabic politeness norms, such as over-apologizing or indirect refusals, often influenced learners' responses, occasionally resulting in pragmatic misfits in English.

4.6 Integrated analysis

The triangulated findings indicate that psychological factors (e.g., anxiety, fear of mistakes) amplify linguistic limitations (e.g., grammar, vocabulary, fluency), which in turn constrain pragmatic performance in speech acts. While learners demonstrated relative competence in compliments and apologies, they struggled with refusals and negotiation of meaning areas where politeness conventions differ between Arabic and English. Observations confirmed that hesitation and repair strategies functioned as coping mechanisms, reflecting both affective and pragmatic dimensions of speaking challenges.

These integrated observations provide a foundation for examining the quantitative data in greater detail, particularly regarding how learners' linguistic, psychological, and pragmatic challenges manifest across questionnaire responses and ODCT scores.

4.7 Summary

The results confirm that psychological and pragmatic challenges are closely intertwined. Anxiety, fear of errors, and concern about peer evaluation limit learners' engagement, while difficulties with politeness strategies, negotiation, and cultural transfer hinder pragmatic performance. These findings complement the linguistic results and align with ODCT performance data, highlighting the multidimensional nature of speaking difficulties among Libyan EFL learners.

5 Conclusion and recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study concludes that speaking challenges among EFL learners cannot be understood solely as linguistic deficits. Rather, they reflect a dual problem: insufficient command of linguistic forms and underdeveloped pragmatic strategies. Learners often avoid speaking because they do not know how to manage miscommunication, maintain politeness, or negotiate meaning. This pragmatic gap leads to silence, anxiety, and lack of confidence, even when students have adequate vocabulary and grammar knowledge.

Therefore, improving speaking skills requires an integrated approach that develops both accuracy and appropriateness, combining grammar and vocabulary instruction with pragmatic strategies such as turn-taking, speech acts, politeness, and repair.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Integrate pragmatic instruction

Teachers should explicitly teach speech acts (e.g., requests, refusals, apologies) and politeness strategies, helping learners understand not just what to say, but how and when to say it appropriately.

2. Interactive speaking activities

Classroom tasks should include role-plays, debates, and group discussions that simulate real-life communicative contexts. These activities reduce fear of mistakes and provide practice in pragmatic strategies such as clarification, hedging, and turn management.

3. Confidence-building approaches

Encourage risk-taking by emphasizing meaning over accuracy. Teachers can provide constructive feedback that values communication effectiveness rather than solely grammatical correctness.

4. Cultural and intercultural awareness

Since pragmatic norms differ across cultures, learners should be exposed to examples of how English speakers manage politeness, disagreement, and small talk. Intercultural pragmatic training can help bridge gaps between students' L1 norms and English communication norms.

5. Vocabulary and fluency support

Organize workshops that focus on expanding learners' lexical resources and practicing spontaneous speaking. This supports both linguistic and pragmatic development by enabling learners to select contextually appropriate expressions.

5.3 Suggestions for further research

Future studies could investigate how explicit instruction in pragmatics impacts learners' speaking confidence over time. Longitudinal research could trace the development of pragmatic competence among EFL learners. Additionally, future research could explore intercultural pragmatic awareness by comparing how learners use English across different social and cultural contexts.

5.4 Summary

This study highlights that English-speaking challenges among EFL learners are best understood as both linguistic and pragmatic. Addressing only grammar and vocabulary is insufficient; learners must also be equipped with the pragmatic tools to communicate confidently, appropriately, and effectively. By adopting teaching practices that integrate pragmatic instruction with linguistic training, educators can help learners move from hesitant, form-focused speakers to competent communicators in diverse contexts.

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Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Appendix I

Linguistic challenges questionnaire

Item	Statement	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
1	I find it difficult to recall the right vocabulary during conversation					
2	I struggle with grammar accuracy when speaking					
3	I hesitate because I am unsure about correct sentence structure					
4	I have difficulty pronouncing words clearly					
5	I often pause or stop speaking because I lack fluency.					

Appendix II

Psychological and Pragmatic Challenges questionnaire

A five-point Likert scale was used for all questionnaire items, ranging from:

    1 = Strongly Disagree
    2 = Disagree
    3 = Neutral
    4 = Agree
    5 = Strongly Agree

Item	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
1	feel nervous when speaking English in front of others					
2	I avoid speaking English for fear of making mistakes					
3	I prefer silence to risking miscommunication.					
4	I worry about how my peers will react if I make an error					
5	I feel anxious about being misunderstood in English conversations.					
6	I find it difficult to respond politely in English (e.g., making requests, refusals, apologies).					
7	I hesitate when I need to negotiate meaning (e.g., clarifying, correcting, or repairing communication).					
8	I sometimes transfer cultural norms from Arabic into English and feel it causes misunderstanding.					

Appendix III

ODCT analytic scoring rubric

Criterion	Excellent (4)	Good (3)	Fair (2)	Poor (1)	No Attempt (0)
Pragmatic Appropriateness	Utterance fully matches the context; correct speech act type and form.	Mostly appropriate, minor contextual mismatch.	Limited contextual fit; speech act partially realized.	Largely inappropriate; meaning unclear or mismatched.	No response or irrelevant utterance.
Politeness Strategy	Consistently applies effective politeness strategies (hedges, mitigation, indirectness).	Uses politeness markers but not always consistent.	Minimal politeness; tends toward directness.	Inappropriate or impolite form.	No evidence of politeness strategy.
Interactional Management	Skillfully maintains flow (fillers, clarification requests, self-repair, paraphrasing).	Some use of interactional devices, minor breakdowns.	Limited strategies; frequent breakdowns.	No attempt to sustain interaction.	No response given.