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Advancing L2 Pragmatic Competence Research: Theoretical, Methodological, and Empirical Perspectives

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Abstract

Second language (L2) pragmatic competence has become a central construct in second language acquisition (SLA), yet conceptual fragmentation, methodological trade-offs, and incomplete understanding of developmental processes persist. This review synthesizes theoretical, methodological, and empirical research to clarify how the construct has been conceptualized, investigated, and developed. Theoretically, it traces a shift from appropriateness-oriented accounts centered on sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge toward Taguchi's (2019) tripartite framework, which encompasses linguistic and sociocultural knowledge, interactional abilities to use knowledge flexibly and adaptively, and agency in deciding whether to implement L2 pragmatic norms. Methodologically, it examines non-empirical and empirical approaches: discourse completion tasks (DCTs), role-playing, and verbal reports. DCTs offer efficiency and interrater reliability but preclude spontaneous interaction and meaning negotiation; role-plays capture interactional and linguistic resource use but impose logistical demands and role interference; verbal reports access cognitive processes but are retrospective and memory-dependent. Empirically, the review addresses three areas. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that pragmatic instruction has a large positive effect (g = 1.656), with explicit instruction, longer treatments, and foreign-language settings associated with larger gains. Individual difference research shows that working memory and motivation facilitate pragmatic gains, whereas anxiety constrains achievement by taxing cognitive resources. Technology-enhanced learning through digital games, virtual reality, social networking sites, and artificial intelligence expands multimodal, simulated, and interactionally consequential practice. Future research should prioritize longitudinal, process-oriented designs aligned with complex dynamic systems theory; individual differences as moderators of instructional effectiveness; and technology-enhanced multimodal learning using process-sensitive, ecologically valid designs. The review offers implications for theory, methodology, and pedagogy.

Keywords: *Empirical Findings, Approaches, Pragmatic Competence, Second Language Acquisition, Theoretical Review*

A. Introduction

Second language (L2) pragmatic competence—the ability to interpret and use language appropriately across social, cultural, and interactional circumstances—has become a central construct in second language acquisition (SLA) (Laughlin et al., 2015; Taguchi & Roever, 2017). Yet the empirical record presents a phenomenon that is difficult to reconcile with linear accounts of pragmatic development. Although instructed pragmatics research has accumulated meta-analytic evidence of a large positive instructional effect (g = 1.656), this aggregate figure masks substantial heterogeneity: explicit instruction does not reliably outperform implicit instruction, and gains are uneven across contexts and learner populations (Yousefi & Nassaji, 2023). More

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strikingly, systematic reviews report that EFL learners' overall pragmatic competence remains low even after years of formal instruction, whereas ESL learners show comparatively higher attainment—a gap that proficiency alone does not explain (Wang et al., 2024). Equally puzzling, recent experimental work on scalar implicature has found no evidence that competent L2 learners differ from L1 users when tasks are graded rather than binary, suggesting that some documented "pragmatic deficits" may be artifacts of measurement rather than properties of learners' competence (Schulz & Wonnacott, 2024). These findings collectively indicate that the field lacks a coherent account of why pragmatic competence develops unevenly, for whom, and under what conditions.

This explanatory gap is compounded by persistent limitations in the literature. First, theoretical conceptualizations have expanded from appropriateness-oriented accounts toward multidimensional frameworks encompassing knowledge, interactional ability, and agency (Taguchi, 2019), but empirical work has not kept pace with these theoretical advances: most studies continue to operationalize pragmatic competence through a narrow set of speech acts measured at a single point in time. Second, methodological syntheses document recurring weaknesses—experimental designs without control or comparison groups, an absence of delayed post-tests, and limited reporting of reliability, statistical assumptions, and effect sizes—which constrain the inferences that can be drawn about development and instructional effectiveness (Laughlin et al., 2015; Yousefi & Nassaji, 2023). Third, although individual difference research has identified working memory and motivation as facilitative and anxiety as constraining, these factors are rarely integrated into models of instructional response, leaving unanswered the question of who benefits most from pragmatic instruction (Taguchi, 2019). Fourth, technology-enhanced pragmatics research has expanded rapidly across digital games, virtual environments, and artificial intelligence applications, yet this literature remains largely descriptive, relying on outcome measures that cannot capture the process-sensitive and interactionally consequential nature of multimodal pragmatic practice (González-Lloret, 2024; Taguchi, 2024). The result is a body of scholarship in which theoretical, methodological, and empirical strands have developed in parallel rather than in productive dialogue.

This review responds to these limitations by offering an integrated synthesis that connects conceptual, methodological, and empirical advances in L2 pragmatic competence research. Rather than treating theory, method, and evidence as separate domains, the review examines how shifts in the conceptualization of the construct—particularly the move toward adaptive, agentive, and interactionally grounded accounts (Taguchi, 2019; Taguchi & Barón, 2024)—carry implications for how the construct is measured and for what counts as evidence of development. It critically appraises the affordances and constraints of the dominant data-elicitation tools (discourse completion tasks, role-playing, and verbal reports) and situates meta-analytic and individual-difference findings within a developmental, process-oriented frame (Laughlin et al., 2015; Yousefi & Nassaji, 2023).

The review focuses on three interrelated questions. First, how has L2 pragmatic competence been theorized, and what dimensions of the construct remain undertheorized or inconsistently operationalized (Ren, 2015; Taguchi, 2019)? Second, what do methodological choices reveal about the construct validity of prevailing research designs, and where do they systematically limit developmental inference (Laughlin et al., 2015)? Third, what does the empirical evidence indicate about the conditions under which pragmatic competence develops—through instruction, learner-internal factors, and technology-mediated practice—and what directions follow for a more cumulative research agenda (Taguchi, 2024; Wang et al., 2024; Yousefi & Nassaji, 2023)?

This integrative approach is important for three reasons. Theoretically, it clarifies the relationship between declarative pragmatic knowledge and procedural ability in spontaneous interaction, addressing a distinction that has been recognized but insufficiently examined (Ren & Han, 2016; Taguchi, 2019). Methodologically, it identifies where current designs cannot answer the questions the field now asks—particularly about change over time, learner responsiveness, and multimodal interaction—and proposes design principles aligned with complex dynamic systems perspectives (Laughlin et al., 2015; Taguchi & Barón, 2024). Pedagogically, it moves beyond the question of whether pragmatics can be taught toward the more consequential question of how instructional effectiveness varies as a function of learner characteristics, treatment features, and technological mediation, thereby informing differentiated and ecologically valid practice (González-Lloret, 2024; Taguchi, 2024; Yousefi & Nassaji, 2023). By integrating these perspectives, the review provides a critical account of the current state of L2 pragmatic competence research and a roadmap for future inquiry that is theoretically coherent, methodologically rigorous, and pedagogically actionable.

B. Methods

This study employed an integrative critical review design informed by a qualitative–interpretive approach. This design was adopted because the purpose of the review was not merely to summarize findings but to connect and critically evaluate three bodies of literature that have largely developed in parallel: theoretical conceptualizations, methodological choices, and empirical evidence concerning second language (L2) pragmatic competence. An integrative review permits the synthesis of diverse theoretical, methodological, and empirical sources—including conceptual papers, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, experimental studies, correlational studies, longitudinal studies, and technology-mediated studies—without restricting the review to a single design or data type. The critical dimension of the design was used to assess the coherence among the construct as theorized, the construct as operationalized, and the inferences drawn from data. The review did not conduct a new meta-analysis; meta-analytic findings are treated as secondary evidence that contextualizes empirical patterns rather than as the product of primary statistical analysis.

The review procedure comprised five stages. First, the focus and review questions were specified across three dimensions: how L2 pragmatic competence has been theorized, how the construct has been investigated methodologically, and what is known empirically about instruction, individual differences, and technology-enhanced pragmatic learning. Second, literature searches were conducted in reputable databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar, using combinations of keywords such as L2 pragmatic competence, pragmatic development, pragmatics instruction, discourse completion task, role-play, verbal report, individual differences, and technology-enhanced pragmatics. Third, titles and abstracts were screened against inclusion criteria: peer-reviewed, English-language articles; a focus on L2 pragmatics; coverage of relevant theoretical, methodological, or empirical dimensions; and publication within a timeframe sufficient to capture conceptual and methodological developments, with emphasis on recent publications. Exclusion criteria comprised studies focusing exclusively on L1 pragmatics, studies unrelated to L2 learning or use, and non-academic sources. Fourth, backward and forward snowballing was conducted through the reference lists and citations of key articles to supplement coverage. Fifth, full-text articles were read, eligibility was assessed, and reasons for exclusion were recorded transparently to maintain an audit trail.

The data for this review consisted of secondary data collected through structured documentary and literature-extraction techniques. Each article meeting the inclusion criteria was

entered into a data-extraction matrix that recorded bibliographic details, research aims and questions, theoretical framework, definition and operationalization of the pragmatic construct, research design, participants and context, data-elicitation instruments or techniques (e.g., DCTs, role-plays, verbal reports, natural interaction data, or digital data), analytical procedures, main findings, limitations, and theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical implications. For theoretical and methodological sources, the extraction focused on conceptual assumptions, construct dimensions, and arguments concerning the strengths and limitations of particular approaches. For empirical sources, extraction focused on evidence regarding instructional effectiveness, individual-difference factors, and technology-enhanced learning. The extraction process was conducted systematically and documented in a research worksheet for traceability, thereby enhancing the transparency and consistency of data collection.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic synthesis, qualitative content analysis, and constant comparison. The analytical process was both deductive and inductive: initial categories were derived from the review questions and relevant theoretical frameworks, while new categories were developed from patterns emerging in the literature. The first stage involved open coding of text segments relating to construct conceptualization, methodological choices, empirical findings, and research recommendations. The second stage involved grouping codes into analytical themes, such as the shift from appropriateness-oriented accounts to adaptation and agency, the tension between reliability and ecological validity in pragmatic instruments, and the conditions that moderate instructional effectiveness. The third stage involved a narrative synthesis that integrated these themes into a coherent argument concerning the development of the construct, methodological strengths and limitations, and directions for future research. Methodological quality was critically appraised by considering the fit between the design and the research questions, the adequacy of control conditions, the presence of delayed post-tests, the reporting of reliability and effect sizes, and the transparency of the analysis. To enhance the credibility of the findings, the review employed source triangulation across theoretical, methodological, and empirical literature, maintained an audit trail, and cross-checked themes. Because the review relied exclusively on published secondary data, ethical approval from a human-research ethics committee was not required.

C. Results and Discussion

Conceptualizations of L2 Pragmatic Competence

What counts as L2 pragmatic competence has changed substantially as views of language competence itself have expanded. The development is not adequately captured as a simple movement from knowledge to performance. A more persistent question has been how knowledge of language relates to the capacity to use that knowledge appropriately, purposefully, and responsively in social interaction. This issue can already be traced to the competence–performance distinction proposed by Chomsky (1965), in which linguistic competence was primarily associated with speakers' knowledge of language's formal properties. Although socially situated language use remained largely outside that formulation, the distinction provided an important point of departure for later debates over what it means to know and use a language.

The status of pragmatic knowledge became more explicit during the following decade. Chomsky (1980) distinguished grammatical competence from pragmatic competence, associating the latter with knowledge of the conditions under which linguistic resources can be used appropriately to accomplish particular purposes. Yet defining such knowledge did not resolve the more difficult question of how it becomes available in actual communication. Bialystok and Sharwood Smith (1985) approached it in terms of the relationship between

linguistic knowledge and the control processes required to access that knowledge in real time. These accounts are important less because they offer a single definition of pragmatic competence than because they expose a tension that continues to shape the field: pragmatic competence concerns what language users know, but it cannot be adequately explained without considering how that knowledge is mobilized under contextual and processing constraints.

Models of communicative competence subsequently gave pragmatics a more explicit structural position. In Canale's (1983) framework, sociolinguistic competence concerns whether meanings and linguistic forms are appropriate to contextual variables such as participant relations, communicative purposes, and norms of interaction. Bachman (1990) reorganized these relations by treating pragmatic competence as a broader domain consisting of illocutionary and sociolinguistic competence. Pragmatic ability, on this account, links knowledge of communicative functions with sensitivity to the social conditions governing their realization. Although the terminology and hierarchical relations differ across these models, both contributed to an important conceptual shift: appropriateness was no longer treated as an incidental feature of language performance but as an integral part of communicative language ability.

This orientation became particularly influential in interlanguage pragmatics, where the analytical focus shifted toward learners' interpretation and realization of communicative intentions. Thomas (1983) conceptualized pragmatic competence as the effective use of language for communicative purposes, along with an understanding of language in context. Pragmatic competence, from this perspective, depends on knowledge of possible form–function relationships, but also on sensitivity to the circumstances under which particular choices become socially meaningful. Taguchi (2012) further articulated this relationship by distinguishing between pragmatic knowledge and the ability to use it in communication. Competence thus increasingly came to be understood neither as a static repository of sociocultural conventions nor as observable performance alone, but as the capacity to align knowledge and use under situated conditions.

More recent work has pushed this conceptualization beyond an understanding of appropriateness as conformity to established norms. Taguchi (2019), for instance, presents pragmatic competence as a multidimensional construct involving linguistic and sociocultural knowledge of form–context relationships, interactional abilities for deploying such knowledge flexibly as contexts change, and agency in deciding whether and how locally available pragmatic conventions should be taken up. The inclusion of agency is especially consequential. It recognizes that L2 users do not simply reproduce community norms; they may adopt, negotiate, resist, or strategically depart from them in accordance with communicative goals and social identities. Pragmatic competence therefore becomes not only context-sensitive but also adaptive and agentive.

Key Dimensions of L2 Pragmatic Competence

In terms of the dimensions of L2 pragmatic competence, several overlapping rather than mutually exclusive classifications have been proposed; one useful starting point is the distinction between knowledge of what linguistic resources can accomplish and knowledge of when those resources are socially appropriate. Bachman and Palmer (1996) capture this distinction in terms of functional and sociolinguistic knowledge. Functional knowledge relates linguistic forms to the communicative purposes they can serve, whereas sociolinguistic knowledge relates language use to features of the social setting. Much early work can therefore be understood in terms of form–function–context mappings: pragmatic competence requires knowledge of the linguistic choices available to realize a particular communicative intention, as well as the contextual conditions under which those choices become appropriate.

A closely related distinction emerged from Thomas's (1983) account of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failure. The former arises from difficulties in mapping linguistic resources onto intended pragmatic force; the latter reflects differences in judgments about the social conditions governing language use. Although Thomas formulated the distinction in terms of pragmatic failure rather than as a formal two-component model of competence, it became highly influential in later L2 pragmatics because it captures two recurrent requirements for successful pragmatic performance. Learners must have access to linguistic resources for accomplishing communicative actions, but they must also interpret social distance, power relations, degrees of imposition, rights and obligations, and other locally relevant expectations when selecting among those resources. A comparable distinction appears in Bachman's (1990) differentiation between illocutionary and sociolinguistic competence and, subsequently, in Bachman and Palmer's (1996) functional–sociolinguistic formulation. Across these accounts, the terminology varies, but the underlying relationship between linguistic choice and socially situated appropriateness remains remarkably persistent.

Pragmatic competence, however, extends beyond this basic pairing. Jung (2002) foregrounds five interrelated abilities: performing speech acts, conveying and interpreting nonliteral meanings, performing politeness functions, managing discourse functions, and drawing on cultural knowledge. The value of this formulation lies in making visible aspects of pragmatic ability that are easily obscured when analysis is confined to speech-act production. Understanding an implicature, maintaining interpersonal relations, organizing discourse, or interpreting culturally grounded meanings may all require pragmatic competence even when no discrete speech act is the primary object of analysis. Chen's (2009) four-dimensional framework similarly broadens the construct by distinguishing pragmalinguistic, sociopragmatic, pragmatic-cognitive, and discourse-organizational competence. Particularly noteworthy is its explicit inclusion of contextual inference and discourse organization, alongside the more established linguistic and sociocultural dimensions. These frameworks suggest that pragmatic competence operates across utterance-, discourse-, cognitive-, and sociocultural levels rather than within any single domain of language knowledge.

A different analytical distinction concerns whether pragmatic meanings are interpreted or produced. Ren (2015), for example, investigates pragmatic development through both receptive and productive competence. Reception requires learners to infer communicative intentions and recognize the pragmatic force and social meanings carried by contextually situated language. Production, by comparison, requires the selection and realization of linguistic resources that fit an intended action and its interactional circumstances. The distinction is useful precisely because the two do not necessarily develop in parallel: recognizing an implicature or evaluating an utterance as contextually appropriate is not equivalent to producing an appropriate response under communicative pressure. Receptive and productive competence are thus better understood as complementary manifestations of pragmatic ability than as separate stores of pragmatic knowledge.

The most consequential expansion of the construct has come from interaction-oriented perspectives. Earlier accounts could be read as implying that appropriate form–function–context associations exist in relatively stable form and are subsequently retrieved by individual speakers. Research in discursive pragmatics and L2 interactional competence challenges that assumption (Hall et al., 2011; Young, 2011). Interaction unfolds sequentially, and what counts as an appropriate next action depends partly on what other participants have just said or done. Meaning and appropriateness are therefore continually recalibrated as interlocutors take turns, initiate or shift topics, repair trouble, display alignment or resistance, and coordinate linguistic and embodied resources. From this perspective, pragmatic competence cannot be reduced to selecting a pre-existing expression for a pre-defined context. It also entails the capacity to

recognize how the context itself is being reshaped through interaction. Longitudinal work on L2 interactional competence reinforces this point by linking development to increasingly context-sensitive use of sequential and linguistic resources (Pekarek Doehler & Berger, 2018).

Adaptation consequently occupies a more central place in recent accounts of pragmatic competence. Taguchi and Barón (2024), for instance, examine learners' ability to modify pragmalinguistic strategies in response to different interlocutor reactions, treating such adjustment as evidence of pragmatic adaptation. Taguchi's (2019) broader formulation brings this development into a three-layered account encompassing linguistic and sociocultural knowledge, interactional ability, and agency. Knowledge provides access to possible form–context relationships; interactional ability enables the deployment of those resources flexibly as circumstances change; agency concerns whether learners choose to enact locally available pragmatic conventions at all. This last dimension matters because pragmatic competence should not be equated with automatic conformity to the norms of an imagined target-language community. Competent L2 users may follow a convention, negotiate it, strategically depart from it, or resist it while remaining aware of its social consequences.

Non-empirical Research Approaches

Non-empirical studies primarily adopt introspective and speculative methods (Zhang, Yang & Jiang, 2019). Introspective speculation is one of the earliest research approaches humans employed to understand the world, relying on the uniquely human capacities for rational thought and reasoning to uncover the internal connections and essential attributes of phenomena. For instance, Yang & Zapata-Rivera (2010) introduced a computer-assisted interactive system developed based on Long's Interaction Hypothesis and explained its operational mechanisms and applications in pragmatic instruction. Chang (2011) further elaborated on the interplay between pragmatic linguistic competence and sociopragmatic competence. Roever (2011) systematically reviewed research on pragmatic competence assessment, noting that tests such as DCTs assess discourse scenarios in isolation and overlook learners' pragmatic competence in extended discourse. As a result, it is crucial to emphasize learners' ability to understand and engage with both monologic and dialogic extended discourse in real-world communicative contexts in L2 pragmatic competence assessments. Bardovi-Harlig (2013) explored the conceptual depth of L2 pragmatics and proposed five valuable research directions: the design and evaluation of pragmatic tasks in simulated conversations; task design for explicit and implicit knowledge acquisition; measuring levels of pragmatic development; the intersection between lexical-grammatical development and pragmatic competence; and the influence of learning environments on pragmatic growth. Taguchi (2015) reviewed research on pragmatic development in study abroad, classroom-based, and online learning contexts. Later, Taguchi (2018) further reflected on research methodologies in L2 pragmatic competence, strongly advocating for longitudinal studies using mixed methods to better monitor the developmental process of pragmatic competence and generate more persuasive findings.

Empirical Research Approaches

Empirical research on L2 pragmatic competence typically employs three major approaches: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods, with quantitative approaches widely used in the field. Quantitative studies often collect data through techniques such as discourse completion tasks (DCTs) and role plays, followed by statistical analyses to identify general patterns and trends in the development of L2 pragmatic competence. Qualitative studies, on the other hand, use methods such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, audio and video recordings, online ethnography, and case studies to collect contextualized data and conduct detailed interpretive analyses. Mixed-methods research combines quantitative and qualitative approaches, enabling researchers to achieve a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding

of the complex process of L2 pragmatic development. Quantitative studies using relatively large samples are particularly useful for identifying general patterns in the development of learners' pragmatic abilities, whereas qualitative approaches, such as in-depth interviews and participant observation, can provide valuable insights into the factors underlying such development. The two approaches can therefore complement each other by revealing both general developmental tendencies and the individual or contextual factors associated with pragmatic development (Taguchi, 2018).

Research data in studies of L2 pragmatic competence can generally be categorized as naturally occurring and elicited data. Naturally occurring data are primarily collected through methods such as audio and video recordings and participant observation, often supplemented by diaries or blogs, interviews, and case studies. Elicited data, by contrast, are obtained through researcher-designed instruments and procedures such as surveys, DCTs, role plays, teaching experiments, and verbal reports.

Among these methods, the DCT is a widely used instrument for written or oral data collection in L2 pragmatic competence research. By presenting participants with specific communicative situations, such as requests, apologies, and refusals, DCTs require them to complete dialogues or provide contextually appropriate responses, thereby allowing researchers to analyze pragmatic strategy choices, cross-cultural differences, and pragmatic transfer. In quantitative research on L2 pragmatic competence, DCTs are among the most frequently used data collection instruments (Zhang et al., 2019). This method is characterized by efficiency and a relatively high degree of experimental control, enabling systematic comparisons of speech-act patterns among learners from different linguistic backgrounds and providing quantitative evidence for evaluating the effectiveness of pragmatic instruction. However, DCTs also have limitations regarding ecological validity, as participants may provide idealized responses rather than those they would produce in spontaneous interaction. In addition, simplified scenarios may fail to capture the dynamic nature of interaction, including nonverbal cues and contextually embedded meanings. Researchers have therefore adopted various strategies to improve the applicability and validity of DCTs. For instance, Rose (2009) illustrates the importance of aligning DCT design with the specific pragmatic knowledge or construct under investigation. Babai Shishavan and Sharifian (2013) supplemented DCT data with focus-group interviews to obtain additional information about the cultural schemas underlying participants' pragmatic choices. Other studies have combined DCTs with role-plays or naturalistic observation and refined scenario descriptions to reduce some of the method's limitations.

Role-playing is another commonly used method for collecting pragmatic data through simulated communicative situations in which participants assume specific roles based on predefined scenarios and complete interactive tasks. Its primary function is to reveal learners' strategic choices, linguistic forms, and pragmatic appropriateness in speech acts such as requests, refusals, and apologies, making it particularly useful for investigating cross-cultural pragmatic differences and features of pragmatic development (Kasper & Dahl, 1991). Role-playing is also frequently used as a supplementary tool to DCTs in studies of L2 pragmatic assessment and instruction (Zhang et al., 2019). Compared with written DCTs, one important advantage of role-playing is its greater interactional naturalness, as it allows participants to respond to an interlocutor in real time while maintaining a certain degree of control through standardized scenarios. Nevertheless, role-playing may still be influenced by participants' awareness of the experimental setting, interlocutor effects, and the simplification of communicative contexts (Yuan, 2001).

Moreover, verbal reports collect data on learners' pragmatic cognition, strategy use, and learning processes through their verbalized accounts. They are commonly used to explore

learners' understanding of pragmatic rules, interpretations of communicative intentions, and reflections on their own language production (Cohen, 2013). Verbal reports generally include two forms: think-aloud protocols and retrospective verbal reports (Gao & Ren, 2016). Think-aloud protocols require participants to report their thoughts while completing a task, providing relatively immediate access to task-related reasoning, although the verbalization process itself may affect the quality or efficiency of task performance. Retrospective verbal reports, by contrast, require participants to recall and explain their thought processes after completing a task. This method is less intrusive during task performance and can provide insights into reasoning that is not directly observable from learners' linguistic production; however, it may be affected by memory limitations, post-task reconstruction, or social desirability bias (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). Verbal reports are often combined with DCTs or role-plays to provide complementary evidence of learners' pragmatic decision-making. Woodfield (2010), for example, employed concurrent and retrospective verbal reports alongside a written DCT to examine the cognitive processes underlying learners' pragmatic choices in requests.

Effective Instruction for L2 Pragmatic Competence

Research on L2 pragmatic instruction has increasingly examined how different forms of pedagogical intervention contribute to learners' pragmatic development. A recurrent distinction in such research is between explicit and implicit instruction. Explicit instruction provides learners with direct information about pragmatic forms, functions, and conditions of use, whereas implicit instruction encourages learners to notice or infer pragmatic patterns with less overt metapragmatic explanation. Rather than constituting entirely separate approaches, these instructional orientations represent different degrees of pedagogical guidance.

Evidence from different instructional contexts generally supports the value of intervention in developing L2 pragmatic competence, although the relative effectiveness of specific approaches varies across studies. Evidence from Iranian learners of English indicated that explicit instruction could facilitate the development of request-related pragmatic competence (Rajabia et al., 2015). Not all findings, however, point toward a simple advantage for highly explicit or deductive instruction. Qi and Lai (2017), in a comparison of deductive and inductive approaches to pragmatic instruction among learners of Chinese as a second language, found a stronger effect for the inductive condition. This result is important because it suggests that effective pragmatic teaching cannot be reduced to a single instructional formula. Depending on the target pragmatic feature and instructional design, learners may benefit from both direct metapragmatic explanation and structured opportunities to notice and infer pragmatic regularities.

Factors Influencing L2 Pragmatic Competence

The development and performance of L2 pragmatic competence are associated with a range of instructional, contextual, and learner-related variables, particularly instructional conditions, learning conditions, task characteristics, and individual learner differences.

Pragmatic instruction represents a recurring topic. Previous studies have identified limited pragmatic instruction, insufficient pragmatic content in teaching materials, inadequate assessment practices, the absence of dedicated pragmatic curricula, insufficient guidance, and limited opportunities for pragmatic output as potential constraints on development. Ishihara and Cohen (2010) suggest that language instruction is an important factor in learners' development, while a substantial body of research has demonstrated the potential teachability of L2 pragmatic features and the effectiveness of different teaching strategies.

Learning conditions and task characteristics may also shape pragmatic performance. In a study of Korean students, Ahn (2007) examined the relationship between language proficiency

and the length of learning and reported that short-term learning had a substantial effect on proficiency development, whereas longer-term exposure had a comparatively smaller effect in that context. Zhu et al. (2025) investigated the combined effects of task complexity and L2 proficiency on Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic competence in responding to compliments. Simpler tasks facilitated the use of appropriate response strategies, whereas more complex tasks encouraged greater accuracy in pragmalinguistic forms. Lower-proficiency learners showed greater improvement in the appropriateness of response strategies, while higher-proficiency learners demonstrated stronger pragmalinguistic accuracy. These findings illustrate that pragmatic performance may vary depending on both learner proficiency and the processing demands imposed by a task.

Individual differences have received increasing attention as well. Zhu et al.'s (2025) study examines the impact of L2 proficiency on L2 pragmatic competence. Wen (2026) demonstrated the importance of pragmatics-specific motivation in an eight-month longitudinal study of Chinese learners studying in the UK. After controlling for baseline performance, motivation related specifically to contextual interpretation and accurate meaning conveyance emerged as the only significant motivational predictor of conversational implicature comprehension, whereas general L2 motivational orientations did not significantly predict developmental gains.

Technology-Enhanced L2 Pragmatic Learning

Technology has become an increasingly visible component of research on L2 pragmatic learning (González-Lloret, 2022). Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has received particularly extensive attention, alongside digital games, Virtual Reality (VR) and self-access websites.

CMC can broadly be understood as interpersonal communication mediated by computer technologies (Herring, 1996). In pragmatic learning, its value lies not merely in the technology itself, but in the forms of interaction the medium enables. Studies have used CMC primarily as an environment for direct communication. Such work has examined how technology-mediated interaction exposes learners to a range of interactional practices, including orthographic and emotive features (Maa & Taguchi, 2022), conversational sequencing (Abe & Roever, 2020), and social play (Lantz-Andersson, 2017). At the same time, the pragmatic affordances of CMC vary by modality. García-Gómez (2022), for example, showed that text-based interaction does not necessarily facilitate pragmatic learning when learners have limited access to verbal or contextual cues. This qualification is important because it indicates that opportunities for interaction alone do not guarantee pragmatic development.

Digital games constitute another strand of technology-enhanced pragmatic learning. Unlike conventional text-based communication, such environments can provide immersive, scenario-based contexts in which pragmatic choices are embedded in simulated or game-mediated social interaction. Tang and Taguchi (2021), for example, developed the Questaurant platform, which incorporates scenario-based tasks, animated character interactions, narrative progression, immediate feedback, and in-game rewards. Zhang (2023) investigated gameplay in the commercial massively multiplayer online role-playing game World of Warcraft. In this case, the game provided 105 L2 English learners with four weeks of spontaneous interaction with native speakers. The intervention was followed by lasting improvement in the production of appropriate compliment responses, illustrating the potential pragmatic value of interaction-rich game environments. Zhang (2026) later found that Chinese EFL learners who played World of Warcraft with American players for four weeks shifted from predominantly direct-suggestion strategies at pretest to more indirect strategies on both the immediate and one-month-delayed posttests.

Immersive VR provides a different set of affordances. Taguchi (2022) compared learner performance in VR with performance in text-based computer scenarios without visual input. Participants in the VR condition spoke more deliberately and employed a wider range of modifications. Interview data further indicated that audiovisual cues helped learners regulate their responses and increased emotional involvement. At the same time, immersive environments may place additional cognitive demands on learners, with possible consequences for speech fluency. The findings therefore point to both the contextual richness and the processing costs associated with immersive pragmatic practice.

Self-access websites have been used to provide learners with explicit pragmatic guidance and awareness-raising opportunities outside conventional classroom interaction. Dedicated websites have been developed for particular pragmatic functions in Chinese, including expressions of gratitude (Yang, 2024) and request strategies (Qi & Lai, 2017). Timpe-Laughlin et al. (2021) introduced the interactive platform Words at Work to develop L2 English learners' pragmatic sensitivity in professional workplace communication. Kerber et al. (2023) used the research-informed platform Dancing with World to support instruction in Spanish apology expressions.

Longitudinal and Process-Oriented Pragmatic Research

More research should be done to strengthen longitudinal and process-oriented investigation of L2 pragmatic development. Much empirical research has relied on cross-sectional comparisons or pretest–posttest designs, which are useful for identifying differences or instructional effects but offer only limited insight into how pragmatic competence develops over time. This limitation is particularly important given that pragmatic competence involves multiple dimensions, including linguistic and sociocultural knowledge, receptive and productive abilities, interactional resources, and adaptive use of language. These dimensions may develop at different rates and may not follow uniform trajectories. Some existing studies have begun to conduct longitudinal research (e.g., Wen, 2026).

Future studies could therefore integrate repeated pragmatic performance measures with qualitative evidence such as interviews, verbal reports, interactional data, or learner reflections. Such designs would make it possible to connect observable changes in performance with changes in learners' interpretations, strategic choices, and experiences. They could also examine receptive and productive development in parallel rather than assuming that gains in one necessarily correspond to gains in the other. More sustained longitudinal research would consequently provide a stronger basis for understanding pragmatic development as a dynamic process rather than a set of isolated learning outcomes.

Individual Differences in Pragmatic Research

The second direction concerns the role of individual learner differences and their interaction with contextual conditions. Research shows that pragmatic development is related to learner variables. Wen (2026) demonstrated that pragmatics-specific motivation predicted development in conversational implicature comprehension more effectively than broader L2 motivational orientations. Zhu et al. (2025) further showed that the effects of task complexity varied with learners' proficiency levels. Individual differences should not be treated as peripheral background variables in pragmatic research.

Future research should move beyond examining such variables in isolation and investigate how they interact with specific tasks, interlocutors, learning environments, and opportunities for language use. The same learner characteristic may not operate uniformly across contexts. For example, the contribution of proficiency may vary with task complexity, while motivational engagement may become more consequential when learners have sustained opportunities for

meaningful, pragmatic interaction. Research could therefore examine combinations of learner characteristics and contextual conditions rather than searching for single predictors of pragmatic success.

Technology-Enhanced and Multimodal Pragmatic Research

The third direction is about technology-enhanced and multimodal pragmatic learning. Existing research has demonstrated the pedagogical potential of CMC, digital games, virtual reality, and self-access websites. However, the central question for future research should not simply be whether technology improves pragmatic competence. Greater attention is needed to the specific affordances and constraints through which different technologies—including AI tools such as ChatGPT—shape pragmatic input, interaction, feedback, and adaptation.

Current evidence already suggests that technological environments are not pragmatically equivalent. García-Gómez (2022), for instance, showed that text-based interaction may restrict access to verbal and contextual cues, whereas Taguchi (2022) found that audiovisual information in virtual reality supported more deliberate pragmatic performance and a wider range of modifications, while also introducing additional processing demands. These findings indicate that technological richness may create new opportunities for contextualized learning, but it may also alter the interactional conditions under which pragmatic competence is displayed and developed.

Future studies should therefore systematically compare different technological modalities, including AI-powered conversational tools such as ChatGPT, and examine which features are most relevant to particular dimensions of pragmatic competence. Multimodal data, including linguistic, prosodic, visual, sequential, and possibly embodied aspects of interaction, may be especially useful for investigating pragmatic behavior in immersive and interaction-rich environments.

D. Conclusion

This review has examined L2 pragmatic competence from theoretical, methodological, and empirical perspectives in order to clarify how the construct has been conceptualized, investigated, and developed across different strands of research. The theoretical literature shows a gradual broadening of pragmatic competence from an emphasis on appropriate language use toward a more multidimensional understanding that incorporates linguistic and sociocultural knowledge, receptive and productive abilities, interactional resources, adaptation, and learner agency. In this sense, pragmatic competence is better understood not as a fixed body of context-specific knowledge, but as the capacity to interpret communicative intentions, mobilize available linguistic resources, and adjust language use in response to changing social and interactional conditions (Taguchi, 2019).

As for the methodological literature, DCTs, role plays, verbal reports, observations, interviews, and naturally occurring interaction each provide access to different aspects of pragmatic knowledge and performance. Although controlled elicitation methods remain useful for comparison and assessment, their limitations in representing spontaneous and sequential interaction highlight the importance of combining multiple sources of evidence. In particular, mixed-methods and longitudinal designs offer stronger possibilities for examining not only the outcomes of pragmatic development but also the processes through which change occurs over time (Taguchi, 2018).

The empirical literature indicates that L2 pragmatic development is shaped by the combined influence of instruction, learner characteristics, contextual conditions, and technology. Explicit

and implicit forms of instruction can both contribute to pragmatic learning, depending on the target feature and instructional design. At the same time, variables such as motivation, task complexity, and opportunities for interaction can influence how learners interpret and produce pragmatic meaning. Technology-mediated environments further extend opportunities for pragmatic exposure and practice, while also introducing new questions concerning contextual richness, interactional naturalness, multimodality, and the transfer of learning across settings.

Taken together, these findings suggest that future research could focus on longitudinal and process-oriented investigation, individual differences research, and technology-enhanced and multimodal pragmatic research. Furthermore, theoretical models need to account for the dynamic, interactional, and agentive nature of pragmatic competence; methodological approaches need to capture development across time, contexts, technologies, and modalities; and empirical research needs to examine how instructional, individual, and technological factors interact. Such research can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of L2 pragmatic competence and provide a stronger basis for the design of instruction, assessment, and learning environments that reflect the complexity of real-world communication.

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