Task-Based Assessment of Pragmatic Competence: A Moroccan EFL High School Perspective

Mohammed Bouknify*

Ibn Tofail University, Kenitra, Morocco

ABSTRACT

This study investigates Moroccan high school learners' pragmatic competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) through two diagnostic tools: The Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT) and the Multiple-Choice Discourse Completion Test (MDCT). Pragmatic competence, a critical dimension of communicative language ability, remains underrepresented in EFL assessment frameworks, particularly in North African contexts. Drawing on data from 108 learners, the research evaluates students' ability to perform various speech acts appropriately in context-sensitive scenarios. Results show significant gaps in learners' pragmatic awareness and performance, particularly in managing politeness, indirectness, and socio-cultural appropriateness. These findings underscore the need to integrate explicit pragmatics instruction and assessment into Moroccan EFL curricula. This article contributes to the growing body of empirical studies on interlanguage pragmatics and calls for a reconceptualization of language assessment practices in EFL classrooms.

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INTRODUCTION

In today's interconnected world, the ability to use English effectively and appropriately in real-life communication is not a mere advantage—it is a fundamental requirement, particularly for learners in expanding-circle contexts such as Morocco. While English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction in Moroccan high schools has traditionally prioritized grammar and vocabulary, it has often overlooked the critical component of pragmatic competence— the ability to use language in socially and culturally appropriate ways. This gap in instruction and assessment significantly hampers learners' communicative effectiveness and limits their capacity to engage successfully across cultural boundaries.

Pragmatic competence involves a nuanced set of skills, including the use of politeness strategies, the management of speech acts, and sensitivity to socio-cultural norms and expectations. Despite its recognized importance in second language acquisition (SLA), pragmatics remains underrepresented in both classroom practice and language assessment frameworks in Moroccan education. Although recent research highlights the benefits of assessing pragmatic

ability through authentic, context-based instruments such as Discourse Completion Tests (DCTs), these methods are rarely implemented in local classrooms.

This article presents an empirical investigation into the pragmatic performance of Moroccan high school EFL learners. Using two well-established diagnostic tools—the Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT) and the Multiple-Choice Discourse Completion Task (MDCT)—the study evaluates learners' ability to produce and recognize appropriate speech acts across a variety of everyday social scenarios. The aim is not only to assess learners' current levels of pragmatic proficiency but also to explore the broader implications for curriculum reform, assessment practices, and teacher professional development.

Given the multilingual and culturally diverse nature of Moroccan classrooms, the need for explicit and effective instruction in pragmatics is both timely and necessary. In an era where communicative competence is increasingly valued as a core educational outcome, understanding how learners navigate pragmatics in English is no longer a peripheral concern—it is central to meaningful language learning. The findings of this study are intended to inform educational policy, curriculum design, and pedagogical practice. While rooted in the Moroccan context, the study also offers insights relevant to other EFL environments across the Global South where similar linguistic, cultural, and instructional challenges are present.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pragmatic Competence in Second Language Acquisition

Pragmatic competence is widely recognized as a core component of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Bachman, 1990), referring to an individual's ability to use language effectively and appropriately in relation to specific social and cultural contexts. According to Kasper and Rose (2002), this competence comprises two interrelated dimensions: pragmalinguistic knowledge, which involves the linguistic resources and strategies used to convey meaning, and sociopragmatic knowledge, which relates to the social conventions and contextual variables that govern language use. In the

absence of pragmatic competence, language learners may produce grammatically correct utterances that nonetheless violate social norms, leading to miscommunication or interactional breakdowns.

Over the past two decades, the pedagogical importance of pragmatics has gained increasing recognition within second language acquisition research. Scholars such as Bardovi-Harlig (1999) and Taguchi (2009) have emphasized that the absence of pragmatic instruction can severely hinder learners' ability to communicate effectively. Despite this growing awareness, pragmatic competence remains underdeveloped in many EFL contexts, where instructional priorities continue to center on grammatical accuracy and lexical range. This imbalance has prompted numerous calls for a more comprehensive integration of pragmatics into both language teaching and assessment frameworks (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Roever, 2011).

More recently, scholars have advanced this discussion by highlighting the role of task-based, interactive methodologies in fostering pragmatic development. Taguchi (2019) and Roever (2021) advocate for pedagogical approaches that expose learners to authentic communicative input and encourage active engagement with socially situated language. These approaches aim to bridge the gap between recognition and production by embedding pragmatic instruction in meaningful, real-world tasks.

In addition, Ishihara and Cohen (2015) promote a culturally responsive model of pragmatics instruction, emphasizing the importance of metapragmatic awareness. Their framework encourages learners to reflect on and compare target-language norms with their own sociocultural expectations, thereby fostering a deeper, more context-sensitive understanding of appropriate language use.

Innovative teaching modalities have also emerged, particularly with the rise of digital learning environments. As noted by Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan (2020), tools such as virtual simulations and telecollaborative exchanges offer learners valuable opportunities to engage with pragmatic forms in dynamic, interactive contexts. These digital platforms are especially promising in EFL settings where access to native-speaker interaction may be limited.

Taken together, these theoretical and empirical contributions underscore the urgent need for pedagogical and curricular reform in EFL education, particularly in underrepresented regions such as Morocco. By adopting more holistic, context-sensitive approaches to pragmatic instruction, educators can better prepare learners for the complexities of real-world communication in English.

Assessing Pragmatic Competence: Tools and Challenges

The assessment of pragmatic competence is methodologically complex due to its context-dependent nature. Researchers have developed a variety of instruments to measure learners' ability to recognize and produce contextually appropriate utterances. Among the most widely used are the Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT) and the Multiple-Choice Discourse Completion Test (MDCT).

The WDCT presents learners with situational prompts and asks them to write appropriate responses, which allows for analysis of their productive pragmatic ability (Kasper & Dahl, 1991). Meanwhile, MDCTs test learners' receptive knowledge by presenting multiple options for each scenario, requiring them to select the most pragmatically appropriate one (Roever, 2006). Both methods have been validated in numerous interlanguage pragmatics studies for their reliability and applicability across cultural contexts (Taguchi, 2011).

Despite their usefulness, these tools have limitations. WDCTs can elicit idealized responses rather than natural language use, while MDCTs may encourage guessing and limit authentic production (Cohen, 2005). Nevertheless, their adaptability and practicality make them valuable instruments for large-scale EFL research.

Empirical Studies on L2 Pragmatics Assessment

A substantial body of empirical research has examined pragmatic competence among learners of English as a second or foreign language. For instance, Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) found that EFL learners often failed to notice pragmatic errors, prioritizing grammaticality over appropriateness. Taguchi (2008, 2011) demonstrated that pragmatic development is slow and requires explicit instruction and repeated exposure to varied social contexts. Studies by Roever (2006, 2011) further highlighted the role of proficiency, age, and learning context in learners' pragmatic development.

However, there remains a notable gap in research from North African or Arab-majority educational contexts. Few studies have explored pragmatic competence in Moroccan high schools, where curriculum reforms have increasingly emphasized communicative competence but have yet to systematically integrate pragmatic instruction or testing. This gap is significant given the sociolinguistic complexities of Moroccan classrooms, which are shaped by multilingualism, cultural diversity, and evolving educational priorities.

The Moroccan Context and Need for Localized Research

In Morocco, English is taught as a foreign language starting from middle school, with growing emphasis at the high school level. Yet, research indicates that pragmatic awareness among learners remains limited due to the predominance of form-focused instruction and lack of teacher training in pragmatics (Bouknify, 2025; Ouardani, 2021). Moreover, EFL textbooks used in Moroccan schools contain minimal explicit instruction in speech acts, politeness strategies, or sociocultural norms (Bouknify, 2025).

The present study builds on this foundation by addressing the empirical gap through the use of WDCT and MDCT instruments to assess learners' pragmatic competence. It is one of the first studies to apply these tools in Moroccan high schools, offering insights into learners' communicative readiness and the implications for pedagogical and curricular reforms.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in key theories of second language acquisition and communicative competence, with a particular focus on the role of pragmatic knowledge. The foundational model guiding this research is Canale and Swain's (1980) framework of communicative competence, which delineates four core components: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. Within this model, pragmatic competence is primarily situated in

the sociolinguistic and discourse domains, emphasizing the importance of contextual appropriateness and interactional meaning.

Further theoretical grounding is provided by Kasper and Rose's (2002) model of interlanguage pragmatics, which distinguishes between pragmalinguistic knowledge (the linguistic resources for conveying communicative acts) and sociopragmatic knowledge (the social norms and cultural expectations influencing language use). These dimensions form the analytic lens through which learners' performance is assessed in both the WDCT and MDCT instruments used in this study.

Additionally, the Noticing Hypothesis proposed by Schmidt (1993**)** informs the interpretation of results, particularly the observed gap between learners' receptive and productive pragmatic abilities. According to Schmidt, conscious attention to language forms and functions is essential for acquisition. In this context, the stronger MDCT scores suggest learners are more attuned to recognizing pragmatic norms than actively producing them, possibly due to limited instructional input and output opportunities.

By anchoring the study in these theoretical frameworks, the research design, analysis, and interpretation of findings are positioned within a robust scholarly discourse, enhancing both credibility and coherence.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design
This study adopts a quantitative descriptive research design to investigate the pragmatic competence of Moroccan high school learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). To ensure a comprehensive and multidimensional evaluation, two complementary assessment instruments were utilized: the Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT) and the Multiple-Choice Discourse Completion Test (MDCT). These tools were selected based on their proven reliability and validity in the field of interlanguage pragmatics, as well as their capacity to capture both productive (WDCT) and receptive (MDCT) aspects of learners' pragmatic performance.

The research design reflects careful methodological planning. The combination of the two test types enables a more nuanced assessment of learners' ability not only to recognize contextually appropriate language but also to produce it in response to real-life communicative scenarios. This dual-focus approach addresses the well-documented gap between pragmatic awareness and actual performance, offering insights into the learners' interlanguage development.

Additionally, several steps were taken to ensure the credibility and contextual appropriateness of the instruments. Both the WDCT and MDCT were adapted to reflect Moroccan socio-cultural norms, thereby enhancing the ecological validity of the study. Piloting procedures, expert validation by EFL specialists, and the inclusion of inter-rater reliability measures further strengthen the methodological rigor.

Overall, this framework provides a robust platform for interpreting learners' pragmatic abilities and deriving pedagogically meaningful conclusions. The design is not only contextually relevant but also replicable in other EFL environments with similar linguistic and cultural dynamics.

Participants
A total of 108 Moroccan high school students participated in the study. Participants were drawn from three grade levels: Common Core, First Year Baccalaureate, and Second Year Baccalaureate, representing different stages of secondary education. The students were enrolled at El Manssour Eddahbi High School, located in the Larache region. All participants had received at least three years of formal English instruction.

The sample was balanced in terms of gender, and participants came from diverse socio-economic and linguistic backgrounds. Students' proficiency levels ranged from lower-intermediate to upper-intermediate, as judged by classroom performance and teacher evaluations.

Instruments

Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT)
The WDCT consisted of 20 open-ended prompts, each describing a real-life communicative situation requiring an appropriate written response. The scenarios were designed to elicit various speech acts including requests, apologies, refusals, compliments, and

invitations. The prompts were contextually adapted to reflect Moroccan sociocultural norms while maintaining relevance to EFL learners.

Each student was instructed to write what they would say in each situation in English. Responses were analyzed based on pragmatic appropriateness, sociolinguistic awareness, and linguistic accuracy, following the rubric established by Taguchi (2009) and modified for this context.

Multiple-Choice Discourse Completion Test (MDCT)

The MDCT included 15 items, each presenting a short dialog or scenario followed by three response options. Participants were instructed to select the most pragmatically appropriate response. The distractors were designed to reflect typical learner errors such as over-formality, under-politeness, or directness inappropriate to the situation.

The MDCT measured students' receptive knowledge of pragmatic norms, with particular focus on speech act realization, formality levels, and politeness strategies.

Validation and Piloting

Both instruments were piloted with 15 students from a comparable school in the region. Based on student feedback and item analysis, minor revisions were made for clarity, length, and cultural appropriateness. Expert validation was conducted by two Moroccan EFL university instructors specializing in pragmatics to ensure construct validity.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection took place over a two-week period during regular English class hours. Students completed the WDCT in one session (~45 minutes) and the MDCT in another (~30 minutes). Instructions were provided in English and clarified in Arabic where necessary to ensure comprehension.

All responses were anonymized and coded. The researcher, with support from two trained raters, scored the responses independently.

Scoring and Analysis

- WDCT responses were scored using a 3-point scale adapted from Taguchi (2009):

- 3 = pragmatically appropriate and fluent
- 2 = partially appropriate, some sociolinguistic or linguistic issues
- 1 = inappropriate or pragmatically flawed
- MDCT responses were scored as:
    o 1 = correct response
    o 0 = incorrect response

Descriptive statistics (mean scores, standard deviations) were calculated for both WDCT and MDCT. Additionally, speech act-specific performance was analyzed to identify which types of acts posed the most difficulty. Inter-rater reliability for WDCT scoring was calculated using Cohen's Kappa.

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

Questionnaire: Analysis of the Learners' Responses

The researcher started his investigation with a group of 103 students from El Manssour Eddahbi High School. This group served as the foundation for examining pragmatic competence and English language proficiency across various skills, among other specific research objectives. By concentrating on this particular sample size, the researcher sought to acquire in-depth insights that could enhance understanding of educational dynamics, the role of pragmatic competence in TEFL within the Moroccan context, and contribute to advancements in the field of pragmatic pedagogy. The choice of El Manssour Eddahbi High School as the study site highlights the importance of local context and the potential relevance of findings to similar educational environment. The diagram below (Fig. 1) shows the demographic information of the participants, including gender distribution and educational level.
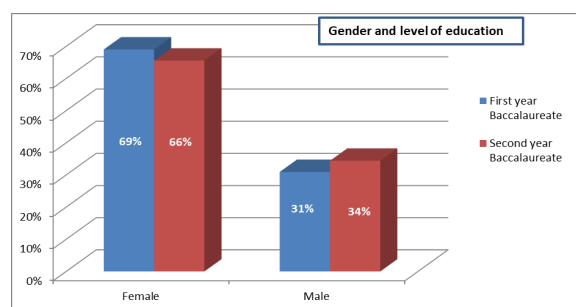

Fig. 1: Gender and level of education

The researcher conducted their study on pragmatic competence using data from 103 students enrolled in the First and Second Year of Baccalaureate in El Manssour Eddahbi High School. In the First year, comprising 42 students, there were 29 females and 13 males. For the Second year, totaling 61 students, there were 40 females and 21 males. This gender distribution across both levels reveals 69 female students and 34 male students, indicating a composition of approximately 67% females and 33% males. Regarding the learners' linguistic background, the data above reveals a diverse distribution across different language categories. Firstly, in the native language, 17 out of 103 learners speak Amazigh, while the majority, 86 learners, exclusively speak Arabic. Looking at first language usage, a similar trend emerges: 3 learners primarily speak Amazigh, 30 primarily use Arabic, 26 prefer English, and 44 use French. When examining second language familiarity, 61 learners use English, and 34 use French. Table 1 below shows the linguistic data of the learners.

The data from the Figure 2 and Figure 3 provide a detailed insight into the linguistic composition of the learners. Initially, in terms of native language, the majority (83%) of students are Arabic speakers, contrasting with the 17% who speak Amazigh. Notably,
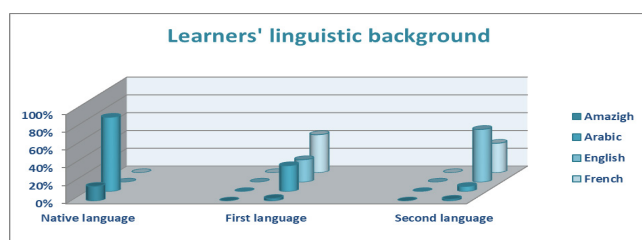
none of the students have English or French as their native language. As for the first language, only 3% of students primarily speak Amazigh, whereas 29% primarily use Arabic, 25% English, and 43% French. This suggests a significant shift in language usage towards French as the dominant first language beyond English. When considering second language usage among the learners, 59% in English, and 33% in French. This indicates a notable use of English as a second language among students, followed by French. These findings highlight the complex linguistic landscape and the varying degrees of language usage among the learner.

The graph below presents a summary of the numbers and percentages of learners' linguistic backgrounds.

As part of the study, the researcher included a targeted question or prompt regarding language proficiency. This particular question tasked learners with assessing their perceived linguistic competencies using a four-category rating scale, each linked to a numerical value. This approach facilitated the collection and analysis of learners' self-assessments of their language skills, emphasizing their subjective viewpoints within the study's parameters.

Table 2 offers a comprehensive view of the linguistic competences of the learners in various language skills, revealing different patterns in speaking, listening, reading, and writing. The data indicates a strong proficiency in listening and reading among the learners, with higher percentages falling into the" Very good" category for these skills. However, it also highlights skills that require additional attention, specifically speaking and writing. The proportions for these skills suggest potential challenges or opportunities for improvement.

Fig. 2: Learners' linguistic backgroun

Table 1:The linguistic data of the learners

Languages	Amazigh	Arabic	English	French	Total
Native language	17	86	0	0	103
	Amazigh	Arabic	English	French	Total
First language	3	30	26	44	103
	Amazigh	Arabic	English	French	Total
Second language	2	6	61	34	103

Table 2: A detailed analysis of proficiency levels across four key language skills

Skills		Proficiency					
		Excellent	Very good		Fair	Poor	Total
Speaking	N	11	28		38	26	103
	%	10.68	27.18		36.89	25.24	100
	Mean	0.10	0.27		0.36	0.25	0.98
Listening	N	22	52		27	2	103
	%	21.36	50.49		26.21	1.94	100
	Mean	0.21	0.50		0.26	0.01	0.98
Reading	N	17	44		35	7	103
	%	16.5	42.72		33.98	6.79	100
	Mean	0.16	0.42		0.33	0.06	0.97
Writing	N	15	30		42	16	103
	%	14.56	29.13		40.78	15.53	100
	Mean	0.14	0.29		0.40	0.15	0.99

For further detail, the Figure 3 provides a comprehensive overview of proficiency levels across four key skills—Speaking, Listening, Reading, and Writing—for a group of 103 individuals. The data presented above offers a detailed analysis of proficiency levels across four key language skills—Speaking, Listening, Reading, and Writing—among a group of 103 EFL learners from El Manssour Eddahbi high school. In Speaking, the distribution reveals 11 (10.68%) rated Excellent, 28 (27.18%) Very Good, 38 (36.89%) Fair, and 26 (25.24%) Poor, with mean proficiency scores of 0.10, 0.27, 0.36, and 0.25 respectively, totaling 0.98 across all levels. Listening exhibits 22 (21.36%) Excellent, 52 (50.49%) Very Good, 27 (26.21%) Fair, and 2 (1.94%) Poor, with mean scores of 0.21, 0.50, 0.26, and 0.01 respectively, summing up to 0.98. Similarly, Reading shows 17 (16.5%) Excellent, 44 (42.72%) Very Good, 35 (33.98%) Fair, and 7 (6.79%) Poor, with mean scores of 0.16, 0.42, 0.33, and 0.06, totaling 0.97. Lastly, Writing indicates 15 (14.56%) Excellent, 30 (29.13%) Very Good, 42 (40.78%) Fair, and 16 (15.53%) Poor, with mean scores of 0.14, 0.29, 0.40, and 0.15 respectively, summing to 0.99. These findings illustrate varying proficiency levels across skills, with Speaking and Writing showing slightly lower means compared to Listening and Reading.

As illustrated in Fig.3, learners reported moderate levels of self-perceived pragmatic and sociocultural competence, with relatively higher confidence in routine, formulaic interactions (e.g., giving compliments) compared to more face-sensitive acts such as refusals or invitations. While participants expressed awareness of politeness strategies and indirectness, their self-ratings on sociocultural appropriateness remained notably lower, reflecting uncertainty in navigating power relations and contextual norms. These self-perceptions broadly align with the WDCT and MDCT results (Tables 1 and 2), where learners demonstrated similar weaknesses in producing and recognizing contextually appropriate language. The alignment between perceived and observed challenges highlights the need for targeted instruction that bridges the gap between pragmatic awareness and performance, particularly in high-stakes or culturally nuanced communicative situations.

Results from the Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT)

The WDCT evaluated learners' ability to produce pragmatic responses across **five key speech acts**: requests, apologies, refusals, compliments, and invitations. Each response was scored on a scale from 1 to 3 based on appropriateness, sociocultural awareness, and linguistic clarity.

Key Observations:
- **Compliments** were the most accurately produced speech act, suggesting learners
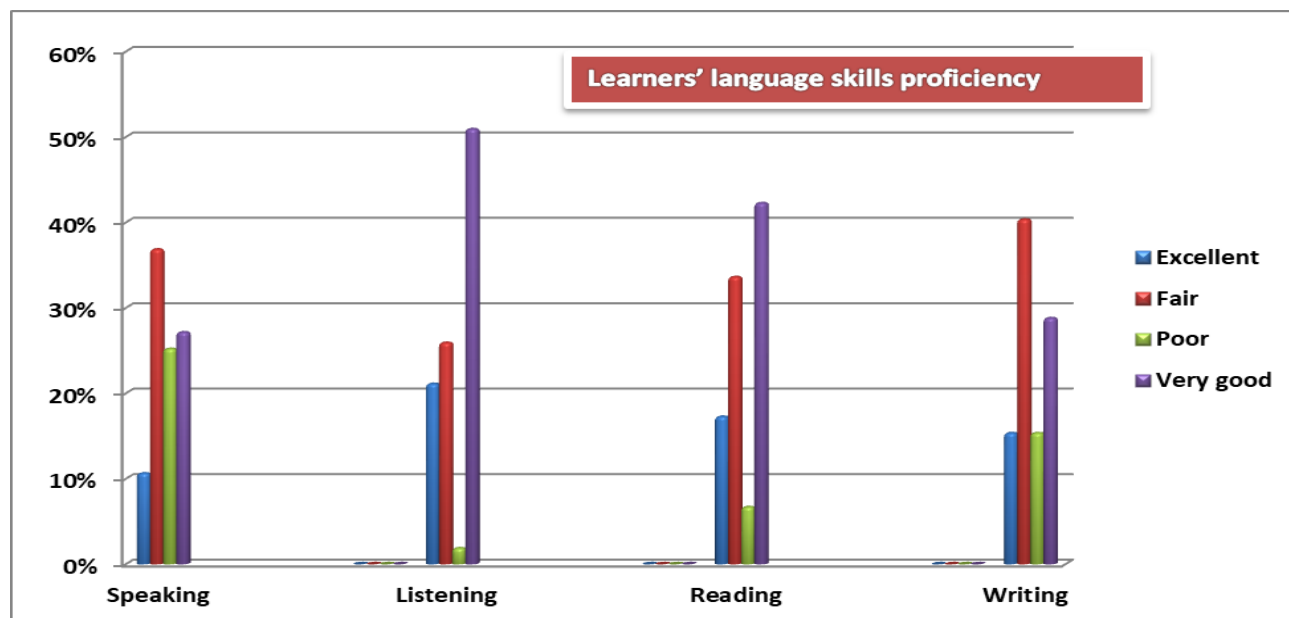
Fig.3: Learners' Language Skills Proficiency

Table 3: Learners' Self-perceived Pragmatic and Sociocultural Competence

Items		Rating values					Total	Mean Score
		5	4	3	2	1		
Speaking English can facilitate my interactions with native speakers.	f	37	41	17	5	3	103	2.18
	%	35.9	39.81	16.5	4.85	2.91	100	
Learning English is important because it enables me to make friendships with people who speak English.	f	40	38	15	5	5	103	2.14
	%	38.83	36.89	14.56	4.85	4.85	100	
Studying English is significant as it can widen my world perspective.	F	33	43	15	6	6	103	2.09
	%	32.04	41.75	14.56	5.83	5.83	100	
I have a good understanding of conversational etiquette. I know when to speak, what to say, and the appropriate manner in which to communicate with others in English.	F	14	35	22	23	9	103	1.62
	%	13.59	33.98	21.36	22.33	8.74	100	
I pay attention when I make requests	f	9	28	28	28	9	103	1.62
	%	8.74	27.18	27.18	27.18	8.74	100	
Whenever I encounter communication barriers with native speakers during conversations, I'll use either verbal or nonverbal cues to overcome the obstacles.	f	8	24	27	33	10	103	1.65
	%	7.77	23.30	26.21	32.04	9.71	100	
I want to enhance my English skills to better understand and engage with foreign cultures.	f	34	32	19	11	7	103	1.75
	%	33.01	31.07	18.45	10.68	6.79	100	
I want to improve my English language because my friends are really good at it.	f	34	31	11	16	11	103	1.69
	%	33.01	30.09	10.68	15.53	10.68	100	

I always pay attention to other people when I refuse	f	9	16	33	37	8	103	1.85
	%	8.74	15.53	32.04	35.92	7.77	100	
I always pay special attention to other people when they make request or refuse.	f	12	13	27	41	10	103	1.82
	%	11.65	12.62	26.21	39.81	9.71	100	
When I complain, I consider other people's emotions, position, and age	f	15	14	30	33	11	103	1.63
	%	14.56	13.59	29.13	32.04	10.68	100	
I understand the appropriate times to use modal verbs like can, could, would, or may when apologizing, requesting, refusing, thanking, inviting, suggesting, and so on.	f	8	16	38	31	9	103	1.81
	%	7.77	15.53	36.89	30.09	8.74	100	
I know how to take turns during conversations.	f	11	16	37	29	10	103	1.73
	%	10.68	15.53	35.92	28.16	9.71	100	
I'm good at rephrasing to clarify misunderstandings.	f	5	17	32	42	7	103	2.03
	%	4.85	16.50	31.07	40.78	6.79	100	
I'm good at effectively using both verbal and nonverbal signals.	f	3	15	39	37	9	103	2.07
	%	2.91	14.56	37.86	35.92	8.74	100	
I am aware of the appropriate distance to maintain when speaking to someone.	f	8	17	34	31	13	103	1.70
	%	7.77	16.50	33.01	30.09	12.62	100	
I have the skills to effectively use facial expressions and maintain eye contact.	f	7	17	35	32	12	103	1.76
	%	6.79	16.50	33.98	31.07	11.65	100	
I understand that speaking in a classroom differs from speaking on a playground	f	15	26	25	27	10	103	1.52
	%	14.56	25.24	24.27	26.21	9.71	100	
I am aware of how to communicate with people of different ages and social status.	f	9	20	35	28	11	103	1.68
	%	8.74	19.42	33.98	27.18	10.68	100	
I think that English learning would be enhanced by engaging in group discussions with classmates during class time.	f	35	32	16	10	10	103	1.75
	%	33.98	31.07	15.53	9.71	9.71	100	

are relatively confident with expressions of praise.

- **Invitations and refusals** received the lowest scores, revealing difficulty with indirectness, face-saving strategies, and cultural expectations.
- The overall average score (1.92/3) indicates partial but inconsistent pragmatic competence.

Qualitative Examples from Learners:

- **Effective request**: "Could you please lend me your notes? I missed the class yesterday."

- **Inappropriate refusal**: "No, I don't want to go. I hate parties." (lack of politeness/mitigation)
- **Underdeveloped apology**: "Sorry for what happened." (vague; lacks context or responsibility)

Results from the Multiple-Choice Discourse Completion Test (MDCT)

The MDCT assessed learners' ability to recognize the most contextually suitable response among multiple options. This tested receptive pragmatic knowledge.

Table 4: WDCT Mean Scores by Speech Act Type (N = 108)

Speech Act	Max Score	Mean Score	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
Requests	3	2.1	0.6	Generally appropriate
Apologies	3	1.9	0.7	Somewhat appropriate
Refusals	3	1.7	0.8	Frequent pragmatic lapses
Compliments	3	2.3	0.5	Mostly appropriate
Invitations	3	1.6	0.9	Limited sociopragmatic awareness
Overall Avg.	**3**	**1.92**	**0.6**	**Emerging pragmatic competence**

Table 5: MDCT Scores Overview (N = 108)

Statistic	Score out of 15
Mean Score	9.4
Median	9
Standard Deviation	2.6
Minimum Score	4
Maximum Score	15

Table 6: Correct Response Rates by Speech Act (selected items):

Speech Act Type	Correct (%)
Requests	72
Apologies	65
Refusals	58
Compliments	78
Invitations	52

Key Observations:
- Compliments and requests were better recognized than produced, indicating familiarity with form but less control in spontaneous use.
- Refusals and invitations again showed low correct response rates, consistent with WDCT results.
- The mean score of 9.4/15 (62.6%) reflects moderate receptive competence, with room for improvement in pragmatic appropriateness.

Summary of Key Findings
- Learners show **partial control** of pragmatic norms, with better performance in lower-stakes or more formulaic speech acts (e.g., compliments).
- **Sociopragmatic failures**—especially in refusal and invitation contexts—are common, often reflecting L1 transfer or lack of instruction.
- Learners perform slightly better on MDCT than WDCT, suggesting a gap between recognition and production.
- The **standard deviations** across both tools

indicate high variability, highlighting **individual differences** in exposure and instruction.

Inter-Rater Reliability
For the WDCT scoring, inter-rater reliability was calculated using **Cohen's Kappa**, resulting in a score of **0.81**, indicating **strong agreement** between raters.

DISCUSSION
This section discusses the findings from the assessment of Moroccan high school EFL learners' pragmatic competence and interprets them in light of prior research, theoretical frameworks, and the study's objectives. The discussion is organized around the three research questions that guided the investigation.

To what extent do Moroccan high school learners demonstrate pragmatic competence?
The data from both the Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT) and the Multiple-Choice Discourse Completion Test (MDCT) revealed moderate to limited pragmatic competence among the participants. The overall WDCT average (1.92/3) and MDCT score (62.6%) suggest that while learners are able to produce and recognize pragmatically appropriate responses in certain speech acts (e.g., compliments, requests), they struggle significantly with more complex or face-threatening acts, such as refusals and invitations.

These results are consistent with prior findings in interlanguage pragmatics, which show that EFL learners often lack exposure to the sociocultural and interactional norms that underlie effective communication in English (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013; Kasper & Rose, 2002). Specifically, learners in this study displayed a tendency toward overly direct, context-insensitive, or culturally inappropriate language use—hallmarks of pragmatic transfer from L1 norms or inadequate instructional input.

While the study draws on foundational literature in interlanguage pragmatics, it would benefit from deeper engagement with more recent research to situate the findings within contemporary scholarly conversations. For example, Taguchi (2019) highlights the role of task complexity and learner agency

in pragmatic development, which aligns with the current study's finding that production (WDCT) lags behind recognition (MDCT). Additionally, Roever (2021) emphasizes the evolving nature of pragmatic assessment, advocating for hybrid tools that reflect authentic communication in globalized contexts.

Integrating these perspectives would strengthen the discussion by framing the study's findings not just as locally relevant, but as part of a broader, ongoing inquiry into how pragmatic competence is best taught and assessed. Moreover, drawing from Ishihara & Cohen (2015) and Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan (2020) would enhance the argument for including pragmatic instruction in curricular design, particularly in multicultural classrooms.

By engaging with such current scholarship, the discussion can more convincingly highlight the contribution of the present study to both theory and practice.

What areas of pragmatic performance are most challenging for learners?

The most challenging speech acts across both instruments were refusals and invitations, with the lowest average scores and highest variability. These acts are inherently complex, as they often involve balancing politeness, indirectness, and face-saving strategies—skills that are rarely taught explicitly in EFL classrooms (Taguchi et al., 2013; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). For example, students' refusal responses were often too blunt (e.g., "No, I don't want") or vague, lacking softeners, justifications, or formulaic mitigations typically expected in English-speaking contexts.

Similarly, invitations were marked by insufficient attention to tone and context. Learners either produced overly casual responses in formal scenarios or failed to convey the relational nuances needed in peer-to-peer interactions. These weaknesses point to a broader issue: **the** absence of targeted pragmatics instruction in the Moroccan EFL curriculum, as observed by Bouknify (2025).

What does the gap between recognition (MDCT) and production (WDCT) suggest?

Learners generally performed better in recognizing pragmatic appropriateness (MDCT) than in producing it (WDCT), mirroring a common pattern in second

language acquisition: receptive knowledge precedes productive control (Schmidt, 1993). This discrepancy may also reflect classroom exposure to input (e.g., textbook dialogues or teacher talk) without adequate opportunities for output or feedback. In other words, students may "notice" the forms passively but lack the practice or confidence to generate them spontaneously.

This finding has important pedagogical implications. It supports the need for **interactive, task-based activities**—such as role-plays, simulated conversations, and peer feedback—to move learners from awareness to autonomous use. The result also reinforces the importance of assessment tools like WDCTs in diagnosing learners' productive limitations, not just their passive recognition.

Implications for EFL Instruction and Curriculum Development

The findings of this study yield several critical implications for the development of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction in the Moroccan educational context:

- Explicit instruction in pragmatics is essential. Teachers should receive targeted training in how to teach and assess core elements of pragmatic competence, including speech acts, politeness strategies, and norms of intercultural communication. Such training is vital for equipping educators with the tools needed to foster socially appropriate language use among learners.

- Textbooks must integrate pragmatic input more systematically. Current instructional materials often fall short in this area, focusing primarily on grammatical forms and lexical items. Future textbooks should include metapragmatic cues, discourse markers, and contextualized examples of interactional patterns—such as refusal negotiation, the use of softeners, turn-taking strategies, and context-sensitive politeness markers.

- **Assessment frameworks require reform.** Evaluation practices in Moroccan EFL classrooms tend to prioritize structural accuracy while neglecting functional and sociocultural

appropriateness. By incorporating tools such as the **Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT)** and the **Multiple-Choice Discourse Completion Test (MDCT)**, educators can obtain a more comprehensive picture of learners' communicative competence, encompassing both recognition and production of pragmatic forms.

- **Pragmatic competence must be recognized as a central component of communicative ability**, rather than an optional or supplementary skill. This perspective aligns with **Canale and Swain's (1980)** broader model of communicative competence, which underscores the importance of sociolinguistic and discourse-level knowledge. It also reflects contemporary global trends in language education, which increasingly emphasize **performance-based and context-sensitive assessment models**.

Incorporating the theoretical insights of **Kasper and Rose (2002)** and **Schmidt (1993)**, the study emphasizes that effective pragmatic instruction must go beyond passive exposure to language input. Rather, it should involve **guided noticing activities**, **explicit metapragmatic explanation**, and **interactive pedagogical techniques** such as role-plays and simulated dialogues. These approaches promote deeper learner engagement and have been shown to accelerate the development of pragmatic awareness and control (Taguchi, 2019).

Furthermore, aligning assessment instruments—such as WDCTs and MDCTs—with instructional goals ensures that learners are evaluated not only on their grammatical proficiency but also on their **ability to navigate real-world communicative scenarios**. Such alignment strengthens the diagnostic value of assessment, encourages more balanced classroom instruction, and supports the development of learners' full communicative repertoire.

5.5. Limitations and Future Directions

While the findings offer valuable insights, this study is not without limitations. The participant pool was drawn from a single high school in northern Morocco, which may limit generalizability. In addition, although WDCTs and MDCTs are widely used, they may not fully capture learners' real-time pragmatic ability in oral interaction.

Future studies should consider:

- **Expanding to multiple regions** to account for dialectal and cultural variation within Morocco.
- **Longitudinal studies** to track pragmatic development over time.
- **Incorporating oral DCTs or role-plays** to assess spontaneous spoken pragmatics.
- **Comparing textbook content with classroom practices** to evaluate alignment between curricular input and student output.

Conclusion and Implications

This study investigated the pragmatic competence of Moroccan high school learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) through the use of two diagnostic tools: the Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT) and the Multiple-Choice Discourse Completion Test **(MDCT)**. The findings reveal that while students exhibit emerging abilities in both recognizing and performing speech acts, their overall pragmatic competence remains limited and inconsistent, particularly in complex, face-sensitive situations such as refusals and invitations. These challenges point to broader systemic issues within the Moroccan EFL landscape, including the absence of explicit pragmatics instruction, minimal exposure to authentic communicative input, and the marginalization of pragmatic content in curricular materials and classroom practices.

The study demonstrates **strong internal coherence and methodological integrity**. The research questions were clearly defined, and the selected instruments aligned effectively with the study's objectives. Data analysis was logically organized and supported by illustrative examples, contributing to the transparency, clarity, and replicability of the findings. The manuscript's structure, with its clearly delineated sections and detailed methodological explanations, further enhances its academic readability and accessibility.

One of the most salient findings of the study is the performance gap between recognition and production. Learners generally performed better on

the MDCT, which assessed receptive knowledge than on the WDCT, which measured productive ability. This discrepancy reflects a well-established pattern in second language acquisition: receptive exposure to language forms does not automatically translate into the ability to use them effectively in context. The results underscore a pressing pedagogical need to go beyond passive exposure and provide learners with structured, interaction-rich opportunities to notice, practice, and reflect on appropriate language use.

Ultimately, the study reinforces the importance of integrating pragmatic competence as a core element of communicative language teaching, rather than treating it as a peripheral or advanced skill. Its findings carry significant implications for curriculum design, teacher training, textbook development, and assessment practices—not only in Morocco but also in similar EFL contexts across the Global South. By emphasizing the need for contextualized, explicit, and task-based instruction, this research contributes to the growing body of literature advocating for a more holistic, socially grounded approach to language education.

Pedagogical Implications
The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that pragmatic competence remains a critical yet underdeveloped area in Moroccan EFL classrooms. Learners' difficulties in performing contextually appropriate speech acts highlight the urgent need for a pedagogical shift: from viewing pragmatics as a peripheral concern to positioning it as a central objective in language instruction.

To support this shift, educators should adopt multi-dimensional assessment strategies that capture both receptive and productive aspects of pragmatic knowledge. The complementary use of the Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT) and the Multiple-Choice Discourse Completion Test (MDCT) allows for a more nuanced and accurate evaluation of learners' pragmatic abilities. In the classroom, teachers should implement interactive, task-based approaches—including role-plays, scenario-based discussions, and guided reflection on speech acts and politeness norms—which have been shown to significantly enhance learners' pragmatic awareness (Taguchi,

2019; Ishihara & Cohen, 2015).

Moreover, teacher preparation and professional development programs must prioritize pragmatics. Both pre-service and in-service training should equip educators with not only the theoretical foundations but also practical strategies for teaching and assessing pragmatic competence. Teachers need to be familiar with cross-cultural variation in language use and be able to guide learners in navigating these differences appropriately.

Additionally, EFL textbooks and curriculum materials must be restructured to reflect the complexity of real-life communication. This includes embedding a broader range of speech acts, integrating metapragmatic explanations, and including culturally contextualized dialogues and reflection tasks that foster awareness of pragmatic norms and variation.

The following targeted recommendations are proposed to guide future improvements in Moroccan EFL education:

1. Curriculum Development
Pragmatic competence should be explicitly incorporated into national EFL curricula as a key component of communicative ability. Instructional objectives should emphasize the use of speech acts relevant to both academic and everyday social interactions, such as requests, refusals, apologies, and invitations.

2. Textbook Design
EFL textbooks should include a wider and more authentic variety of speech acts and communicative functions. These should be supported by metapragmatic commentary, cultural notes, and structured reflection activities that help learners understand the *why* behind appropriate language use.

3. Teacher Training
Teacher education programs must include dedicated modules on interlanguage pragmatics, including cross-cultural pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and discourse analysis. Training should prepare teachers to design and implement lessons that explicitly address pragmatic norms, and to evaluate learners' pragmatic performance with appropriate tools.

4. Assessment Reform

Current classroom assessment practices should be revised to incorporate pragmatic performance tasks, such as WDCTs and MDCTs. These tools provide a more holistic picture of communicative competence by evaluating learners not just on grammatical accuracy, but on their ability to use language appropriately in context.

Taken together, these recommendations aim to foster **a** more balanced, context-sensitive, and socially grounded approach to EFL instruction—one that empowers learners to navigate real-world communicative encounters with both fluency and cultural appropriateness.

Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to the growing body of research in interlanguage pragmatics by providing empirical data from a North African EFL context—a region that remains underrepresented in the literature. The dual use of WDCT and MDCT as complementary tools allows for a richer understanding of learners' pragmatic development and highlights the value of multi-dimensional assessment in SLA research.

As a result, it can be asserted that since English continues to serve as a global lingua franca, the ability to communicate not only accurately but also appropriately becomes increasingly vital. For Moroccan learners navigating multilingual, multicultural realities, pragmatic competence is not an optional skill but a core component of communicative success. Addressing the current instructional and assessment gaps is essential to preparing learners for meaningful participation in English-speaking academic, professional, and social contexts.

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