

# Linguistic landscape and pragmatic competence development: Towards an integrative pedagogical model

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**ABSTRACT:** This article explores the concept of the linguistic landscape, referring to written language in public spaces, and its role in enhancing pragmatic competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). It presents a teaching method that incorporates instructional signage within the linguistic landscape to help students grasp the pragmatic aspects of politeness. The approach was applied in a B2 Translation Studies course, where students analyzed and revised signs to reflect different pragmatic goals. Results were assessed using Mao et al. (2021) Integrated Model of Pragmatic Competence (IMPC). The study emphasized that politeness and impoliteness extend beyond vocabulary and grammar, encouraging learners to critically engage with these concepts. The findings highlight the value of integrating real-world linguistic elements into language education for a deeper understanding of pragmatic contexts.

**Keywords:** EFL, Language teaching, Linguistic landscape, Pragmatics, Pragmatic Competence

**Paisaje lingüístico y el desarrollo de la competencia pragmática: hacia un modelo integrador**

**RESUMEN:** Este artículo explora el concepto de paisaje lingüístico, refiriéndose al lenguaje escrito en espacios públicos, y su papel en el desarrollo de la competencia pragmática en inglés como lengua extranjera (ILE). Presenta un método de enseñanza que incorpora señalización instructiva dentro del paisaje lingüístico para ayudar a los estudiantes a comprender los aspectos pragmáticos de la cortesía. El enfoque se aplicó en un curso de Traducción en nivel B2, donde los estudiantes analizaron y revisaron señales para reflejar diferentes objetivos pragmáticos. Los resultados se evaluaron utilizando el Modelo Integrado de Competencia Pragmática de Mao et al. (2021) El estudio destacó que la cortesía y la descortesía van más allá del vocabulario y la gramática, alentando a los estudiantes a involucrarse de manera crítica con estos conceptos. Los hallazgos subrayan el valor de integrar elementos lingüísticos del mundo real en la educación de lenguas para una comprensión más profunda de los contextos pragmáticos.

**Palabras clave:** Competencia Pragmática, inglés lengua extranjera, Paisaje Lingüístico, Pragmática

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Texts surround us daily, from menus and screens on our phones and computers, to signs on buildings, and much more. Despite their prevalence, Gorter (2006) observes that “most

of the time people do not pay much attention to the ‘linguistic landscape’ that surrounds them” (p. 1). To define the concept of “linguistic landscape” in this study, we follow Scollon & Scollon’s (2003) argument that our focus is selectively drawn to certain aspects of this linguistic (or as they term it, geosemiotic) environment. For example, in signs intended to regulate behaviour, how the reader interprets the message depends on a variety of factors. Scollon and Scollon (2003) ask us to envision a situation at a street corner: a pedestrian waits to cross the road, surrounded by multiple texts or discourses. These include advertisements on shop windows, discarded food wrappers next to a trash bin, street name signs, a notice on an electrical box reading “post no bills,” a poster for an upcoming theatre show, manhole covers for utilities like gas or water, the music from a passing car, no-parking signs, and the bus stop sign nearby (p. 200). These various discourses may momentarily capture attention, but they remain secondary to the primary focus: the pedestrian crossing signal. Hence, the *linguistic landscape* refers to the written language displayed in public spaces, such as street signs, advertisements, billboards, and public notices. This concept, first articulated by Landry and Bourhis (1997), has since become a significant area of study in both sociolinguistics and applied linguistics. The linguistic landscape provides a window into how language is used in real-world contexts, reflecting the cultural, social, and political dynamics of a particular place. The languages on display in public spaces often carry deeper meaning, including aspects of identity, power, and social norms. By examining these written forms of communication, researchers and educators can gain insights into the ways language reflects and constructs the social fabric of a community (Sánchez, 2023).

In recent years, the concept of the linguistic landscape has found relevance in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. Language learning, particularly at intermediate to advanced levels (B2 and beyond), often involves not just mastering grammar and vocabulary but also understanding how language functions within specific cultural and social contexts. This is where the development of *pragmatic competence* comes into play. Pragmatic competence refers to a learner’s ability to use language effectively and appropriately in social interactions, considering factors such as politeness, formality, and indirectness (Leech, 2014). It is a crucial component of communicative competence and is often regarded as one of the most challenging aspects of second-language acquisition (Hu, 2022).

Although grammar and vocabulary are important, learners’ success in real-world communication often hinges on their ability to navigate the subtleties of pragmatics. This includes making requests, offering compliments, apologizing, and understanding and interpreting humour or sarcasm. However, these pragmatic elements do not merely rely on linguistic proficiency; they require an understanding of the cultural and social norms governing communication in a particular community. Consequently, teaching pragmatic competence poses a unique challenge for educators in EFL classrooms, especially when addressing learners who may not yet have the cultural knowledge to understand the nuances of communication in the target language.

Thus, this paper explores the use of real-world materials, particularly public signage, to enhance pragmatic competence, a promising yet underexplored approach. Public signs, serving functional purposes like providing directions or conveying information, reflect cultural and pragmatic norms, making them valuable for teaching politeness, appropriateness, and cultural sensitivity. The study, conducted in a B2-level Translation Studies course,

examines how instructional signage can deepen students' understanding of the pragmatic subtleties of politeness (Richey, 2023). By engaging with authentic signage, students analyse how language choices reflect intentions, social hierarchies, and cultural context. They then revise their own texts using insights from their analyses. The results were assessed using the Integrated Model of Pragmatic Competence (IMPC) by Mao et al. (2021), with a focus on politeness strategies. The paper investigates whether instructional signage can effectively enhance pragmatic competence and its potential use in language classrooms, particularly in advanced language courses. It also addresses challenges in teaching pragmatic competence in EFL contexts, especially regarding politeness and the social dimensions of language use.

## **2. THEORETICAL REVIEW**

### **2.1. The Linguistic Landscape in language learning**

The linguistic landscape (LL) refers to the written language in public spaces, which includes signage, advertisements, and other forms of publicly displayed written communication. According to Cenoz and Gorter (2008), the linguistic landscape encompasses all written forms of language that are visible in the public domain and can provide valuable insights into the sociolinguistic and cultural context of a specific community. LL studies have expanded beyond the examination of language choice in public spaces to explore how these visible texts can shape perceptions of identity, power, and social order. These studies highlight the ways in which the written language on signs reflects both local and global influences, and how language use in public spaces can reveal important aspects of a society's cultural, social, and political dynamics (Gorter, Cenoz, & der Worp, 2021; Backhaus, 2007; Shohamy, 2006) including moving signs on T-shirts, body inscriptions, temporary protest signs during demonstrations, and ever-changing digital screens (Gorter & Cenoz, 2024); these recent developments reflect the innovations and interdisciplinary efforts that have been undertaken.

In the context of language education, the linguistic landscape has been seen as an authentic source of materials that can be used to develop learners' understanding of how language functions in real-world contexts (Sánchez, 2023). By examining the ways in which language is used in public signage, learners can engage in discussions about the appropriateness, politeness, and socio-cultural nuances of different language choices. These opportunities for real-world engagement with language offer valuable insights into pragmatic competence, which is crucial for learners' ability to use language effectively in diverse social contexts (Piller, 2012; Stroud & Mpendukana, 2009). The use of LL as a pedagogical resource encourages learners to consider the cultural and situational factors that shape language use, which is particularly important for EFL learners who may not have a deep familiarity with the cultural contexts in which the language is spoken.

Further studies have also demonstrated how LL contributes to critical literacy and intercultural competence (Blommaert, 2013; Maybin & Swann, 2006), providing learners not only with linguistic tools but also with a broader understanding of the cultural landscape in which language is embedded. These studies emphasize the importance of viewing language learning as a sociocultural process, where learners acquire both linguistic forms and cultural competencies.

## 2.2. Pragmatic competence in EFL

Pragmatic competence refers to the ability to use language effectively in social interactions, considering factors like politeness, formality, and cultural norms (Leech, 2014). In the EFL context, it is a critical but challenging aspect of language acquisition, as it requires learners to navigate social and cultural expectations beyond grammar (Taguchi, 2015; House, 2013). Unlike grammatical competence, which focuses on language correctness, pragmatic competence involves using language appropriately in varying contexts and understanding the social implications of language choices.

Research indicates that pragmatic competence is often overlooked in traditional curricula, which emphasize vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension (Hu, 2022; Rose & Kasper, 2001). However, studies highlight its importance due to globalization, which increases intercultural communication and necessitates the understanding of politeness and cultural norms in communication (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Beebe & Takahashi, 1995).

Several models have been developed to describe the components of pragmatic competence. One such model is the Integrated Model of Pragmatic Competence (IMPC) as reformulated by Mao et al. (2021), which identifies the cognitive, linguistic, and social dimensions of pragmatic competence. According to this model, pragmatic competence involves the ability to both produce and interpret speech acts (such as requests, apologies, and compliments) within specific social contexts, with attention to the social roles and relationships between speakers. This approach underscores the dynamic and context-sensitive nature of pragmatics, which is essential for EFL learners aiming to engage in effective communication across cultural boundaries (Taguchi, 2015; Kádár & Kytö, 2013).

Additionally, the role of pragmatic awareness in improving language learners' ability to understand cultural nuances and interpersonal dynamics has been extensively explored by Kasper and Rose (2002) who emphasize the role of pragmatic awareness in improving understanding of cultural nuances and interpersonal dynamics; this is particularly important in globalized communication, where misunderstandings can arise from cultural differences in the use of politeness strategies (Bardovi-Harlig, 2010).

## 2.3. Instructional signage as a pedagogical tool

Instructional signage in education refers to signs designed to convey educational messages, guidelines, or instructions clearly and effectively, including directions, rules, and cultural norms (Gorter et al., 2021; Hornberger & Link, 2012). In language education, it plays a key role in teaching pragmatic competence, as public signage reflects the cultural and social norms governing communication. Analyzing these signs helps learners understand how language expresses politeness, requests, and social meaning (Sykes, 2019).

For example, Sykes (2019) found that by studying public signage, EFL learners can grasp pragmatic concepts like politeness and impoliteness, noting how tone and word choice vary based on the social relationship between speaker and listener. Instructional signage offers real-world examples of language use, aligning with task-based learning (Willis, 1996), which uses authentic materials for language acquisition.

Incorporating signage encourages learners to critically examine how language functions in social contexts, fostering a deeper understanding of pragmatic competence and its connection to cultural values (Goh, 2021). Beyond pragmatics, using signage supports vocabulary acquisition, cultural awareness, and comprehension, offering a holistic view of language as both a communicative and cultural tool (Nassaji, 2015).

## 2.4. Pragmatics in translation studies

In translation studies, pragmatic competence is essential for successful communication across cultures. Translators must not only understand the linguistic aspects of both source and target languages but also be aware of the social, cultural, and contextual factors that influence communication. This is particularly true for translation tasks that involve public signage, where language use is often tied to specific cultural norms and expectations (Baker, 2018; House, 2013).

Research in translation studies has emphasized the importance of *cultural adaptation* and *pragmatic equivalence* in the translation process (Leech, 2014). Translators are tasked with ensuring that the target text is not only linguistically accurate but also culturally appropriate. This requires an understanding of the pragmatic goals of the source text and the ability to adapt those goals for the target audience, taking into account differences in cultural norms and expectations. In the context of public signage, for example, a direct translation of a sign may not be appropriate if it fails to convey the intended politeness or respect within the target culture. Therefore, developing pragmatic competence is an essential skill for translators, particularly in tasks involving culturally sensitive or context-dependent material such as signs, advertisements, and instructions (Baker, 2018; Katan, 2016).

The integration of public signage into EFL classrooms, particularly in Translation Studies, provides learners with the opportunity to explore the challenges of translating pragmatic meaning. By analysing signs and revising their own translations to reflect varying pragmatic objectives, students can deepen their understanding of both the linguistic and cultural aspects of communication (Baker, 2018; Pym, 2014). This approach not only enhances learners' pragmatic competence but also prepares them for the demands of real-world translation tasks, where cultural sensitivity and contextual awareness are crucial.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

Developing pragmatic competence in second language learners requires exposure to diverse linguistic interactions. Cenoz and Gorter (2008) emphasize that “linguistic landscape can increase the availability of input which is appropriate for the acquisition of pragmatic competence” (p. 275), helping students understand how social behaviour is regulated and what actions may violate social norms. This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to explore the use of instructional signage within the linguistic landscape to improve pragmatic competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Specifically, the research investigates how public signage can support students' understanding of pragmatic nuances such as politeness, impoliteness, and the socio-cultural context of language use. Conducted in a B2-level Translation Studies course, the study focuses on developing pragmatic competence through interactive tasks based on public signage analysis.

### 3.1. Research design

A mixed-methods approach grounded in Linguistics Analysis was employed (Granger, 2018; McEnery & Hardie, 2012). On the one hand, this study utilized a qualitative research design to gather in-depth insights into the effects of instructional signage on learners' pragmatic competence. Subsequently, the research involved the analysis of students' interactions with fabricated public signage in a classroom setting.

Additionally, a quantitative component was integrated to assess changes in students' pragmatic understanding before and after the instructional intervention. This combined approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the impact of the pedagogical tool on students' language development (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2017; Creswell, 2014).

### 3.2. Participants

The study population consisted of 50 students enrolled in a B2-level English course in the Translation Studies program at a public university in Madrid, specifically at Rey Juan Carlos University in late 2024, while the participants were enrolled in their second academic year. The learners were aged between 18 and 25, with a diverse range of linguistic backgrounds, including native speakers of Spanish, French, Chinese, Arabic and Italian. All participants had completed at least 4 years of formal English instruction prior to enrolling in this course. While students had a strong foundation in grammar and vocabulary, they were (based on close observations) at an intermediate level in terms of pragmatic competence, which made them ideal candidates for this intervention.

### 3.3. Data collection

Data for this study was collected using multiple methods to ensure triangulation and enhance the validity of the findings:

#### 3.3.1. Pre- and Post-Test assessments

To assess students' baseline understanding of pragmatic competence, a pre-test was administered at the beginning of the course. This test included a series of tasks designed to measure students' ability to identify and interpret pragmatic elements, such as politeness strategies, indirectness, and contextual appropriateness in written language (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Kecskes, 2014). The post-test, which was identical in format to the pre-test, was given at the end of the course to evaluate any changes in students' pragmatic awareness and competence after the instructional signage intervention.

#### 3.3.2. Instructional Signage analysis

The core of the intervention involved the analysis of instructional signage as a pedagogical resource. In the experimental group, students were tasked with analysing public signs that reflected various pragmatic functions, such as requests, directives, and expressions

of politeness or impoliteness (Gorter, Cenoz, & Der Worp, 2021; Leech, 2014). These signs were selected from both real-world environments (e.g., public transport, commercial areas) and fabricated signs used for instructional purposes (e.g., classroom-specific directives). Students reviewed and revised the language of these signs to reflect varying pragmatic objectives, such as adjusting politeness strategies or rewording directives to fit different social contexts. For example, students might encounter a public sign reading, “Please do not park here” and then analyse its tone, formality, and appropriateness in a specific social context (House, 2009). They would then be asked to reformulate the sign to make it more polite or formal, such as “Please, no parking here.” These tasks allowed learners to explore how language functions pragmatically in different social settings and contexts (Taguchi, 2015).

### 3.3.3. *Written reflections*

To encourage self-reflection and deepen students’ understanding of the pragmatic concepts explored in the intervention, students were asked to submit written reflections at various points during the course. These reflections focused on their experiences with the signage analysis tasks, the adjustments they made to the signs, and the broader implications of pragmatics in communication. The reflections were analysed for themes related to the students’ evolving understanding of pragmatic competence, particularly their ability to adjust language use to suit different social situations (Bardovi-Harlig & Dornyei, 1998).

### 3.3.4. *Teacher observations*

Teacher observations were also conducted throughout the course to capture any changes in the students’ pragmatic awareness and their ability to implement appropriate language use in classroom discussions and written assignments. The researcher made notes on students’ participation in class, their responses to pragmatic tasks, and any noticeable shifts in their communicative strategies. These observations provided valuable insights into how the students’ pragmatic competence developed throughout the study (Bardovi-Harlig, 2010).

## 3.4. **Data analysis**

The data collected through the pre- and post-tests, written reflections, focus group discussions, and teacher observations were analysed using both qualitative and quantitative methods (Silverman, 2017).

### 3.4.1. *Quantitative data analysis*

The pre- and post-test assessments were analysed using descriptive statistics to examine any changes in students’ scores. A paired-samples t-test was employed to assess whether the experimental group showed a statistically significant improvement in pragmatic competence compared to the control group. The focus was particularly on identifying any improvements in students’ ability to interpret and produce language with appropriate politeness strategies and pragmatic awareness (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).



### 3.4.2. *Qualitative data analysis*

The written reflections and focus group discussions were analysed using thematic analysis, which involved identifying recurring themes and patterns related to students' understanding of pragmatic concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis focused on how students perceived the instructional signage tasks and their reflections on the development of their pragmatic competence. Specific attention was paid to any changes in students' ability to critically assess language use and adapt it to different social contexts.

Teacher observation notes were also analysed qualitatively to identify any noticeable shifts in students' language use during classroom activities and discussions. These notes were compared with the reflections and discussions to triangulate findings and ensure that the results were consistent across different data sources (Flick, 2018).

### 3.5. **Methodological limitations**

While this study provides valuable insights into the use of instructional signage for enhancing pragmatic competence in EFL, there are several limitations that should be noted. First, the sample size was relatively small, consisting of only 50 participants, which may limit the generalizability of the findings (Cohen et al., 2017). Second, the study was conducted in a single educational setting, which may affect the applicability of the results to other contexts. Future research could expand the sample size and explore the effectiveness of instructional signage in different cultural and educational settings. Additionally, the study primarily focused on one aspect of pragmatic competence (politeness and formality), and further research could examine other pragmatic features, such as humour, indirectness, or implicature, in greater detail (Schneider, 2018).

## 4. **RESULTS**

This section details the results of the students' engagement with the signage analysis and revision tasks designed to improve their pragmatic competence, specifically regarding politeness, indirectness, and cultural awareness. The findings were analysed in line with the Integrated Model of Pragmatic Competence (IMPC) as reformulated by Mao et al. (2021) and the methodology employed in this paper. This approach enabled students to critically engage with the pragmatics of language, focusing on real-world linguistic elements such as politeness, indirectness, impoliteness, and cultural nuances.

### 4.1. **Engagement with pragmatic competence through signage analysis**

#### 4.1.1. *Refinement of politeness and indirectness*

Students were tasked with revising direct, often imperatively phrased signs into more polite, indirect formulations. These revisions aimed to highlight students' ability to soften commands and convey respect through their language choices. Example:



- Original Sign: “No Smoking Here.”
- Revised Sign: “Please, no smoking in this area.”

This task required students to understand and apply politeness strategies, such as the use of modal verbs (“please”), indirect phrasing, and softened directives.

Out of 50 students, 43 (86%) chose to modify the direct phrasing into more polite versions. Specifically, 35% of students incorporated hedging strategies like “kindly request” or “we appreciate your cooperation,” which are seen as softer and more indirect ways of addressing the reader. For instance, in one of the signs, “Please don’t park here,” was revised by a student to, “Please, no parking here.”

In post-activity surveys, 30% of students specifically mentioned that the task helped them understand that politeness is not just about adding “please” but about structuring a message to avoid being too direct. A student (student\_22) noted: *“I didn’t realize before that using modals like ‘could’ or ‘would’ changes how a request is perceived. It’s not only about being polite but also about showing respect for the reader’s autonomy.”*

#### 4.1.2. Recognition of impoliteness and pragmatic failures

Another significant aspect of the task was identifying instances where signage might come across as impolite or too blunt. Students were asked to revise these signs to make them less direct and more socially appropriate. Example:

- Original Sign: “No entry without permission.”
- Revised Sign possibilities: “Please ensure you have the necessary authorization before entering” and/or “Beware: only authorized personnel”

The aim was to teach students to recognize impolite structures, such as blunt imperatives, and replace them with more tactful requests.

Out of the 50 students, 42 (84%) revised blunt imperatives into more polite and indirect forms. A student (student\_17) who revised a sign reading “You must leave immediately” to “We kindly request that you vacate the area at your earliest convenience” stated: *“I realized that when you say, ‘you must,’ it sounds like an order, not a request. Changing it to ‘We kindly request’ feels more respectful.”*

Post-test surveys and close observation indicated that 78% of students found the revision tasks valuable in learning to recognize impoliteness in language use. Another student (student\_43) commented: *“Before the task, I thought ‘No entry without permission’ was just a clear instruction, but now I understand that it can sound harsh and even disrespectful to some people.”* This finding demonstrates that students were able to shift from simply identifying correct language forms to considering how tone and politeness can influence pragmatic outcomes.

#### 4.2. Impact of signage analysis on pragmatic objectives

Through analysing and revising signage, students also demonstrated the ability to adopt a critical perspective on the social roles and relationships that inform pragmatic decisions, including the use of politeness, formality, and indirectness.

#### 4.2.1. Critical reflection on pragmatic contexts

Students reflected on how politeness strategies are not just about specific vocabulary, but are deeply embedded in the social context, audience, and relationship between speakers. They were asked to revise signs to reflect varying pragmatic objectives based on context, such as a sign aimed at international tourists versus one intended for local employees.

Example:

- Original Sign (for general public): “Park at your own risk.”
- Revised Sign (for international tourists): “Parking recommended in designated areas for your safety.”

This task required students to consider how social roles and relationships might influence their choice of language. For example, a sign addressed to a business partner would require different politeness strategies than one directed at a customer.

In a follow-up survey, 85% of students (42 out of 50) stated that the task helped them understand the importance of tailoring language to specific contexts. A student (student\_41) reflected: “*I didn’t realize that the same message could be perceived so differently depending on who you’re addressing. For example, a command works in one situation, but in others, it feels more like an imposition.*” This feedback supports the argument that students gained an understanding of the deeper social and pragmatic considerations required in bilingual communication.

#### 4.2.2. Incorporating cultural and contextual factors

Another critical aspect of the task was incorporating cultural sensitivity into the revision process. Students were required to revise signage in a way that avoided culturally specific idioms or expressions that might confuse international audiences or those from different cultural backgrounds.

Example:

- Original Sign: “Eat a piece of cake while you wait.”
- Revised Sign: “Enjoy a snack while you wait.”

In this case, the student revised the sign to remove a potentially confusing idiom (“piece of cake”), making it more universally understood. 76% of students (38 out of 50) revised culturally-specific idioms to avoid misunderstandings in a global context. One student explained, “I realized that not all cultures will understand metaphors like ‘a piece of cake’ or ‘a walk in the park,’ and I needed to change these to make them more universal.”

Additionally, students made conscious efforts to avoid colloquial phrases or humour that could be misinterpreted by non-native speakers. For example, “This store is a goldmine!” was revised to “This store offers great value.” The revisions showed an understanding of how cultural knowledge shapes pragmatic competence. As one student (student\_18) remarked: “*This exercise made me think about how language isn’t just about the words; it’s about how the audience will interpret those words, especially when they come from a different culture.*”

### 4.3. Analysis based on the IMPC framework

The findings from the signage analysis and revision tasks were analysed according to the three key dimensions of pragmatic competence outlined in the IMPC framework: linguistic competence, sociocultural competence, and strategic competence.

#### 4.3.1. Linguistic competence

The students demonstrated a clear understanding of how to apply specific linguistic strategies to achieve pragmatic goals. They were able to use indirect forms, mitigate directives, and apply polite expressions in their revisions of public signage.

Out of 50 students, 46 (92%) employed hedging strategies in their revisions. For instance, a sign reading “You must leave the premises” was revised to “We kindly ask that you leave the premises when possible.” This revision included modal verbs (“kindly ask”) and mitigated the directness of the original imperative.

A follow-up survey revealed that 75% of students felt more confident using polite forms in their own language production. One of the learners (student\_11) remarked: *“Before this, I thought politeness was just about adding ‘please.’ Now, I understand the difference between a direct command and a request.”*

#### 4.3.2. Sociocultural competence

Students showed increased awareness of how social roles, power dynamics, and cultural differences influence pragmatic communication. The revision tasks encouraged them to consider the social distance between speaker and hearer and adapt their language accordingly.

88% of students (44 out of 50) revised signs to consider the reader’s potential cultural background. For instance, “Welcome to the club!” was revised to “Welcome, and thank you for joining us,” making it more inclusive and less culturally specific.

Feedback from the surveys indicated that 82% of students understood the importance of cultural sensitivity in communication. One student (student\_49) shared: *“I didn’t think about how much a simple phrase could change depending on the cultural background of the reader. This task helped me realize that politeness and appropriateness are cultural constructs.”*

#### 4.3.3. Strategic competence

Strategic competence refers to the ability to achieve communication goals even in challenging or ambiguous situations. The task encouraged students to creatively revise signage to ensure that their messages were clear, polite, and appropriate for the context.

80% of students (40 out of 50) were able to creatively rephrase signs in ways that met the pragmatic objectives of clarity, politeness, and appropriateness. The student (student\_3) who revised the sign “No parking allowed” into “Please use designated parking areas” explained: *“I realized that making my message sound less authoritative and more helpful made the sign easier to read and more pleasant.”*

In post-task reflection, 70% of students expressed that the task helped them think critically about how to adjust their communication strategy depending on the context. The

same student (student\_3) reflected on the overall success of the task: *“This exercise taught me to think about the impact of my words. It’s not just about giving information, but also about the way the information is presented to ensure it’s received politely.”*

4.4. Analysis based on teacher’s observations

The following table (Table 1) provides a summary of student performance across different aspects of the signage revision task based on the professor’s observation; this table condenses data into percentages to highlight key trends and strengths in pragmatic competence development.

Table 1. Students’ performance global data

Category	Percentage of Students
Used polite, indirect phrasing	86%
Incorporated hedging strategies	35%
Identified impoliteness	78%
Tailored language to context	85%
Avoided cultural misunderstandings	76%
Applied linguistic strategies	92%
Considered cultural sensitivity	88%
Successfully adjusted messaging	80%

As can be inferred, the highest-performing area was applying linguistic strategies (92%), demonstrating that nearly all students successfully used polite expressions, indirect phrasing, and mitigation techniques. For example, Student\_5 revised “You must leave the premises.” to “We ask that you leave the premises, when possible,” showcasing a strong grasp of politeness strategies.

However, the lowest percentage (35%) was for incorporating hedging strategies, indicating that fewer students used subtle ways to soften directives. While many revised direct imperatives, fewer opted for hedges like “We would appreciate it if...” or “It would be best to...,” highlighting an area for further instructional and research focus. In terms of cultural and contextual awareness, 88% of students considered cultural sensitivity, while 76% did their best to avoid cultural misunderstandings. This suggests that while students were generally mindful of cultural factors, some still struggled with idiomatic expressions. For instance, a student\_21 revised “Eat a piece of cake while you wait” to “Enjoy a snack while you wait,” ensuring clarity for non-native English speakers. Hence, the task was also effective in helping students recognize impoliteness, with 78% successfully identifying and revising blunt directives: “No entry without permission” to “Please, only authorized personnel” which softens the directive while maintaining clarity.

5. DISCUSSION

This study investigates the role of public signage in enhancing pragmatic competence among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Through the analysis and revision of real-world public signs, students in a B2 Translation Studies course deepened their under-

standing of key pragmatic elements, such as politeness, indirectness, cultural sensitivity, and social roles. Drawing on the Integrated Model of Pragmatic Competence (IMPC) by Mao et al. (2021), the study highlights the value of authentic linguistic materials in language education.

The findings showed that students effectively revised signs to reflect varying degrees of politeness, indicating an understanding of politeness strategies beyond vocabulary choices. For instance, students transformed direct signs like “No Smoking Here” into more polite forms such as “Please, no smoking in this area,” using modal verbs and polite requests. This aligns with Brown and Levinson’s (1987) concept of politeness strategies, where indirectness and hedging are key to mitigating face-threatening acts. The revisions underscored that politeness is not merely about vocabulary but involves a broader social understanding of communication contexts (Leech, 2021).

Additionally, students addressed instances of impoliteness in signage, revising phrases like “You must leave immediately” into more tactful versions. This demonstrated their awareness of how impoliteness can hinder communication, reflecting Leech’s (2021) “politeness maxims” that emphasize communication should respect social norms. The students’ ability to identify and mitigate impoliteness showed their understanding of pragmatic competence, which requires balancing linguistic correctness with social appropriateness (Kasper & Rose, 2022).

The study also revealed that students developed a critical understanding of context-dependent communication. They adapted signage for different audiences, adjusting formality and politeness based on social distance and power relations. This highlights the importance of sociocultural competence, central to pragmatic development according to Mao et al. (2021), and reflects Goffman’s (2023) concept of “face,” where communication aligns with participants’ social roles.

Moreover, the study emphasized the value of integrating real-world linguistic elements like public signage into language education. Students bridged the gap between classroom knowledge and real-life application, making learning more meaningful and contextually relevant. This approach aligns with the research of Gorter, Cenoz, and der Worp (2021), which advocates for the use of authentic materials in language learning to enhance pragmatic competence.

The interdisciplinary nature of the study, combining linguistics, cognitive science, and education, suggests that AI-based language learning tools could further support pragmatic development. As Bardovi-Harlig (2022) and Chun (2023) suggest, these tools could offer context-sensitive feedback and real-time support, complementing traditional language learning methods and enriching students’ pragmatic learning experiences.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study explored the use of public signage as a pedagogical tool to enhance pragmatic competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, focusing on a B2 Translation Studies course. By analysing and revising real-world public signs, students deepened their understanding of pragmatic elements such as politeness, impoliteness, and social context. The research emphasized the value of authentic resources in language learning, encouraging students to engage critically with language and explore the subtleties of communication necessary for effective interaction in diverse social contexts.

The study revealed that students effectively transformed direct or impolite language into more tactful, contextually appropriate versions, demonstrating an understanding of politeness strategies. For example, students revised blunt signs like “No Smoking” to “Please, no smoking,” reflecting a growing awareness of the importance of politeness in communication. These revisions align with Leech’s (2021) concept of politeness, which is not just about vocabulary but involves a complex set of strategies that navigate social relationships.

In addition to politeness, students demonstrated a critical understanding of the sociocultural context of language. They recognized that public signage reflects the social and cultural norms shaping communication. When revising signs, students considered how different phrasing might influence the relationship between speaker and listener, highlighting the role of sociocultural competence in pragmatic communication. These insights resonate with Goffman’s (2023) concept of “face,” emphasizing how language choices influence social identity and relationships.

The study also showed that public signage serves as an authentic linguistic resource, bridging the gap between classroom knowledge and real-world language use. By working with public signs, students engaged with language that was both familiar and relevant to their daily lives, which aligns with Gorter et al. (2021), who argue that authentic materials make language learning more practical and applicable. This hands-on approach made the abstract concept of pragmatics more tangible for students.

Furthermore, the research demonstrated that pragmatic competence extends beyond grammar and vocabulary to include the ability to adapt language based on social context. This aligns with Brown and Levinson (1987) and Leech (2021), who argue that politeness and impoliteness are dynamic and context-dependent. Students’ ability to adjust language for different social roles underscores the importance of context in pragmatic competence.

The study has broader implications for future research and language education, suggesting that integrating real-world materials like public signage enhances students’ pragmatic understanding. This approach fosters critical thinking about language use and helps students navigate complex social interactions, particularly in multicultural and multilingual environments. Additionally, the research highlights the potential of interdisciplinary collaboration in developing pragmatic competence and suggests that AI tools could further enhance language learning by providing context-sensitive feedback, as noted by Hu et al. (2022). The integration of AI with human expertise could enrich pragmatic education in the future.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates the value of incorporating public signage into language learning to enhance pragmatic competence. By engaging with authentic linguistic materials, students gained a deeper understanding of how language functions in context, emphasizing sociocultural competence and the subtleties of politeness, impoliteness, and social roles. The findings contribute to the growing body of research advocating for the use of authentic materials in language education and highlight the potential of interdisciplinary approaches to improve pragmatic competence in second language learners.

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