

# PRAGMATIC APPROPRIATENESS IN INTERCULTURAL EFL COMMUNICATION: TURKISH UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' CALIBRATION OF SPEECH ACTS BY INTERLOCUTOR CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Seçkin Can\*  

School of Foreign Languages,  
Ondokuz Mayıs University, Samsun, Türkiye

## Abstract

This study examines how Turkish university EFL students construct pragmatic appropriateness in intercultural communication and whether they adjust their choices across same-culture and intercultural encounters. Using a written discourse completion task, 62 students responded to scenarios that varied the interlocutor, a familiar same-culture Turkish interlocutor versus a less familiar international interlocutor from a different cultural background, and social power, across four speech acts: requests, refusals, disagreements, and apologies. Each response was followed by a short reflective comment, and a Turkish-language version of a subset of scenarios was administered to provide a first-language baseline. Responses were coded for directness and politeness strategies using established taxonomies, rated for pragmatic appropriateness, and reflective comments were analysed thematically. As a group, learners shifted toward greater indirectness and negative politeness in the intercultural encounter. However, the calibration was not uniform: roughly 61 per cent showed adjustment in at least three of the four matched scenario pairs, while the rest showed more limited or inconsistent adjustment, often invoking first-language norms. The findings support the argument that concrete discourse choices may provide a limited window onto the pragmatic dimension of intercultural competence, and they suggest that calibration toward a culturally unfamiliar interlocutor may constitute a plausible pedagogical target rather than an automatic consequence of proficiency or positive attitudes.

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\* Corresponding author: [seckin.can@omu.edu.tr](mailto:seckin.can@omu.edu.tr).

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## **1 Introduction**

Internationalisation has changed who Turkish university students speak English with. Exchange programmes, English-medium instruction, and the growing number of international students mean that English in these settings is increasingly used between people from different cultural backgrounds. In such encounters, getting the grammar right is rarely the main difficulty. The harder task is pragmatic. When these choices misfire, the cost is not a marked error on a test but a misreading of the speaker as rude, evasive, or insincere.

Language education has long recognised this through the idea of intercultural competence. However, intercultural competence is often described in terms of knowledge and attitudes, what learners know about other cultures and how disposed they are toward difference, rather than in terms of what they actually say. Second-language pragmatics offers the missing piece, as it examines the concrete realisation of communicative acts in context. This study brings the two together. It examines learners' speech-act choices as one limited indicator of the pragmatic dimension of intercultural competence, and it asks a question that the attitude-based view cannot address: when the addressee is a culturally different and less familiar interlocutor rather than a same-culture one, do learners change how they speak?

This question motivates the central move of the study. Rather than treating the interlocutor as a fixed feature of each situation, the study varies the interlocutor by design, so that the same participant responds to both a familiar, same-culture Turkish interlocutor and a less familiar international interlocutor from a different cultural background. This contrast is best understood as a broad intercultural condition, combining cultural difference with reduced familiarity and limited shared interactional history, rather than as a comparison of specific cultural backgrounds. Pragmatic appropriateness is then examined not as a fixed property of a learner but as a calibration, an adjustment of directness and politeness that may or may not happen when the addressee changes. A learner who produces appropriate forms with a familiar interlocutor but carries the same pattern unchanged into an intercultural encounter is showing something different from a learner who adjusts. This difference is difficult to see in studies that hold the interlocutor constant, and it is the difference that the present design is built to capture.

The study examines four speech acts that are central to everyday interaction and high in face threat: requests, refusals, disagreements, and apologies. Data were collected through a written discourse completion task, with each response followed by a short reflective comment that gives access to the reasoning behind the choice, and a Turkish-language version of a subset of scenarios provides a first-language baseline.

The study aims to contribute in two ways. Empirically, it provides evidence on whether learners in this setting adjust their reported pragmatic choices across same-culture and intercultural encounters, a question that single-interlocutor designs leave open. Conceptually, it supports the argument that the pragmatic dimension of

intercultural competence in language education is not only a matter of cultural knowledge or attitude, and that specific discourse choices may offer one limited window onto it.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 From cultural knowledge to pragmatic action**

Research on intercultural competence in language education has often treated culture as a body of knowledge or a set of attitudes that learners acquire alongside the target language. Work in this tradition has examined, for example, how targeted intercultural training can develop students' cultural awareness and competence in higher education settings (Popescu, 2023). A separate line of work in second language pragmatics has shown that competent communication also depends on what speakers actually do with language in context: how they soften a request, decline an invitation, or register disagreement without damaging the relationship. The present study sits at the meeting point of these two lines. It treats intercultural competence not only as awareness or disposition but also as a set of concrete discourse choices, and it asks whether Turkish EFL students adjust those choices when addressing someone from a different cultural background. This section reviews the three frameworks that inform the study, situates it within the interlanguage pragmatics tradition, and identifies the gap it addresses.

### **2.2 Intercultural pragmatics as an organising frame**

The organising frame for the study is intercultural pragmatics, which examines how speakers who do not share a common first language or cultural background use a common language, frequently English, to communicate (Kecskes, 2014). This framework differs from cross-cultural pragmatics, which compares the conventions of separate language communities. Intercultural pragmatics focuses instead on the encounter itself, in which interlocutors cannot rely on fully shared assumptions and must construct common ground as the interaction unfolds. For an EFL setting, this distinction matters. Turkish students using English with an international interlocutor are not simply transferring Turkish norms or approximating native English norms; they are operating in a space where neither set of conventions is guaranteed to hold. Bărbuleț (2023), analysing interaction across digital platforms through Grice's cooperative principle and Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, shows that the interpretation of meaning and the management of face depend heavily on shared contextual and cultural knowledge, and that the absence of such shared ground raises the risk of pragmatic failure. The intercultural encounters examined in the present study pose the same challenge, since learners cannot assume that their interlocutor shares the conventions that make a given level of directness interpretable.

Framing the study this way also keeps the focus on the variable the design isolates: whether pragmatic choices shift between the same-culture and intercultural conditions. Intercultural communicative competence, in the broader sense described by Byram (1997), remains relevant as a context because it situates pragmatic ability within a broader model of attitudes, knowledge, and interactional skills. The present study, however, narrows its focus to the pragmatic dimension, which can be investigated through the speech acts that learners produce rather than through self-reported attitudes.

This framing has a direct consequence for how appropriateness is understood here. Because the interlocutor is an international rather than a native speaker, there is no single native norm against which production can be measured (Seidlhofer, 2011). Appropriateness is therefore operationalised as a judgment about how a form would plausibly be received in the intercultural encounter, not against native-speaker usage (Kecskes, 2014).

### **2.3 Politeness as an analytical lens**

The analysis of how learners manage face and social relationships draws on politeness theory. Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed that speakers select among bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies according to the weight of the face-threatening act, which they modelled as a function of social distance, relative power, and the ranking of the imposition. This model provides a coding vocabulary for describing the strategies learners choose and for relating those choices to the social variables built into the scenarios.

The model has well-documented limitations, particularly the assumption that its categories carry the same value across cultures. Leech (1983) offered a complementary account through the politeness principle and its associated maxims, and later work has argued that the management of relationships is better captured by a broader notion of rapport than by face alone (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Working within this rapport-oriented tradition, Plăcintar (2024) compared how Romanian and Finnish students of business English performed face-threatening acts in a shared communicative situation and found that the two groups differed systematically in their use of mitigation, politeness, and solidarity markers, with one group orienting more to relational rapport and the other to transactional efficiency. This is directly relevant to the present study, since it shows that the linguistic realisation of face-threatening acts varies with the speaker's cultural background, the kind of variation the present design examines within learners as the interlocutor changes. The study uses Brown and Levinson's categories for coding because they are operational and widely applied, while drawing on the rapport-oriented critique to interpret cases in which a strategy that appears impolite in one frame functions appropriately in context. This keeps the coding tractable without treating the categories as culturally neutral.

## **2.4 Pragmatic transfer**

The third framework is pragmatic transfer, defined as the influence of first-language pragmatic knowledge on the comprehension and production of pragmatic actions in a second language (Kasper, 1992). Transfer can be positive when first-language conventions align with target-language expectations, or negative when they produce forms that are understood differently from what the speaker intended. Kasper distinguished between pragmalinguistic transfer, involving the form-function mappings learners carry over, and sociopragmatic transfer, involving judgments about what is socially appropriate. Both are relevant here, since the study examines both the strategies learners select and their reasoning about appropriateness.

Empirical work on transfer in speech act production has frequently relied on comparisons across the first-language baseline, the learner's interlanguage, and target-language norms. Beebe et al. (1990) showed in their study of refusals that learners can transfer the order, content, and frequency of semantic formulas from the first language, even when the target-language forms are accurate. This finding motivates the inclusion of a first language baseline in the present design. Without a Turkish-language measure, transfer can only be interpreted from the English data; with it, divergences between Turkish and English production can be examined directly. The consequences of unsuccessful transfer were described by Thomas (1983) as pragmatic failure, which she argued is often more damaging to communication than grammatical error because it is read as rudeness or insincerity rather than as a language mistake. This consequence is part of what makes the study pedagogically relevant.

## **2.5 The interlanguage pragmatics tradition and the discourse completion task**

These frameworks have been applied in interlanguage pragmatics, the study of how second-language learners develop and use pragmatic ability. Much of this work has used the discourse completion task, an instrument standardised in the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realisation Project (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989), which provided coding schemes for requests and apologies that remain widely used. The discourse completion task allows researchers to collect comparable responses to controlled situations across many participants, which is why it has been central to the field.

Its limitations are also well established. Because it elicits written responses to described situations, it measures what learners report they would say rather than what they produce in real interaction. It removes the turn-by-turn negotiation through which pragmatic meaning is built. Researchers have responded by supplementing the task with verbal reports and reflective accounts that access the reasoning behind learners' choices, an approach the present study adopts through its reflective prompts. Recent overviews of second-language pragmatics continue to treat the discourse completion task as a valid instrument for examining pragmatic knowledge, provided its scope is accurately described (Taguchi & Roever, 2017).

## **2.6 The Turkish EFL context and the research gap**

In the Turkish higher education context, English serves as the medium of intercultural contact across internationalisation initiatives, exchange programmes, and English-medium instruction. A body of interlanguage pragmatics research has examined Turkish learners' production of individual speech acts, including the development of requests (Otçu & Zeyrek, 2008), refusal strategies (Han & Burgucu-Tazegül, 2016; Tuncer & Turhan, 2019), and apologies (İstifçi, 2009), and this work has repeatedly documented the transfer of Turkish pragmatic norms into English, particularly at intermediate proficiency levels.

Two gaps emerge from this literature. First, learner production has typically been evaluated against native-speaker baselines, with the addressee treated as a fixed feature of the situation, so whether learners adjust their pragmatic choices when the addressee changes remains largely unexamined; treating the interlocutor as a designed variable allows this to be examined directly. Second, although transfer is a recurrent finding, designs that directly compare the same participants' first-language and English production remain rare, a recent exception being Karagöz-Dilek's (2020) study of compliments. The present study addresses both gaps by varying the interlocutor within the instrument and by collecting a Turkish-language baseline for a subset of scenarios.

On this basis, the study asks how Turkish university EFL students realise requests, refusals, disagreements, and apologies in English, whether their directness and politeness choices differ between same-culture and intercultural encounters, what exploratory patterns emerge across the scenario sets involving equal- and higher-status interlocutors, and what their reflective accounts reveal about the cultural and pragmatic reasoning behind them.

## **3 Research Methodology**

### **3.1 Research design**

This study used a cross-sectional design that combined categorical analysis of elicited speech-act data with thematic analysis of participants' retrospective accounts. The aim was to describe how Turkish university EFL students construct pragmatic appropriateness in English and whether their choices shift between same-culture and intercultural encounters. A within-subjects design was used: each participant responded to scenarios that varied the interlocutor (a familiar same-culture Turkish interlocutor versus a less familiar international interlocutor from a different cultural background) and social power (equal versus higher), allowing pragmatic choices to be examined within the same participant rather than across separate groups.

### **3.2 Participants and setting**

Participants were 62 EFL students enrolled in the English preparatory programme of Ondokuz Mayıs University in Samsun, Turkey, with CEFR levels B1 to B2, as determined by an institutional placement examination administered at programme entry. Purposive sampling was used to recruit students who had completed at least one term of instruction, so that responses would reflect some exposure to English-medium interaction rather than beginner-level production. Basic demographic information was collected on age, first language, and prior intercultural contact.

### **3.3 Instrument**

Data were collected through a written discourse completion task (DCT) targeting four speech acts: requests, refusals, disagreements, and apologies. The DCT contained eight scenarios. The scenario set included two interlocutor conditions (a familiar same-culture Turkish interlocutor versus a less familiar international interlocutor from a different cultural background) and two social power conditions (equal versus higher status). Power was assigned across speech-act types rather than fully crossed within each speech act, so power-related comparisons are exploratory and confounded with speech-act type. Each scenario specified the setting, the relationship between the speaker and the interlocutor, and the interlocutor in a brief context sentence: the same-culture interlocutors were described as familiar to the speaker (for example, a Turkish professor known since the start of the year or a classmate the speaker knows well), whereas the international interlocutors were described as more recently encountered (for example, a newly arrived exchange student or an international faculty member who had recently arrived in Türkiye). The international condition, therefore, combines cultural difference with reduced familiarity and limited shared interactional history, and is best understood as a broad intercultural condition rather than as a manipulation of cultural background alone. This design allowed the second research question to be answered through the instrument itself rather than through a label applied after the fact. The scenario set is provided in Appendix B.

The distribution of scenarios across speech acts and conditions is summarised in Table 1. Each speech act appeared in two scenarios, one with a same-culture Turkish interlocutor and one with an international interlocutor, and social power was varied across rather than within speech acts, so that the power comparison is available for requests and apologies.

Table 1. Scenario matrix: Speech act by the interlocutor, cultural background, and social power

| Speech act | Same-culture interlocutor | International interlocutor | Power condition |
|------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------|
| Request    | Scenario 1                | Scenario 2                 | Higher          |
| Refusal    | Scenario 3                | Scenario 4                 | Equal           |

|              |            |            |        |
|--------------|------------|------------|--------|
| Disagreement | Scenario 5 | Scenario 6 | Equal  |
| Apology      | Scenario 7 | Scenario 8 | Higher |

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Each scenario was followed by two prompts. The first task asked participants to write what they would say in English. The second asked for a short reflective comment of two to three sentences explaining why they chose that response. The reflective prompts were included to assess participants' metapragmatic reasoning, which a production-only DCT cannot capture.

The DCT was piloted with eight students who were not part of the main sample. Piloting checked the clarity of scenario wording, the cultural plausibility of the situations, and the time required for completion. Minor wording adjustments were made to two scenarios after piloting.

To examine pragmatic transfer at the level of production rather than interpretation alone, a Turkish-language version of a subset of the scenarios was administered to 20 participants drawn from the main sample. The same participants completed both versions, with the Turkish version administered at least 1 week after the English DCT to reduce direct carryover. Because the baseline and English data come from the same individuals, first-language and English production can be compared within participants rather than across separate groups, allowing a limited within-participant comparison relevant to a possible transfer interpretation.

### 3.4 Data collection procedure

The DCT was administered in class under supervised conditions. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Responses were collected over three weeks. No time limit was imposed, and completion took approximately 30-40 minutes.

### 3.5 Coding and analysis

Responses were coded along four dimensions using established taxonomies, with the wording of categories adapted only where the EFL setting required it.

Request directness was coded using the categories from the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realisation Project (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989): direct, conventionally indirect, and non-conventionally indirect strategies. Refusal structure was coded using the framework of Beebe et al. (1990), which distinguishes direct, indirect, and adjunct refusals. Apology strategies were coded using the apology component categories from the same Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realisation Project. For disagreement, which has a less standardised coding tradition, responses were coded for directness and for the presence of mitigating moves within the politeness framework described below, and the disagreement scheme was anchored to Rees-Miller's (2000) classification of softened, unmitigated, and aggravated disagreement to maintain consistency with published work.

Politeness strategies were coded using the categories of Brown and Levinson (1987): bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record. Pragmatic appropriateness was rated on a five-point scale ranging from fully appropriate to seriously inappropriate, applied by two raters. Consistent with the study's intercultural framing, raters were instructed not to judge responses against native-speaker usage. The criterion was the likely interpretability and relational effect of the response for the interlocutor described in the scenario, that is, whether the form would plausibly achieve its communicative purpose without being read as rude, evasive, or insincere by an addressee who does not share the speaker's first language conventions. Raters were given this criterion in writing, together with anchored descriptors for each scale point, before coding began.

The reflective comments were coded as present, partial, or absent with respect to intercultural awareness. Awareness was coded as present when the participant explicitly referred to the interlocutor's cultural background or to cultural norms as a reason for the chosen form, as partial when the comment acknowledged something about the interlocutor, such as their being a stranger or a foreigner, without connecting it to cultural expectations or to the form chosen, and as absent when the justification did not refer to the interlocutor at all.

Quantitative analysis combined descriptive frequency distributions with paired nominal tests. Category frequencies were reported for each speech act, and choices were compared across the same-culture and intercultural conditions, as well as across social power conditions. Because each participant responded to both interlocutor conditions, responses across conditions are paired rather than independent, and standard chi-square tests of association are not appropriate. Shifts in strategy choice between the same-culture and international interlocutor conditions were therefore tested with McNemar's test for paired nominal data, which compares two categories, and with the McNemar-Bowker test, which compares more than two. Tests were run at the matched-scenario-pair level within each speech act. Two decision rules were set in advance for these tests. First, where the discordant pair counts were too small for the asymptotic test, defined as fewer than 25 discordant pairs in total for a two-category comparison or any symmetric cell pair summing to fewer than five for a multi-category comparison, the exact binomial form of McNemar's test was used, and exact p-values were reported. Second, where sparseness required collapsing categories, adjacent categories were merged on conceptual grounds: for request directness, non-conventionally indirect responses were merged with conventionally indirect responses into a single indirect category; for politeness strategy, off-record responses were merged with negative politeness into a single category of high-mitigation strategies, because both respond to high face-threat weight in Brown and Levinson's (1987) hierarchy. No other mergers were permitted. In addition to these act-level comparisons, calibration was examined at the individual level. A matched pair was counted as adjusted when the act's primary dimension (directness for requests, structure for refusals, mitigation for disagreements, and politeness strategy for apologies) moved toward greater indirectness or mitigation in the intercultural condition; the politeness dimension of

the non-apology acts was treated as corroborating rather than as a separate criterion, so the primary dimension resolved that movement in conflicting directions across dimensions. A participant who met this criterion in at least three of the four matched scenario pairs was classified as showing adjustment; otherwise, as showing more limited or inconsistent adjustment. This criterion was set before the analysis, and the robustness of the resulting classification to a one-pair stricter and a one-pair looser criterion was checked. The reflective data were analysed thematically, with codes developed from the data and organised around participants' stated reasons for their pragmatic choices and then read against the quantitative patterns to interpret the two strands together.

### **3.6 Reliability**

Two raters independently coded the data: the author and an experienced EFL instructor with an MA in applied linguistics. Before coding began, the raters completed a joint training session on a small set of responses outside the reliability sample, working through the taxonomies and the appropriateness rubric until category boundaries were agreed upon. The second rater coded at least 24 per cent of the responses for all four speech acts. Interrater agreement was calculated using Cohen's kappa for the categorical codings (directness, refusal structure, politeness strategy, and intercultural awareness) and linearly weighted kappa for the five-point appropriateness rating, since the rating scale is ordinal and disagreements of one scale point should not be weighted equally with larger disagreements. Values are reported in the results section. Disagreements were resolved through discussion, and the coding scheme was clarified where the two raters had applied a category differently.

### **3.7 Ethical considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ondokuz Mayıs University Social and Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Approval No. E25.23\_2, 14 November 2025). Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw. No identifying information was collected, and responses were stored in anonymised form.

### **3.8 Limitations of the method**

The discourse completion task measures offline metapragmatic knowledge rather than performance in real interaction. Responses reflect what participants report they would say, not what they would produce under the time pressure and turn-by-turn negotiation of actual conversation. The reflective comments partly offset this by accessing participants' reasoning, but the findings should be read as evidence of pragmatic awareness and reported choice rather than of interactional behaviour. A further limitation concerns the appropriateness ratings themselves. Although the

rating criterion was defined in intercultural rather than native-speaker terms, the raters were Turkish-background English teachers, and their judgments of how an international interlocutor would receive a given form remain interpretive. Ratings should therefore be read as informed estimates of likely reception rather than as direct evidence of it. A further limitation concerns the operationalisation of the interlocutor variable. The same-culture and international conditions differed not only in cultural background but also in the degree of familiarity and shared interactional history they implied, since same-culture interlocutors were described as already known to the speaker, whereas international interlocutors were described as more recently encountered. The differences observed in this study should therefore be attributed to a broader intercultural context that combines cultural difference, unfamiliarity, and perceived linguistic asymmetry, rather than to cultural background as an isolated factor. Finally, because the Turkish baseline was conducted after the English DCT by the same participants, an order effect cannot be fully ruled out. However, the interval between the two administrations was intended to reduce it.

## **4 Results and Interpretation**

This section reports the findings in the order of the research questions. It first describes the levels of directness and politeness strategies learners used across the four speech acts, then examines whether these choices differed between same-culture and intercultural conditions, considers exploratory patterns related to social power, and finally draws on the reflective comments to interpret the reasoning behind the choices. Coding reliability is reported before the substantive findings. All values reported here are based on 62 participants responding to eight scenarios, with each scenario yielding 62 responses unless otherwise noted.

### **4.1 Coding reliability**

The second rater coded 24 per cent of all responses across the four speech acts. Interrater agreement, calculated with Cohen's kappa, was .84 for request directness, .81 for refusal structure, .79 for politeness strategy, and .77 (linearly weighted) for the pragmatic appropriateness rating, with an overall value of .81. Agreement on the intercultural awareness coding of the reflective comments was .83. These values indicate substantial agreement. The lowest agreement occurred on the appropriateness rating, where the two raters initially differed on borderline cases between fully appropriate and partly appropriate responses; these were resolved through discussion, and the descriptors for the middle band were clarified.

## 4.2 Directness and politeness across the four speech acts (RQ1)

Across all scenarios, learners relied most heavily on conventionally indirect strategies for requests and on indirect strategies for refusals, while disagreements and apologies showed more varied patterns. Table 2 reports the distribution of request directness, coded with the categories of Blum-Kulka et al. (1989).

Table 2. Distribution of request directness strategies (Percentage of responses)

| Strategy                    | Same-culture interlocutor | International interlocutor |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| Direct                      | 41.9                      | 17.7                       |
| Conventionally indirect     | 51.6                      | 71.0                       |
| Non-conventionally indirect | 6.5                       | 11.3                       |

For refusals, coded using the framework of Beebe et al. (1990), direct refusals accounted for 41.9 per cent of responses to the same-culture interlocutor but only 22.6 per cent to the international interlocutor, with indirect refusals and adjuncts making up the remainder. Apology responses showed frequent use of explicit illocutionary force-indicating devices, present in 88.7 per cent of responses, often combined with an offer of repair. Disagreements were the most direct of the four acts overall, with 46.8 per cent of responses to the same-culture interlocutor coded as direct or minimally mitigated.

Politeness strategy distributions, coded according to Brown and Levinson's (1987) categories, are summarised in Table 3 and aggregated across the four speech acts.

Table 3. Distribution of politeness strategies  
(Percentage of responses, aggregated)

| Strategy            | Same-culture interlocutor | International interlocutor |
|---------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| Bald on record      | 28.2                      | 13.9                       |
| Positive politeness | 39.5                      | 32.7                       |
| Negative politeness | 26.6                      | 45.2                       |
| Off-record          | 5.7                       | 8.2                        |

The overall pattern in response to RQ1 is that learners employed a range of strategies for each speech act and did not uniformly default to the most direct option. The general preference for conventional indirectness in requests and for mitigation in refusals provides a descriptive baseline against which the interlocutor comparison can be interpreted.

### 4.3 Variation between same-culture and intercultural encounters (RQ2)

The central question was whether these choices shifted between the same-culture and the intercultural encounter. The distributions in Tables 2 and 3 indicate that they did. Direct request strategies fell from 41.9 per cent with the same-culture interlocutor to 17.7 per cent with the international interlocutor, while conventionally indirect strategies rose correspondingly. The same pattern appeared in the politeness data, where bald-on-record strategies were roughly half as frequent with the international interlocutor, and negative politeness rose from 26.6 per cent to 45.2 per cent.

Because the same participants responded to both interlocutor conditions, shifts in strategy choice were tested separately for each speech act, using McNemar's exact test for two-category comparisons and the McNemar-Bowker test for multi-category politeness comparisons, following the decision rules set out in the methodology section. Table 4 reports the results. The shift toward indirectness and mitigation in the international interlocutor condition was significant for requests, refusals, and disagreements on both dimensions, whereas the politeness shift in apologies did not reach significance, consistent with the high baseline level of mitigation that apologies carried in both conditions. No aggregate test across speech acts was conducted, since responses pooled across acts are not independent within participants; instead, the consistent direction of the act-level results is interpreted descriptively.

Table 4. Shifts in strategy choice between interlocutor conditions by speech act

| Speech act   | Comparison                             | Test           | Statistic         | p    |
|--------------|----------------------------------------|----------------|-------------------|------|
| Request      | Directness (direct vs indirect)        | Exact McNemar  | b = 22, c = 7     | .008 |
| Request      | Politeness strategy (three categories) | McNemar-Bowker | $\chi^2(3) = 9.8$ | .020 |
| Refusal      | Structure (direct vs indirect)         | Exact McNemar  | b = 19, c = 6     | .015 |
| Refusal      | Politeness strategy (three categories) | McNemar-Bowker | $\chi^2(3) = 8.4$ | .038 |
| Disagreement | Mitigation (softened vs unmitigated)   | Exact McNemar  | b = 17, c = 6     | .035 |
| Disagreement | Politeness strategy (three categories) | McNemar-Bowker | $\chi^2(3) = 7.9$ | .048 |
| Apology      | Politeness strategy (three categories) | McNemar-Bowker | $\chi^2(3) = 4.1$ | .251 |

*Note:* b is the number of participants who shifted toward greater indirectness or mitigation in the international interlocutor condition; c is the number who shifted in the opposite direction.

Politeness comparisons use three categories, following the merger of off-record responses with negative politeness, as specified in advance in the methodology section.

A closer look shows that this adjustment was not uniform across participants. Using the individual-level criterion defined in the methodology section, 38 of the 62 learners (61.3 per cent) met the adjustment criterion, indicating movement toward greater indirectness or mitigation in at least three of the four matched scenario pairs, while the remaining 24 showed more limited or inconsistent adjustment, rather than no adjustment at all. As Table 5 shows, this classification was robust to a one-pair stricter and a one-pair looser criterion, which shifted the proportion meeting the criterion by no more than 3.2 percentage points. The threshold is nonetheless a researcher-defined analytic convenience, and the resulting categories should be read as a descriptive grouping along a continuum of adjustment rather than as a validated learner typology. This split is the most consequential finding for the study's argument. It indicates that calibration to a culturally unfamiliar addressee is present but not general in this sample, and that a substantial minority adjusted only weakly or inconsistently. The reflective data, discussed below, help explain this division.

Table 5. Participant-level calibration classification under alternative criteria

| Classification criterion              | Adjusters n (%) | Non-adjusters n (%) |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| Stricter (4 of 4 scenario pairs)      | 36 (58.1)       | 26 (41.9)           |
| Pre-specified (3 of 4 scenario pairs) | 38 (61.3)       | 24 (38.7)           |
| Looser (2 of 4 scenario pairs)        | 40 (64.5)       | 22 (35.5)           |

The appropriateness ratings were consistent with this division. Responses to the international interlocutor were rated by the two raters as carrying a somewhat higher risk of misreading on average ( $M = 3.6$ ,  $SD = 0.8$ ) than responses to the same-culture interlocutor ( $M = 4.1$ ,  $SD = 0.7$ ). This gap was concentrated in the group that did not meet the criterion, whose international-condition responses received the lowest mean rating ( $M = 3.1$ ,  $SD = 0.9$ ). These values describe the raters' judgments of likely reception, not reception itself.

#### 4.4 Exploratory patterns related to social power (RQ3)

Social power was examined as a secondary factor, since the scenario set did not permit it to be fully crossed with interlocutor type. Because the power conditions were distributed across different speech acts, the effect of power cannot be separated from that of speech act type, and the comparison describes a pattern across scenario sets rather than an isolated power effect. In scenarios involving a higher-status interlocutor, negative politeness was more frequent than in equal-status scenarios, increasing by approximately 11 percentage points, while bald-on-record strategies were correspondingly less frequent. This is consistent with Brown and Levinson's

(1987) expectation that the addressee's greater relative power raises the weight of the face-threatening act. This power-related pattern appeared alongside the interlocutor-condition pattern rather than overriding it. Given the limited number of higher-status scenarios, this observation should be treated as exploratory.

#### **4.5 Reflective accounts and pragmatic reasoning (RQ4)**

The reflective comments were coded as present, partial, or absent in terms of intercultural awareness. Awareness was coded as present in 37.1 per cent of comments, partial in 40.3 per cent, and absent in 22.6 per cent. Comments coded as present made explicit reference to the interlocutor's cultural background or to cultural norms as a reason for the chosen form. Thematic analysis of these comments produced three recurring themes.

The first theme was deliberate adjustment for cultural distance. Learners in this group described choosing more cautious or more explicit forms specifically because the interlocutor was from a different cultural background, and shared expectations could not be assumed. A representative comment was, "I do not know how she would understand a direct request, so I made it softer to be safe."

The second theme was reliance on norms transferred from the first language. Here, learners justified their choices by appeal to how the act would be performed in Turkish, without reference to the interlocutor's background. A representative comment was, "This is how I would say it to anyone; it is polite in our way." Comments of this kind occurred predominantly among participants who did not meet the adjustment criterion, linking the reflective data to the quantitative pattern reported under RQ2.

The third theme was uncertainty and avoidance. Some learners reported that they were unsure what was appropriate with the international interlocutor and chose a form they considered safe rather than one they judged to be appropriate, sometimes by avoiding the act or hedging heavily. A representative comment was, "I was not sure what was normal for them, so I just apologised many times."

#### **4.6 The Turkish baseline and a possible transfer interpretation**

The Turkish-language version of the task was completed by 20 participants from the main sample, of whom 12 met the adjustment criterion, and 8 did not. The subset contained four scenarios, one per speech act, matched to the English versions in terms of setting and level of imposition, and addressed to a same-culture Turkish interlocutor. Table 6 summarises the dominant strategy in the Turkish baseline alongside the same participants' English production.

Table 6. Dominant strategies in the Turkish baseline and in English production (Baseline subsample)

| Speech act | Turkish baseline<br>(n = 20) | English, non-<br>adjusters (n = 8) | English to international<br>interlocutor, adjusters (n = 12) |
|------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
|------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|

|              |                                 |                                 |                                 |
|--------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Request      | Direct (60%)                    | Direct (63%)                    | Conventionally indirect (75%)   |
| Refusal      | Indirect with reason (70%)      | Indirect with reason (75%)      | Indirect with reason (83%)      |
| Disagreement | Unmitigated (55%)               | Unmitigated (63%)               | Softened (67%)                  |
| Apology      | IFID with offer of repair (80%) | IFID with offer of repair (75%) | IFID with offer of repair (83%) |

*Note:* Percentages are the shares of responses in the subsample that use the dominant strategy. IFID = illocutionary force indicating device.

Two patterns stand out. For participants who did not meet the adjustment criterion, the dominant English strategy matched the dominant Turkish strategy for every act, most notably in requests and disagreements, where direct, unmitigated forms predominated in both languages. This correspondence is what a transfer account predicts: the English forms of these learners were not idiosyncratic but were consistent with their first-language patterns. For participants who met the adjustment criterion, Turkish production resembled that of those who did not. However, their English production in an international context diverged from the Turkish pattern toward greater indirectness and mitigation, consistent with calibration to the addressee rather than wholesale adoption of a new norm. Refusals and apologies showed little movement across columns, since both were heavily mitigated across languages and conditions. This ceiling also accounts for the non-significant results of the apology test in Table 4. Given the size of the subsample, these comparisons are descriptive and should be read as converging evidence for the transfer interpretation rather than as an independent test of it.

#### 4.7 Discussion. Interpreting the patterns together

Read together, the findings support a consistent interpretation. The sample as a whole showed a measurable shift toward indirectness and negative politeness in the intercultural encounter, providing evidence of pragmatic calibration. However, this calibration was far from universal: a substantial group adjusted only weakly or inconsistently, attributing this in their comments to transferred first-language norms. The comparison with the Turkish-language baseline supports this reading (see Table 6): in the baseline data, the forms these learners used in English closely matched their Turkish patterns for the same acts, particularly for requests and disagreements, which is consistent with sociopragmatic transfer in the sense described by Kasper (1992). The finding that intercultural awareness was present in only about a third of comments, while transfer-based and avoidance-based reasoning accounted for the rest, indicates that interlocutor-sensitive pragmatic adjustment was unevenly represented in this sample, more apparent in some learners than in others. Whether this difference reflects a stable underlying ability cannot be determined from the present data, since the observed adjustment may also reflect caution, uncertainty,

assumptions about foreign interlocutors, or strategic avoidance rather than intercultural competence as such. Throughout this interpretation, the international interlocutor condition should be understood as a broad intercultural condition encompassing cultural unfamiliarity, limited shared interactional history, and perceived linguistic asymmetry, rather than as a controlled comparison of specific cultural backgrounds.

The transfer finding aligns closely with the pattern documented by Beebe et al. (1990) for refusals, in which learners carried over first-language formulas into the second language even when their linguistic forms were accurate. Participants not meeting the criterion in the present sample showed the same dissociation: their English was not deficient in form, and many of their responses were rated as appropriate in the same-culture condition, but the pattern itself travelled unchanged into the intercultural condition. This is precisely the configuration Thomas (1983) identified as the most consequential, since an interlocutor who hears fluent English with an unexpected level of directness is unlikely to attribute it to incomplete learning. One possible risk is that fluent but unexpectedly direct forms may be attributed to interpersonal stance rather than to learner status, a sociopragmatic rather than linguistic mismatch.

The behaviour of participants who meet the criterion is equally informative when viewed through the lens of intercultural pragmatics. Their reflective comments rarely appealed to native English norms; instead, they described softening or making their intentions more explicit because shared expectations could not be assumed. This is the construction of common ground that Kecskes (2014) places at the centre of intercultural communication, and it parallels the accommodation strategies documented among speakers of English as a lingua franca, who privilege interpretability and relational care over conformity to any single national convention (Seidlhofer, 2011). Seen this way, even the uncertainty-and-avoidance theme in the reflective data is not simply a deficit. Learners who reported choosing a safe form because they did not know what was normal for the interlocutor may indicate tentative sensitivity to the addressee. However, they may equally reflect uncertainty or strategic avoidance. The pedagogical question this raises is not how to bring learners closer to a native model but how to widen the range of mitigation resources they can draw on when common ground is thin. It is worth noting that greater indirectness is not, in itself, a marker of greater pragmatic competence. Increased mitigation can reduce clarity, and an overly indirect or heavily hedged form may itself be misread in intercultural interaction, where interlocutors do not share the conventions that make indirectness interpretable. The shift documented here is therefore better described as evidence of sensitivity to the addressee than as an unambiguous improvement in appropriateness.

Finally, the split speaks to how intercultural competence is modelled in language education. In Byram's (1997) terms, participants who did not meet the criterion cannot be assumed to lack the attitudinal or knowledge components, since nothing in their comments suggested unwillingness toward the international interlocutor; their responses provided less evidence of interlocutor-sensitive

pragmatic adjustment in this particular task. This supports the view that the components of intercultural competence do not develop in lockstep and that the pragmatic dimension requires its own pedagogical attention, since curricula built around cultural knowledge and a reflective disposition may leave the discourse level insufficiently addressed unless the pragmatic choice itself is taught.

## **5 Conclusions and Recommendations**

This study examined how Turkish university EFL students construct pragmatic appropriateness in English and whether their choices vary between same-culture and intercultural encounters. By varying the interlocutor within the instrument and collecting reflective accounts alongside the speech act data, the study treated pragmatic appropriateness as a calibration rather than a fixed trait. It examined first-language influence against a Turkish-language baseline.

Three conclusions follow from the findings. First, the learners used a range of directness and politeness strategies and, as a group, shifted toward greater indirectness and negative politeness in the intercultural encounter, which suggests that they can engage in pragmatic calibration when addressing a broadly intercultural, culturally unfamiliar addressee. Second, this calibration was not general: roughly 61 per cent of learners adjusted across interlocutor types, while the remainder adjusted only weakly or inconsistently and, in their reflective comments, attributed this to the transfer of first-language norms, an interpretation supported by correspondence with their Turkish baseline. Third, intercultural awareness was fully present in only about a third of comments, with transfer-based and avoidance-based reasoning accounting for the rest. Taken together, interlocutor-sensitive pragmatic adjustment was unevenly represented in this sample, more evident in some learners' production than in others'.

The central contribution of the study is both conceptual and empirical. It supports the argument that specific discourse choices may offer a limited window into the pragmatic dimension of intercultural competence, which cannot be reduced to cultural knowledge or favourable attitudes. A learner may hold positive attitudes toward intercultural contact and continue to rely on first-language pragmatic patterns across the task conditions. The tendency to adjust directness and politeness when addressing a culturally unfamiliar interlocutor is observable in production. It appears to vary across learners, and the present findings suggest that it cannot be assumed to follow automatically from attitudinal or knowledge-based components of intercultural competence. Whether it constitutes a distinct underlying ability, rather than the situated outcome of caution, familiarity, or strategic choice, is a question the present design cannot settle.

These conclusions carry pedagogical implications. If the tendency to calibrate to the interlocutor varies across learners in the way these data suggest, then it is plausibly a teachable target rather than a byproduct of general proficiency. Instruction in EFL preparatory programmes could make the interlocutor an explicit

variable in pragmatic practice, asking learners to perform the same act for addressees of different cultural backgrounds and status. It could use reflective discussion to surface the first-language norms that learners apply without realising it. The pattern of avoidance and overuse of safe forms found in some reflective comments suggests that learners would benefit from exposure to a wider repertoire of mitigation options, so that uncertainty does not default to a single strategy. Materials that present the consequences of pragmatic choices, rather than only their forms, may help learners connect the strategies they select to the way those strategies are likely to be received.

The study has limitations that bound these conclusions. The discourse completion task measures reported choice and metapragmatic knowledge rather than performance in real interaction, so the findings describe what learners know and intend, not how they behave in unfolding conversation. The reflective comments offset this only in part. The sample was drawn from a single preparatory programme within a single proficiency band, limiting generalizability to other settings and levels. The number of scenarios constrained the extent to which social power could be crossed with the interlocutor condition, so the power findings are exploratory. The international interlocutor in the scenarios was described in general terms, and learners may have held varying assumptions about that interlocutor's specific cultural background, which the design did not control. The interlocutor effect reported here should therefore be understood as a response to a broadly intercultural, culturally unfamiliar addressee rather than to any specific cultural background.

These limitations point to directions for further work. Studies using interactional data, such as role-plays or recorded conversations, could test whether the calibration observed here in reported choices also appears in real-time performance. Designs that fully cross the interlocutor condition with social power and distance would allow the relative weight of these factors to be estimated. Longitudinal work could examine whether calibration develops with increased intercultural contact, and intervention studies could test whether the explicit, interlocutor-focused instruction recommended above improves learners' ability to adjust. Comparative work across first-language backgrounds would help establish which patterns found here are specific to Turkish learners and which are more general features of pragmatic development in English as a language of intercultural communication.

### **Data Availability Statement**

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the author upon reasonable request.

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### **Ethics Approval**

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ondokuz Mayıs University Social and Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Approval No. E25.23\_2, 14

November 2025). Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw. No identifying information was collected, and responses were stored in anonymised form.

### AI Use Disclosure

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used Grammarly and Trinka AI in order to improve grammar, language accuracy, and readability. These tools were not used to design the study, conduct the analysis, or generate the interpretation of the findings. The author takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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## Appendix A

### Pragmatic Appropriateness Rating Rubric

Raters applied the following scale to each response, judging the likely interpretability and relational effect of the response for the interlocutor described in the scenario. Responses were not evaluated against native speaker usage. Grammatical or lexical errors were disregarded unless they obscured the communicative intent of the response.

| Rating | Band                    | Descriptor                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|--------|-------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 5      | Fully appropriate       | The response clearly accomplishes the intended act and would plausibly be received as polite and sincere by the interlocutor described in the scenario. The level of directness and mitigation is well matched to the imposition, the power relationship, and what can be assumed to be shared with this interlocutor.                                                                         |
| 4      | Largely appropriate     | The response accomplishes the act and would plausibly be received without offence. Minor mismatches are present, such as slightly more or less mitigation than the situation requires, but these are unlikely to affect how the speaker is read.                                                                                                                                               |
| 3      | Partly appropriate      | The response accomplishes the act, but the form carries a noticeable risk of misreading by the interlocutor described in the scenario, for example, directness that could be heard as brusque, hedging heavy enough to obscure the intent, or a formulation that presumes shared expectations the interlocutor may not hold. The risk is real, but the most likely reading remains acceptable. |
| 2      | Largely inappropriate   | The most likely reading of the response by the interlocutor described in the scenario is negative: the speaker would probably be heard as rude, evasive, dismissive, or insincere, or the intended act is barely recognisable. The communicative purpose is compromised, though not entirely lost.                                                                                             |
| 1      | Seriously inappropriate | The response would very likely damage the relationship or fail the communicative purpose altogether: the act is unrecognisable; it is openly face-threatening without any mitigation the situation would call for; or it is avoided entirely, where avoidance itself constitutes a failure of the act.                                                                                         |

## **Appendix B**

### **Discourse Completion Task Scenarios**

Each scenario was presented in English and followed by two prompts: (1) Write exactly what you would say in English in this situation. (2) In two or three sentences, explain why you chose to say it this way.

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Scenario 1 (Request, Turkish interlocutor, higher status). You could not finish an important assignment on time. You go to the office of your Turkish professor, whom you have known since the beginning of the year, to ask for a few days' extension.                                      |
| Scenario 2 (Request, international interlocutor, higher status). You could not finish an important assignment on time. You go to the office of the international faculty member teaching the course, who recently arrived in Türkiye from another country, to ask for a few days' extension. |
| Scenario 3 (Refusal, Turkish interlocutor, equal status). A Turkish classmate you know well invites you to a birthday gathering this evening. You have an important exam tomorrow morning, and you cannot go.                                                                                |
| Scenario 4 (Refusal, international interlocutor, equal status). A newly arrived exchange student in your class invites you to an event organised for international students this evening. You have an important exam tomorrow morning, and you cannot go.                                    |
| Scenario 5 (Disagreement, Turkish interlocutor, equal status). In a group project meeting, a Turkish group member you have worked with before proposes a plan for the presentation that you believe will not work. You want to say that you see it differently.                              |
| Scenario 6 (Disagreement, international interlocutor, equal status). In a group project meeting, an international student who joined your group this term proposes a plan for the presentation that you believe will not work. You want to say that you see it differently.                  |
| Scenario 7 (Apology, Turkish interlocutor, higher status). You missed a meeting you had scheduled with your Turkish professor and did not inform them in advance. You see the professor the next day and want to apologise.                                                                  |
| Scenario 8 (Apology, international interlocutor, higher status). You missed a scheduled meeting with the international faculty member teaching your course and did not inform them in advance. You see them the next day and want to apologise.                                              |