



## Research Article

# Raising EFL Learners' Pragmatic Competence via Teaching Compliments: The Case of Explicit vs Implicit Instruction in Focus

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### ABSTRACT

Teaching the English language involves not only the lexical and grammatical systems but also the implicatures, implied meanings, and the influence of context/culture on interpretation (Tanduk, 2023), which are invisible and hard to teach. In effect, the researchers aimed to investigate whether explicit and implicit instruction of compliment speech acts could help EFL learners achieve pragmatic appropriateness in authentic communication. The study comprised 60 intermediate EFL learners, 21 males, and 39 females, from a private English language institute in Amol. Participants were divided into two groups of 30 learners each - explicit and non-explicit. The teacher-researchers taught both groups how to give and respond to compliments, using explicit techniques for one group and implicit techniques for the other. Participants received a Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT) before and after the intervention to evaluate their pragmatic competence. The obtained data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), and a noteworthy disparity between the pre-test and post-test scores of both groups was revealed. Although both methods enhanced the pragmatic competence of EFL learners, the explicit group demonstrated more significant improvement compared to the implicit group. Findings testify that appropriate instruction can lead to better outcomes.

## Introduction

Pragmatics is a linguistic field that delves deeper than just grammar and vocabulary. It focuses on understanding how language is used in context, by analyzing the literal meaning of words and their implied meanings, implicatures, and how context and culture can influence interpretation

(Tanduk, 2023). Crozet (2003) suggested that “pragmatics involves some of the rules that govern interactions, but these rules are not immediately obvious and are instead referred to as invisible rules”. Pragmatics, as defined by LoCastro (2003), refers to the study of meaning conveyed through the interaction between speakers and listeners. This

includes both linguistic and non-linguistic cues that are used during sociocultural activities. This understanding of pragmatics highlights the importance of communication between individuals within a given sociocultural context.

Since the late 1980s, recommendations have been made by L2 scholars to add pragmatic instruction into L2 curricula to enhance learners' pragmatic competence (e.g., Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). Pragmatic Competence refers to one's knowledge of communicative action and how to carry it out, as well as the ability to use language appropriately according to context, as defined by Kasper (1997). According to Barron (2003), pragmatic competence refers to the understanding of the linguistic resources present in a language that can be used to convey specific intentions, as well as knowledge of the order in which speech acts occur and the appropriate contextual use of linguistic resources. In the same vein, Kasper (1997) defined pragmatic competence as a speaker's declarative knowledge of the target language and the ability of learners to utilize speech acts in socially appropriate ways. As highlighted by Huang (2022), pragmatic competence is the ability to negotiate meaning dynamically and interactively between two or more people in specific circumstances and it is an axiomatic component of communicative competence (Timpe Laughlin et al., 2015). As a result, it could be inferred that having pragmatic competence involves possessing knowledge of linguistics and social norms, as well as the ability to apply this knowledge in social interactions.

Speech acts are crucial elements of communication as they enable us to perform a range of actions such as requesting, commanding, promising, apologizing, complimenting, refusing, and more. Communication is a complex process that involves various speech acts that help individuals navigate social interactions (Fudholi et al., 2023). Nonetheless, studies on the practical skills of second language (L2) learners have shown marked differences in how native speakers and L2 learners approach pragmatics (Kasper 1997). According to Hymes (1972), language learners must not only develop language proficiency but also pragmatic competence to avoid cross-cultural communication issues also known as a *pragmatic*

*failure*. Thomas (1983) defined pragmatic failure as a situation where learners transfer their first language (L1) pragmatic rules into second language (L2) contexts. This transfer of rules could result in stereotyping of specific speech communities, as speakers may be perceived as thoughtless or impolite. Even advanced learners, according to Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), frequently make pragmatic errors while communicating, as they may not convey or grasp the intended illocutionary force or politeness value. Hence, learners' lack of pragmatic awareness might cause them to miss the key points that are being communicated or to have the crucial messages misunderstood (Kasper, 1997). In addition, classroom observations have manifested that L2 learners suffer from a deficiency in pragmatic knowledge (Huang, 2022), which emanates from exposure to insufficient and sometimes irrelevant input in EFL classrooms (Malmir & Derakhshan, 2020). In the same fashion, Kasper and Schmidt (1996) maintained that one of the causes of learners' non-target-like pragmatic performance is the incomplete or misleading input provided by pedagogical materials.

Bachman (1990) divided language competence into two areas 1) organizational competence, which comprises the knowledge of linguistic units and rules of joining them together at the levels of sentence (grammatical competence) and discourse (textual competence), and 2) pragmatic competence, which is the knowledge of speech acts and speech functions. Therefore, communication should be taught according to the sociocultural rules that govern speech acts in a given speech. In Weizman's terms (1985), pragmatics could be taught in different cultures by instructing either speech act strategies (e.g., request, apology, promise, compliment, refusal, compliment response) or other pragmatic features (hedges, and address markers), and this claim has been analyzed by many scholars (Bagherkazemi, 2018; Bonalumi et al., 2023; Derakhshan & Arabmofrad, 2018; Kaivanpanah & Langari, 2020; Malmir, 2020).

Hitherto, numerous studies have explored and evaluated different approaches in teaching pragmatics, such as inductive and deductive instruction, explicit and implicit teaching, meta-pragmatic discussion, teaching within the zone of

proximal development (ZPD), and input/output-based instruction (e.g., Alkawaz et al., 2023; Altun & Dinçer, 2020; Birjandi & Derakhshan, 2014; Blyth & Sykes, 2020; Bonalumi et al., 2023; Plonsky & Zhuang, 2019; Tajeddin & Alemi, 2020; Yousefi & Nassaji, 2019). The consensus among these studies is that pragmatic instruction is superior, a crucial element of L2 learning and teaching, and has positive effects. Furthermore,

In the context of speech acts, pragmatics plays a pivotal role and pragmatic instruction is significant in developing second language skills as it is important to have a good understanding of language use and to develop pragmatic competence to communicate effectively across cultures (Haung, 2022). However, Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners might face difficulty expressing informal speech accurately in various situations due to limited exposure to English and a lack of suitable learning materials. Therefore, this study aims to investigate whether explicit or implicit instruction of the speech act of compliments and compliment responses can help intermediate Iranian EFL learners improve their pragmatic knowledge and competence. Furthermore, the teacher-researchers have tried to examine the effectiveness of this dichotomy of instruction (i.e., explicit and implicit) in raising EFL learners' awareness of pragmatics. This, in turn, may lead to greater pragmatic appropriateness in real-world communication situations as understanding the linguistic and pragmatic functions of speech acts is crucial for effective communication and avoiding misunderstandings in multicultural settings (Akmal et al., 2022). So, the following research questions are addressed:

**RQ1:** Is there a significant difference in conversational appropriateness of Iranian intermediate EFL learners regarding compliments when they receive explicit instruction on pragmatics?

**RQ2:** Is there a significant difference in conversational appropriateness of Iranian intermediate EFL learners regarding compliments when they receive implicit instruction on pragmatics?

**RQ3:** Is there a statistically significant difference between teaching pragmatics through

explicit versus implicit methods on the pragmatic competency of intermediate EFL learners in Iran?

The results of the study will offer valuable insights to material designers, experts, educators, ELT trainers, and curriculum developers regarding the importance of pragmatic awareness in cross-cultural communication.

## Literature Review

Having been considered a fertile ground for research, numerous experimental studies have been conducted to provide recommendations for L2 education that encompass different perceptions of pragmatic competence (e.g., Birjandi & Derakhshan, 2014; Blyth & Sykes, 2020; Bonalumi et al., 2023; Cohen, 2008; Culpeper et al., 2018; Derakhshan et al., 2021; Derakhshan & Arabmofrad, 2018; Derakhshan & Cohen, 2021; Derakhshan & Eslami, 2015; Derakhshan & Eslami Rasekh, 2020; Derakhshan & Malmir, 2021; Hernández, 2021; Irshad & Bukhari, 2020; Kasper & Roever, 2005; Malmir & Derakhshan, 2020; Shakki et al., 2021; Tajeddin & Alemi, 2020; Taguchi, 2019; Vygotsky, 1987). In addition, various activities and exercises have been proposed and practiced to help L2 learners choose appropriate communicative acts or strategies based on the context (Derakhshan & Shakki, 2021; Kasper, 1997; Rose, 2005). In this regard, orders, offers, congratulations, claims, judgments, apologies, requests, compliments, refusals, and compliment responses are among speech act strategies that could be employed to enhance L2 learners' pragmatic competence in different cultures (Weizman, 1985). Additionally, various approaches to teaching pragmatics, such as explicit and implicit teaching, have been extensively explored and evaluated (Derakhshan & Shakki, 2020; Gökgöz-Kurt, 2023), briefly discussed in the following sections.

## Speech Act: The Concept

Within the vast realm of linguistic communication, speech acts stand as crucial building blocks, enabling us to make requests, make promises, refuse, apologize, give orders, compliment, and perform numerous other actions that shape our interactions and relationships

(Tanduk, 2023). Speech acts, according to Risselada (2019), encompass various categories, including directives (requests, orders), commissive (promises, offers), expressive (apologies, congratulations, compliments), assertive (statements, claims), and verdicts (judgments, assessments). The complex nature of human communication is demonstrated through the use of various speech acts, where language is utilized to navigate intricate social interactions (Tanduk, 2023). The study of speech acts is not only about language, but it is also a key to understanding intercultural communication, human sociality, and the influence of culture on language use and interpretation. Having a solid understanding of speech acts in both linguistic and pragmatic contexts is crucial for effective communication and avoiding misunderstandings in multicultural settings (Akmal et al., 2022). Furthermore, Speech acts are not static entities; rather, they are dynamic processes that are influenced by various factors, such as the relationship between interlocutors, the context of the conversation, and the cultural norms that shape communication (De Castro, 2022). Pragmatics enables us to study the dynamic aspects of communication. It helps us understand why people choose certain speech acts and how they balance clarity and politeness in specific situations (Tanduk et al., 2021).

### **The Speech Act of Compliment**

A compliment is a form of speech used to strengthen community and solidarity between individuals. Its purpose is to boost someone's positive self-image and create a feeling of unity (Ulfa et al., 2023). Compliments are generally viewed as a polite way of communicating and can be used on their own or as part of a broader statement. According to Brown and Levinson, it is a collaborative speech act that acts as a "social lubricant". As per Holmes (1988), compliments are a way to express positive judgment and evaluation of someone's achievements or appearance. According to Holmes and Brown (1987), complimenting is a complicated social skill. Although it can be a positive gesture, it also has a downside. Sometimes compliments can be interpreted as offensive, ironic, sarcastic,

patronizing, or even put-downs. Complimenting may be seen as a face-threatening act because it can create the complementor's debt (Holmes, 1988). This means that receivers may feel obliged to return the compliment.

Compliments are a way to express admiration or praise for someone's appearance, manners, personality, or other positive attributes during a conversation. They can be used to initiate a dialogue or maintain a previously established social relationship. Compliments are an integral part of every culture, and each culture has its unique ways of expressing approval and admiration for its members. However, the number and method of giving compliments vary across different cultures (Ishihara & Cohen, 2014). Compliments differ in structure, distribution, frequency, and function cross-culturally (Wolfson, 1981). It is crucial to understand that acceptable types of compliments can differ significantly across various cultures. For example, in the culture of America, it's entirely usual to compliment someone's spouse openly regarding their appearance, such as saying "Your wife is so beautiful!" However, in Iranian culture and many other Middle Eastern countries, such a compliment could have negative consequences for both the giver and the receiver.

### **The Explicit and Implicit Instruction**

Long's (1991) View suggested that Focus on Forms is similar to teacher-centered instruction that is highly metapragmatic, decontextualized, and emphasizes explicit awareness, practice, and production tasks. According to Norris and Ortega's (2001) research, explicit instruction includes providing students with explanations and clarifications of rules during the lesson. This means that teachers use various techniques to help students focus on grammatical structures and forms. Besides, in applied research on the English language, Focus on Form methods provide indirect instruction. Learners gain attention incidentally and receive implicit input without direct focus. Implicit instruction does not involve any explanation of pragmatics or metapragmatic rule provision. Instead, it refers to teaching methods that help students unconsciously infer rules (Jeon & Kaya, 2006). In the current study, explicit instruction

involved direct teaching of the compliment speech act to learners, while the non-explicit group received indirect and implicit instruction.

### Several Related Studies

Ishihara (2004) examined how teaching compliments/compliment responses benefited 31 ESL learners. The training was conducted across four sessions, spanning roughly three hours, and involved various activities and skills. These included writing compliments for different social settings, taking notes, providing feedback and evaluations, and reading. Both groups were given a pre-test and an immediate post-test, followed by a delayed post-test administered after a year of instruction. The tests required writing compliment dialogues using both compliments and their responses. The study revealed that explicit instruction had a positive effect on enhancing students' awareness and use of specific pragmatic forms. However, a certain degree of attrition was observed in the delayed post-test. These findings are crucial in improving the effectiveness of instruction for learners' pragmatic development. However, further research is required to compare various instructional paradigms.

Nguyen et al. (2012) conducted a study to probe into the impact of explicit versus implicit instruction on developing pragmatic competence. The study included sixty-nine Vietnamese students who were divided into three groups: explicit, implicit, and control. The study results manifested that the explicit group outperformed the implicit group. However, both groups showed significant improvement compared to the control group, indicating the effectiveness of the instruction.

Rajabi and Farahian (2013) conducted a study to investigate the impact of instruction on the acquisition and development of pragmatic competence. Their research involved 34 Iranian EFL learners who were divided into two groups: an experimental group and a control group. Awareness-raising instruction was allocated to the experimental group, while the control group was deprived of any intervention. The results showed that the experimental group outperformed the control group. However, both groups showed improvement in terms of pragmatic performance.

Rezvani et al. (2014) conducted a study to determine the effectiveness of implicit and explicit teaching on the pragmatic development of Iranian EFL students. 60 Iranian EFL students were divided into Implicit and Explicit groups to assess their ability to make suggestions and requests. Both groups took pre and post-tests. The results showed that both instruction types had a positive impact on the students' pragmatic competence.

Taguchi (2015) reviewed 58 experimental studies and reported that explicit instruction of pragmatic features was more effective than implicit instruction. Input exposure was found to be not sufficient in promoting learning, even when by the use of enhancement techniques, the input had been emphasized. The study findings showed that explicit clarification of various aspects of the speech act (i.e., pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic), in addition to enhancing awareness embedded in the tasks, ultimately caused EFL learners' metapragmatic awareness.

Plonsky and Zhuang (2019) conducted a study by collecting fifty research papers to analyze the effectiveness of pragmatic instruction. The results showed the effectiveness of explicit instruction over implicit instruction.

Ziafar (2020) carried out a research project to look into the effect of various lexical approaches (i.e., implicit, explicit, and contrastive) on the pragmatic competence of 63 EFL learners. The study was conducted on a sample of EFL learners who were separated into three groups for treatment. The primary source of instruction for the students was episodes of a TV sitcom. Following the treatment, the students took a post-test which revealed that explicit instruction had a significantly positive effect on their pragmatic awareness/competence, and was more useful than implicit instruction.

Derakhshan and Shakki (2020) probed the impact of implicit versus explicit metapragmatic instruction on EFL students' ability to understand apologies and refusals. To this end, based on the Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT), they chose 49 Iranian EFL learners and assigned the selected participants into three groups: implicit, explicit, and control. The researchers used a validated Discourse Completion Test (DCT) comprising 128 items,

with 8 conversations each for refusal and apology. The results of a one-way ANOVA manifested that the student's understanding of pragmatic language improved and that the explicit group significantly outperformed the implicit group.

Shakki et al. (2021) conducted a thorough study on the effectiveness of instructing apologies. Struggling to answer their research questions, they reviewed 31 papers and utilized 12 primary studies. According to the study, apology instruction showed a medium effect size regarding its overall effectiveness. The variable that moderated productivity was the research design ( $g = 2.39$ ), which was assumed to predict efficiency. Additionally, the instruction of apology in pragmatics generated medium and large effect sizes among the different treatment types.

At last, meta-analyses and systematic reviews on pragmatic instruction have been conducted by enterprising scholars, including Jeon and Kaya (2006), Plonsky and Zhuang (2019), Yousefi and Nassaji (2019), Shakki, (2022), Shakki et al. (2021). They have unanimously argued that pragmatic features are more likely to lend themselves to explicit teaching than to implicit instruction, teaching pragmatics is effective for L2 learners to acquire pragmatic competence and other variables such as implicatures and routines have the potential to be considered noble research areas for future studies rather than speech acts.

## Method

### Participants

The study sample was taken from a private language school in Amol, Iran. A total of 100 EFL learners who had studied English for 12 semesters (3 years) at the same language school (where the English teacher-researchers teach) were randomly selected. Then, the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was given to all participants. Based on Allen's (2004) rating scale for the intermediate OPT, 60 participants who scored above 65 out of the total score were identified as intermediate learners and selected for this study. In effect, 21 male and 39 female (aged 19 to 24) monolingual intermediate-level EFL learners who had been learning English at the same language school for at least 12 semesters (3 years), comprised the participants of this

experimental study. The average age of the selected participants was determined to be 21.5. To avoid any uneven distribution of potential confounding variables between the groups which would impact the study's internal validity, the participants were randomly divided into two groups 1) an explicit group and 2) an implicit group, each consisting of 30 members. All of the participants started learning English in the same private language school (situated in Amol city in Iran) from the elementary level up to the intermediate level which sounded enough to ensure that they belonged to the same population. In addition, they had also taken English courses in the public schooling system of Iran which is standard throughout the whole country. Therefore, the researchers expected that the learners would have a similar level of proficiency in English, which was met to a high extent as there was not much difference in this regard among the groups.

### Instruments

To ensure the participants' homogeneity in terms of level of language proficiency, the researchers used the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) which has a Cronbach's alpha value of .81. This test comprises 100 multiple-choice questions that evaluate the grammatical knowledge of the participants. The test is designed based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and is tailored to each proficiency level.

As part of this study, the researchers used a personal profile questionnaire that included questions about the participant's educational background, age, gender, first language, home language (i.e., the language they use at home), official language (i.e., the language they use at formal and educational establishments), and other relevant information.

Researchers developed a Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT) based on the works of Billmyer (1990) and Dunham (1992) for the pre- and post-tests. WDCT is a questionnaire that requires written responses and is often used to encourage speech production. It usually presents various scenarios or untrue situations to prompt the desired speech/act being studied (Geluyskens,

2007). Each description is followed by a section of dialogue where the participants are required to fill in the blanks imagining what they or some abstract person would do and utter in that imaginary situation (Kasper & Dahl, 1991, p. 9). WDCT is a preferred form of assessment compared to other types as it has been demonstrated that instructional effects are more apparent in the results of an assessment tool that requires less cognitive processing (Taguchi, 2015). WDCT allows more time for planning, in contrast to other types of productive tasks such as role plays (Cyluk, 2013). To obtain truthful WDCT results, the participants were assured that their results would be kept confidential.

In this study, the validity of the WDCT (comprising 15 scenarios for compliments and compliment responses) was confirmed by the stamp of approval of three experts of TEFL, including supervisors and consultants of the Ayatollah Amoli Branch of Islamic Azad University. To determine the reliability of the WDCT, the Cronbach's alpha method was used. The test was piloted with a group of learners who had similar characteristics as the target population, such as age, gender, and level. The test was modified based on the feedback received during the pilot and used for both the pretest and post-test. However, the order of the situations was changed for each test. The pilot test involved 30 EFL learners and the results indicated a mean of  $M=23.4$  and a standard deviation of  $SD=1.96$ . The test was reliable with an estimated  $r$  value of  $0.79$ , as determined by the Kr-21 method. These results suggest that the test is acceptable for use. You can find more information in Table 1.

### Data Collection Procedure

Initially, The Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was administered to learners who had been studying English at the same language school for a minimum of 12 semesters (3 years). Based on Allen's (2004) rating scale for the OPT intermediate, 60 participants who scored above 65 out of the total score were identified as intermediate learners and selected for this study.

Next, the participants were requested to complete a personal profile questionnaire that

included questions regarding their language background, educational level, gender, age, primary language, and official language. This information was gathered to provide the researchers with demographic data and ensure that all participants were monolingual and belonged to the same population. Then three phases of the study began 1) pretest, 2) treatment, and 3) posttest, discussed as follows.

In the first phase, a WDCT was administered to both groups as a pretest to help the researchers gain a general profile of the participant's knowledge and awareness of pragmatics (i.e., the speech act of complement and complement responses).

In the second phase, the treatment phase spanned over eight weeks, with learners attending classes twice a week. The explicit and implicit groups had 16 sessions, each lasting 75 minutes. During the semester, the language school curriculum required 30 minutes of each session to be dedicated to an experiment in both groups. Both the explicit and non-explicit groups received the same amount of instruction and practice sessions. One of the teacher-researchers taught both groups. Each session covered between 10 to 12 pragmatic features. However, there were two differences between the groups: different texts and materials were used, and the materials were presented in different ways. The explicit group was given explicit instructions on how to use English compliments in different social contexts. This was done through video explanations and handouts showcasing the differences between various formulas, and a lot of discussion and engagement. On the other hand, the implicit group was only exposed to compliments through video clips without any explicit explanations or additional activities. All other procedures like time limits, class hours, course book, the teacher, physical conditions, and tests for the implicit group were the same as those for the explicit group. The primary aim of the teaching sessions was to help learners understand the common syntactic and semantic structures used for complimenting, the common adjectives used for complimenting, general tendencies in compliment responding with a special emphasis on the inappropriateness of disagreement, and gender differences in complimenting. To achieve this,

Decoo's (1996) Modality A (Explicit-Deductive Instruction) and Modality B (Explicit-Inductive Instruction with guided discovery) were utilized to teach ESL learners the speech acts of complimenting and responding to compliments.

In the third phase, both groups were given a post-test of WDCT after 8 weeks of instruction. As mentioned earlier, the WDCT is a test used in the field of pragmatics designed to elicit specific pragmatic functions from EFL learners whose responses are then evaluated by human raters to assess their performance (Liu & Xie, 2014); therefore, it is crucial to ensure accuracy and fairness in assigned ratings used for decision-making. In effect, to minimize the effect of bias, severity, leniency, halo effect, and inaccuracy in the ratings given by researchers of this study on pre and post-tests, two native English speakers were also asked to review and approve the ratings. These reviewers were well-versed in the rating guidelines and provided an additional layer of quality control. Finally, the data collected from the pre-test and post-test were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 20 (i.e., SPSS 20). In this Table 1.

*Reliability*

Test	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance	Reliability (KR-21)
WDCT	30	19.5	30.0	23.4	1.960	3.221	0.79

As shown in Table 1, the results represent that the mean score is  $M=23.4$  and the standard deviation is  $SD=1.96$ . The reliability of the test based on the Kr-21 method is determined as  $r=0.79$ , which is an acceptable reliability. Additionally, Table 2 displays the distribution of participants by gender:

Table 2.

*Frequency distribution of the participants based on gender*

Group	Gender	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Explicit	male	21	34.6	33.3
	female	39	65.4	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	

Table 3.

*Kolmogorov-Smirnov analysis*

Group	Pre-test	Post-test
Explicit	N	60
		60

regard, the mean scores of both groups were compared not only within the group, but also among two groups by employing 1) descriptive analysis, including mean, percentage, and percentile, and 2) inferential analysis, including independent samples t-test and paired sample t-test. In other words, the data were analyzed to find out any probable improvement in the learners' knowledge of pragmatics after receiving the treatment, to discover which variable was more effective, and to investigate the effectiveness of different teaching methods (i.e., implicit vs. explicit teaching) on promoting EFL learners' knowledge of pragmatics in two groups.

**Data Analysis**

**Results**

Initially, the reliability of the WDCT questionnaire was determined by employing Cronbach's alpha test, and the results are presented in Table 1. below:

Group	Gender	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Implicit	male	21	34.6	33.3
	female	39	65.4	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	

In Table 2, the study shows that 34.6% of male and 65.4% of female students participated in each group. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov analysis was then conducted to determine if the study parameters were normally distributed. In other words, the analysis was used to see if the data followed a normal distribution pattern. The findings of the analysis are listed in Table 3 below:



	Normal Parameters <sup>ab</sup>	Mean	4.27	6.76	
		Std. Deviation	1.96	2.01	
	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		.993	1.23	
	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.278	.089	
	<b>Implicit</b>	N		60	60
		Normal Parameters <sup>ab</sup>	Mean	4.46	5.84
Std. Deviation			2.13	1.66	
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z			.930	1.38	
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)			.367	.055	

Based on the results shown in Table 3, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistic is found to be greater than  $0.05$  which indicates statistical insignificance at the level of ( $p < 0.05$ ). As a result, we can say with 95% certainty that the data follows a normal distribution, which means that parametric statistical methods can be used for analyzing the research questions.

### Investigating the First Research Question

To answer the first research question of the study, both descriptive and inferential analysis techniques were utilized. This question was focused on whether there is a significant difference in conversational appropriateness of Iranian intermediate EFL learners when they receive explicit instruction on pragmatics, particularly concerning compliments. The outcomes of this analysis are presented in Tables 4-5.

Table 4.

*The mean scores of the explicit group before and after the treatment*

	Group Test	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
<b>Explicit</b>	Pre-test	4.27	60	1.962	0.356
	Post-test	6.76	60	2.011	0.411

Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics for the explicit group before and after the treatment. The results reveal that the mean score of the pre-test of the explicit group is  $M=4.27$  and  $SD=1.96$ , while the mean score of the post-test is  $M=6.76$  and  $SD=2.01$ . The mean difference ( $-2.48$ ) indicates that the learners of the explicit group improved due to the intervention. To examine the effect of explicit instruction of pragmatics on the learning of the explicit group, inferential statistics (i.e., independent samples t-test) were used. Table 5 presents the inferential analysis in this regard.

Table 5.

*Inferential statistics of the explicit group before and after the treatment*

Group	Test	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
<b>Explicit</b>	pre posttest	-	-5.989	58 .000

Based on the information provided in Table 5, the significance level of the  $p$ -value is smaller than

$0.05$  (i.e.,  $p=0.00 < 0.05$ ), so it could be inferred that there is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the explicit group before and after the treatment. This testifies that the explicit group of the study improved after receiving the treatment. Therefore, the first null hypothesis of the study (i.e., Explicit instruction of pragmatic techniques does not affect Iranian intermediate EFL learners' conversational ability) is rejected.

### Investigating the Second Research Question

To find the answer to the second research question of the study (i.e., Is there a significant difference in conversational appropriateness of Iranian intermediate EFL learners regarding compliments when they receive implicit instruction on pragmatics?) descriptive as well as inferential analysis was employed to compare the mean scores before and after the administration of the treatment. The results are presented in the two following tables (i.e., Tables 6-7).

Table 6.

*The implicit group's mean scores before and after the treatment*

Group Test		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Implicit	Pre-test	4.46	60	2.131	0.462
	Post-test	5.84	60	1.661	0.411

Table 6. shows the descriptive statistics for the mean scores of the implicit group before and after treatment. According to the results, the mean score of the pre-test of the implicit group is  $M=4.46$ ,  $SD=2.13$ , and  $M=5.84$ ,  $SD=1.66$ , for the post-test of the same group. The mean difference (i.e.,  $-1.38$ ) testifies that the learners of the implicit group also improved as a result of the intervention. To find out if there has been any statistically significant difference between their mean scores, inferential statistics was employed, too. Table 7 shows the inferential analysis in this regard:

Table 7.

*Comparison of the mean scores of the implicit group before and after the treatment*

Group Test	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Implicit pre - posttest	-4.027	58	.000

According to the information presented in Table 7, the significance level is less than 0.05, which means that  $p=0.00 < 0.05$ . This suggests that there is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the implicit group before and after treatment. As a result, the second null hypothesis of the study, which states that implicit instruction of pragmatic techniques does not affect Iranian intermediate EFL learners' conversational ability, is also rejected.

### Investigating the Third Research Question

To find out the answer to the third research question of the study regarding the existence of any statistically significant difference between explicit vs implicit methods of teaching pragmatics, descriptive and inferential statistics were employed and the results were tabulated in the following four tables (i.e., Tables 8-11). Table 8 shows the comparison between the mean scores of both groups before the administration of the treatment, as follows:

Table 8.

*Descriptive statistics for both groups before treatment*

Test	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-test	Explicit	60	4.27	1.961	0.356
	Implicit	60	4.46	2.131	0.462

In Table 8, the mean and standard deviation for the explicit group were found to be  $4.27$  and  $1.96$ , respectively. For the implicit group, the mean and standard deviation were  $4.46$  and  $2.13$ , respectively. This indicates that there was no significant difference in the mean scores of both groups before the treatment was administered, with a partial mean difference of  $-0.19$ . This implies that both groups had a similar level of knowledge about using compliment formulas in pragmatics before the treatment. To get a better understanding of the

mean scores for both groups, inferential statistics was used (i.e., t-test). The results are presented in Table 9, as follows:

Table 9.

*Inferential statistics to compare both groups before the treatment*

t-test for Equality of Means		
	t	df
Pre-test	-.341	116

Sig. (2-tailed)

.734

According to the data presented in Table 9, the p-value indicates that it is higher than 0.05 ( $p=0.734>0.05$ ). Therefore, it can be concluded that there is no significant difference between the

mean scores of the two groups before the treatment administration. For comparison of the mean scores of both groups after the treatment, a descriptive analysis was performed, and the results are outlined in Table 10.

Table 10.  
*The mean scores of both groups after the treatment*

Group	N	Mean		Mean Difference	Std. Deviation
		Pretest	Posttest		
Explicit	60	4.27	6.76	-2.49	2.96
Implicit	60	4.46	5.84	-1.38	2.34

Based on the information presented in Table 10, it was observed that both the explicit and implicit groups in the study showed improvement after receiving treatment. However, the explicit group showed a greater improvement than the implicit group. This is indicated by the mean scores of the groups (explicit = 6.76, implicit = 5.84). The results suggest that utilizing explicit teaching of pragmatics is more effective than implicit teaching in improving pragmatic awareness among intermediate EFL learners in Iran. Additionally, a paired-sample t-test was conducted to compare the mean scores of the post-test of both groups, to evaluate the effectiveness of each group and to investigate the impact of different teaching techniques (implicit vs. explicit teaching) on the development of pragmatic knowledge. Please refer to Table 11 for more information.

Table 11.  
*Inferential statistics to compare both groups after the treatment*

	t-test for Equality of Means		
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Post-test	2.275	116	.024

According to the data presented in Table 11, the p-value level is less than 0.05 ( $p=0.024<0.05$ ), indicating a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the explicit and implicit groups after the treatment. This means that explicit teaching was significantly more effective than implicit teaching in teaching compliment formulas or pragmatic awareness to EFL learners. For a better understanding of the results, refer to Figure 1.

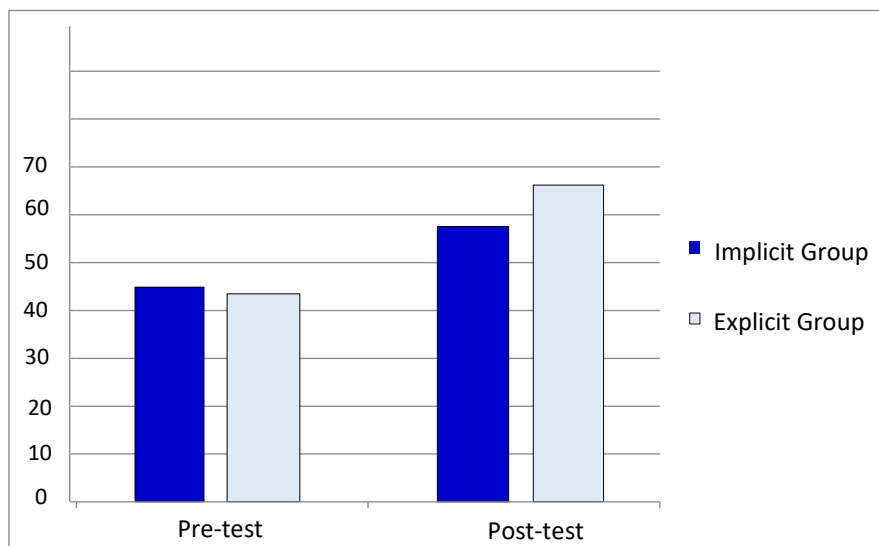


Figure 1. *Mean scores of both groups before and after the treatment*

Note. The Explicit group improved more than the Implicit group

## Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the effects of implicit and explicit teaching methods on the conversational skills of intermediate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Iran. The study focused on the pragmatic feature of complimenting and explored how different teaching approaches affect the learners' pragmatic competence. Previous research has shown positive outcomes for various instructional methods in developing the pragmatic competence of EFL learners (e.g., Ahmadpour et al., 2020; Alkawaz et al., 2023; Altun & Dinçer, 2020; Bardovi-Harlig, 2013; Bonalumi et al., 2023; Crozet & Liddicoat, 1999; Huang, 2022; Plonsky & Zhuang, 2019; Taguchi, 2019; Tajeddin & Alemi, 2020; Yousefi & Nassaji, 2019).

The study has shown that there is a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test results of the two groups involved in the study. It can be inferred that this teaching dichotomy, whether explicit or implicit, has the potential to increase intermediate EFL learners' knowledge of pragmatics. However, the results indicate that the group that received explicit instruction improved more than the implicit group. The study suggests that explicit teaching has been significantly more effective than implicit teaching in helping EFL learners learn compliment formulas. These findings are consistent with the results of some previously conducted studies, which highlighted the impact of explicit instruction on improving EFL learners' pragmatic awareness (e.g., Alkawaz et al., 2023; Altun & Dinçer, 2020; Birjandi & Derakhshan, 2014; Blyth & Sykes, 2020; Bonalumi et al., 2023; Derakhshan & Arabmofrad, 2018; Huang, 2022; Plonsky & Zhuang, 2019; Tajeddin & Alemi, 2020).

The field of literature is abundant with research that demonstrates a strong correlation between language proficiency and various language components, including grammar, syntax, semantics, morphology, phonology, and pragmatic competence (Safdari, 2019). Additionally, further development of a second language requires learners to notice the features of the target language, as per Schmidt (1993). Research on instruction has

extensively explored the teachability of these features in general, as well as different pragmatic features in particular. As to the results of this study, adequate and appropriate instruction in pragmatics can help EFL learners gain sufficient pragmatic knowledge and become competent in real communication. Without it, pragmatic failure may occur, leading to misunderstandings and communication breakdowns. Such crucial findings are also consistent with previous research conducted in an EFL setting by Alkawaz et al. (2023), Altun & Dinçer (2020), Huang (2022), Kim (2022), Plonsky & Zhuang (2019), Shakki (2022), and Tulgar (2016).

The present study, as well as the aforementioned ones, has shown that teaching pragmatic skills is more effective than not teaching them at all. Thus, second language learners need to develop these skills as part of their curriculum. The classroom provides a great opportunity for learners to acquire knowledge about sociocultural awareness and pragmatic competence (Barjesteh et al, 2014). Therefore, the second language curriculum should include modules that raise awareness of sociocultural issues.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of implicit and explicit teaching methods on the conversational abilities of intermediate-level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Iran. The study specifically looked at the pragmatic aspect of complimenting and investigated how different teaching approaches can influence learners' pragmatic competence.

The study has revealed that there is a notable difference between the results of the pre-test and post-test of the two groups that participated in the study. It can be inferred that this teaching method, whether it was explicit or implicit, can enhance the intermediate EFL learners' knowledge of pragmatics. However, the results indicate that the explicit group showed more improvement than the implicit group. The study suggests that explicit teaching is significantly more effective than implicit teaching when it comes to helping EFL learners

learn compliment formulas. The results of this study indicate that teaching pragmatic skills is more effective than leaving them out entirely. As a result, second language learners should be exposed to these skills as part of their curriculum. The classroom offers a valuable setting for learners to acquire knowledge related to sociocultural awareness and pragmatic competence. Therefore, it is important to include modules in the second language curriculum that promote awareness of sociocultural issues.

The results of this study offer valuable insights for language experts, educators, teacher trainers, heads of language institutes, ELT material designers, curriculum developers, and language stakeholders. It is important to be careful when teaching the subtle and less visible aspects of a language as it is necessary to comprehend and use language effectively in different situations. Learners may miss key points or misunderstand messages due to poor pragmatic competence (Kasper, 1997). ESL/EFL instructors are advised to enable learners to gain maximum exposure to the pragmatic features of the language. Teachers are advised to use various tactics during L2 instruction to enhance learners' attentiveness towards cultural aspects and to act as facilitators. Additionally, it is important to inform learners that compliments and responses to compliments are highly dependent on the context and can be difficult to learn. To help learners understand these nuances, they should be exposed to real-life examples of these structures both in and out of the classroom. This can be achieved through various activities and assignments that require learners to collect authentic samples of the target pragmatic structures.

Many language teachers are trained in teaching different skills and components of a second language (Isaee & Barjesteh, 2023); however, they often lack training in L2 pragmatics. This is not surprising, as L2 pragmatics is considered a peripheral topic in L2 teaching. Therefore, it is important to emphasize the teaching of L2 pragmatics to empower language teachers who are best suited to determine what, when, and how to teach pragmatics. It is essential to provide language teachers with appropriate knowledge and skills to teach L2 pragmatics. Teachers require guidance in

various areas, including teaching and assessment methods, teaching resources, and the use of technology for effective L2 pragmatics learning and teaching. Professional development activities and training can help equip teachers with these necessary skills. In addition, developers should create engaging and diverse materials that utilize pragmatic features for teaching and tasks (Plonsky & Kim, 2016).

It is necessary to conduct further research to determine the effectiveness of explicit instruction of pragmatics. According to Alcón-Soler (2019), it is recommended to explore the impact of various methods that are used to teach pragmatics, such as task-based language teaching. In the field of L2 pragmatics, there has been a growing emphasis on using task-based instruction as an approach to teaching pragmatics (Nguyen & Basturkmen, 2023). Moreover, longitudinal studies can be carried out to investigate the long-term impact of explicit pragmatic instruction on the speed and quality of pragmatic competence.

Interpretation of results should be cautious as the study had limitations. The small number of participants prevents the full generalization of findings. The study focused solely on intermediate-level EFL learners and did not have the opportunity to include ESL learners or learners at an advanced or elementary level. Conducting comparable studies on EFL learners with different proficiency levels may lead to different findings regarding the effectiveness of explicit versus implicit instruction of pragmatics. The study was not accompanied by other means of data collection. Using mixed/qualitative methods for conducting the same research would likely result in more detailed information and findings. However, it is important to note that the study has a limitation in that WDCT is not a suitable tool for collecting naturally occurring data. Therefore, for future studies, it is suggested that more authentic and interactive methods of data collection such as role-playing or collecting data from learners in real-life situations could be utilized to overcome this limitation.

In conclusion, determining the most effective methods for teaching L2 pragmatics is a complex process that involves several factors such as learning outcomes, target structures, and context. However,

it has been proven that any activity that draws learners' attention to Form through input enhancement can be beneficial.

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