

**Original Research**

## **A Cross-Cultural Exploration: Developing an MDCT for Pragmatic Competence in EFL and Native English Speakers, with Emphasis on Speech Acts of Request and Apology**

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Submission date: 23-04-2025

Acceptance date: 06-07-2025

### **Abstract**

Pragmatic competence, the ability to perform language functions appropriately across social and cultural contexts, is a critical component of effective intercultural communication. However, existing assessment tools often lack contextual grounding and cultural sensitivity, particularly in evaluating speech acts such as requests and apologies. This study aims to develop a culturally grounded and empirically validated Multiple-choice Discourse Completion Test (MDCT) to assess pragmatic competence among EFL learners. Drawing on data from 147 participants (21 native English speakers and 126 Iranian and Iraqi EFL learners), the research employed an eight-phase design, which included exemplar generation, likelihood investigation, metapragmatic assessment, pilot testing, expert review, item analysis, scoring rubric development, and statistical validation. Data were collected through structured questionnaires, Likert-scale evaluations, expert judgments, and learner feedback. Quantitative analyses confirmed the test's internal consistency as well as construct validity, and criterion-related validity. Qualitative procedures ensured the cultural plausibility and contextual appropriateness of items. The final MDCT demonstrated high inter-rater reliability and effective discrimination across pragmatic proficiency levels. By embedding native speaker input from the beginning, the instrument addresses cultural bias often found in traditional pragmatic assessments. The findings contribute to ongoing efforts to design fair, reliable, and pedagogically relevant tools for assessing intercultural pragmatic competence. This work offers both theoretical insight into the multi-dimensional nature of pragmatics and practical applications for EFL instruction and curriculum development.

**Keywords:** Apology, Cross-cultural exploration, Discourse Completion Test, MDCT (Multiple Discourse Completion Test), Pragmatic Competence, Request, Speech Act

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## **1. Introduction**

Effective communication across cultures is essential in today's globalized society. A key aspect of such communication is pragmatic competence—the ability to use language appropriately according to sociolinguistic norms. Among various facets of pragmatics, speech acts like requests and apologies are especially significant, as they frequently occur in daily interactions and often involve face-threatening or socially delicate situations. Despite the recognized importance of pragmatic competence in intercultural communication, existing assessment tools often suffer from limited cultural sensitivity, insufficient empirical validation, or an overemphasis on grammatical and lexical knowledge. Many available instruments do not adequately reflect how language is used in diverse, real-world contexts, creating notable gaps in evaluating pragmatic performance.

In response to these shortcomings, the present study aims to develop and validate a culturally grounded and empirically robust Multiple-choice Discourse Completion Test (MDCT) to assess pragmatic competence, particularly in the performance of requests and apologies. These speech acts are selected due to their complexity and their high dependence on sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic appropriateness. Rather than limiting its focus to any specific learner group, this study seeks to construct an instrument applicable across diverse language users, accommodating varied sociocultural and communicative backgrounds.

It is important to clarify that the present study does not aim to compare the pragmatic competence of different learner populations (e.g., Iranian, Iraqi, or native speakers). Instead, its sole focus is on the design, contextual adaptation, and validation of a reliable assessment tool informed by authentic scenarios and expert evaluation. By integrating perspectives from interlanguage pragmatics, language assessment theory, and cross-cultural communication, this study contributes to the development of more valid, reliable, and context-sensitive tools for evaluating pragmatic competence

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Pragmatic Competence and Its Pedagogical Development**

Numerous studies have investigated the effectiveness of teaching pragmatics and the developmental process of learners' pragmatic competence (Holmes & Brown, 1987). Nevertheless, little attention has been given to the development of pragmatics tests, with

distinguished exceptions such as the study by Hudson et al. (1995) and Jianda (2006). In constructing pragmatic tests, researchers encounter the challenge of selecting specific sub-components from a range of pragmatic elements. For example, Roever (2005) comprises speech acts, implicature, and routine formulas, while Bouton (1999) incorporates idiosyncratic and formulaic implicature. Jianda (2006) specifically designed a test focusing on requests and apologies for Chinese EFL learners.

One essential consideration in interlanguage pragmatics testing refers to the choice of instrumentation. Numerous researchers advocate for different tools by considering their merits. Kasper and Rose (2002) emphasize the critical role of metapragmatic awareness in second language acquisition, emphasizing that understanding the underlying social rules and norms governing language use is essential for effective communication. Their findings propose that learners who develop metapragmatic awareness are better performers in navigating different social interactions and adapting their language use to suit diverse cultural and contextual demands, thereby enhancing their general pragmatic competence.

Farhady (1980) pioneered the systematic development of a pragmatic competence test based on a functional approach. His multiple-choice (MC) test assessed students' abilities in language functions such as expressing attitudes and making requests.

An influential study by Hudson et al. (1992, 1995) signifies a major investigation of interlanguage pragmatic knowledge. They pointed out indirect, semi-direct, and self-assessment measures, each including two test formats. The indirect measures encompassed free-response DCT and multiple-choice DCT, focusing on assessing Japanese ESL learners' ability to request, apologize, and perform refusal speech acts. Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) emphasize the significance of pragmatic competence in language learning, highlighting that learners' ability to use language appropriately in different social contexts is crucial. They claim that pragmatic awareness often develops more slowly than grammatical proficiency, making it essential to focus on the explicit teaching and assessment of pragmatics to develop learners' communicative competence entirely.

In a contextually grounded approach, Razmjoo (2007) explored the speech act of compliment response among Persian speakers, shedding light on culturally specific patterns in pragmatic performance. His findings underline the importance of tailoring pragmatic assessments to learners' sociocultural backgrounds, a perspective crucial to interlanguage pragmatics research.

Jianda (2007) introduced a five-stage process for developing interlanguage pragmatics tests, comprising the following steps: exemplar generation (based on EFL learners' writing scenarios related to targeted speech acts after training sessions), followed by a likelihood study to evaluate the scenarios' realism. The metapragmatic assessment of both native and non-native judgments further filtered items representing power, distance, and imposition; those with over 70% agreement were retained in the WDCT.

Ishihara and Cohen (2010) highlight the significance of integrating pragmatic instruction into language teaching, advocating for approaches that increase learners' awareness of both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic elements. They argue that effective language instruction should offer opportunities for learners to reflect on and practice pragmatic features of communication, assisting them in developing appropriacy across contexts.

Similarly, Chalak (2021) examined speech acts such as self-presentation and praise within digital discourse among Iranian EFL users on social media. Her work demonstrates the dynamic nature of pragmatic performance in online intercultural contexts and supports the view that pragmatic competence is shaped by evolving modes of communication. Taguchi (2012) emphasizes integrating varied cultural contexts in assessing pragmatic competence. She asserted that to evaluate learners' pragmatic skills precisely, it is crucial to comprise diverse cultural perspectives, as this confirms a more complete understanding of how pragmatic competence functions across different linguistic and cultural environments.

Birjandi and Rezaei's study has some disadvantages in their research as follows: Cultural Generalizability Limitation: The study's focus on Iranian EFL learners raises questions about the test's applicability to other cultural contexts. Reliability and Validity Concerns: Acknowledgment of potential reliability and validity issues suggests uncertainties about the robustness of the developed MDCT.

Moreover, a pragmatics test on request and apology in academic contexts in Iran, the United States, England, and Saudi Arabia was developed by Salehi and Isavi (2013) for Iranian EFL learners. However, their test has significant problems, including the pragmatic test's lack of measurement validity and reliability, which may highly depend on culture. Therefore, more attention should be paid to this issue, and more thorough studies should be

conducted. It appears that only one study has been conducted on developing pragmatic assessments for Iranian EFL learners and teachers (Aleami and Khanlarzadeh, 2016).

In recent years, scholars have increasingly emphasized the need to update pragmatic assessment tools to reflect the evolving dynamics of intercultural communication and language pedagogy. Taguchi (2022) argues for a more inclusive framework that integrates learners' socio-cognitive processes and diverse cultural norms. While this approach is theoretically sound, it lacks clear operationalization guidelines, making practical implementation in large-scale testing contexts difficult. Furthermore, the absence of empirical validation raises concerns about its generalizability across varied cultural and educational settings. Similarly, Roever (2021) highlights the advantages of performance-based pragmatic assessments that mirror real-life communication more closely than traditional multiple-choice tests. However, these methods often demand significant resources, including trained raters and extended testing time, which limits their feasibility in many classroom or standardized settings. Moreover, issues related to scoring reliability and consistency across raters remain a persistent challenge, suggesting that while performance-based assessments offer richer data, they are not without methodological and logistical shortcomings.

Moreover, García (2020) underscores the value of incorporating cultural scripts into test scenarios to ensure that assessment items authentically reflect communication patterns across linguistic communities. While this culturally grounded approach enhances ecological validity, it also raises concerns about test standardization, especially when items are too localized and lose cross-cultural comparability. Overemphasis on culturally specific scenarios may unintentionally reduce fairness for test-takers from unfamiliar cultural backgrounds.

Ishihara and Nguyen (2021) propose a framework for teaching and assessing English as an International Language (EIL) pragmatics, advocating for a shift away from native-speaker norms toward context-sensitive, pluralistic evaluations. Although this model aligns well with global pedagogical goals, it remains underdeveloped in terms of large-scale empirical validation and lacks a unified measurement approach that balances flexibility with scoring consistency. The challenge lies in translating broad theoretical ideals into concrete, scalable assessment tools for diverse classrooms.

Kasper and Liu (2020) similarly advocate for dynamic testing formats that better reflect the complexity of authentic communication. However, these dynamic approaches often lack clear scoring rubrics and may compromise inter-rater reliability due to their open-ended nature. Wang and Spencer-Oatey (2022) critique the limited cultural scope of many existing instruments and emphasize the need for rigorous cross-cultural validation. They recommend piloting across multiple cultural settings and revising test items based on intercultural feedback. Although their recommendations are methodologically sound, they can be logistically demanding and difficult to implement on a broad scale, especially for researchers with limited access to multilingual and multicultural participant pools.

Khatib and Rezaei (2023), in their systematic review, reinforce that test generalizability remains a central issue, particularly when pragmatic constructs are heavily culture-bound. Nevertheless, their review does not fully address how future instruments might strike a balance between cultural specificity and cross-contextual applicability, leaving a gap in practical guidance for test developers. Paluanova (2024) explored multiple assessment formats, including role-plays, discourse completion tasks, self-assessment surveys, and digital interfaces, arguing that hybrid approaches—combining traditional and technology-enhanced tools—yield more comprehensive insights into pragmatic competence. While this perspective is valuable, the study does not address the practical constraints of integrating such diverse tools into mainstream classroom settings, particularly in underfunded educational contexts.

Yeshanov (2025) similarly advocated for task-based testing and needs analysis to enhance pragmatic development among EFL learners. Though task-based models offer contextual authenticity, they often demand extensive instructor training and face challenges in achieving consistent scoring criteria across contexts, which the study underemphasizes. Arabmofrad and Mehdiabadi (2022) also developed a Multiple-choice Discourse Completion Test for Iranian EFL Learners, including four Speech Acts: Apology, Request, Refusal, and Thanks. Their study has several strengths, including a systematic and well-structured process for developing the MDCT. This process involves metapragmatic assessment, reviewing and analyzing situations based on situational features, indicating a commitment to balancing the test scenarios, and promoting content validity. However, there are also certain drawbacks and limitations in their study as follows: 1) Reliability Issues: The initial reliability estimate of the MDCT was relatively

low, with Cronbach's alpha reported at .6 for both pretest and posttest. This proposes potential issues with the consistency and stability of the test. 2) Cultural Specificity: While the MDCT was considered appropriate for the Iranian context, the study acknowledges that it is unclear whether the test would be correspondingly effective in other cultural contexts. The cultural specificity of the MDCT may limit its generalizability to various language learning environments. 3) Small Sample Size: The pilot studies involved a relatively small sample size of participants (25 in the first pilot and 20 in the second pilot). A larger and more diverse participant pool could increase the generalizability of the findings.

Therefore, this study aims to conduct a comparative cross-cultural analysis by examining the pragmatic competence of Iranian and Iraqi EFL learners as well as native English speakers, focusing specifically on the speech acts of requests and apologies in English. The MDCT is developed to assess English pragmatic competence across these culturally distinct groups, allowing for an exploration of how learners from different cultural backgrounds realize speech acts in English. This cross-cultural perspective does not compare native languages, but rather investigates how cultural backgrounds influence the performance of English pragmatic functions. By doing so, the study aims to create a more culturally sensitive and psychometrically valid MDCT tool.

Additionally, this paper tries to address and mitigate the limitations recognized in previous research endeavors. Identifying the challenges and shortcomings in previous studies, the goal is to enhance the reliability, validity, and cultural applicability of the MDCT. By considering a critical stance on past research, this study aims to contribute valuable insights that not only advance the development of a robust assessment tool but also provide a complete understanding of the pragmatic competence of language users across diverse cultural backgrounds.

The assessment of pragmatic competence in language learners has grown, enhancing attention in applied linguistics and language testing research. One method commonly used for evaluating pragmatic abilities is the Discourse Completion Test (DCT). DCTs have been used as an important tool for investigating language learners' abilities to perform various speech acts in context. Originating from the field of pragmatics, DCTs typically present respondents with written or spoken prompts, encouraging them to complete a given communicative situation. Researchers have used DCTs to assess a range of speech acts, including requests, refusals, apologies, and expressions of gratitude. The flexibility and

adaptability of DCTs make them appropriate for measuring pragmatic competence across diverse proficiency levels and linguistic contexts.

## **2.2. The Theoretical Base of the Study**

The present study draws upon several foundational theories in pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and language testing to inform the design, development, and validation of the Multiple-choice Discourse Completion Test (MDCT) for assessing pragmatic competence in the speech acts of requests and apologies.

One of the primary theoretical underpinnings is the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) by Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989), which provides a structured framework for analyzing the realization of speech acts across cultures. This model offers a typology of directness and politeness strategies, allowing researchers to classify pragmatic behavior along dimensions of sociopragmatic appropriateness and pragmalinguistic form.

To address the interactional and face-sensitive aspects of communication, the study also adopts Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which highlights how speakers manage face wants in situations involving imposition. This theory is particularly relevant to speech acts such as requests and apologies, where face-threatening acts (FTAs) are common and the choice of strategies is often culture-specific.

From a language testing perspective, the study is guided by Bachman and Palmer's (1996) model of communicative language ability, particularly their emphasis on pragmatic competence as an integral component of communicative ability. Their framework supports the integration of pragmatic functions in language assessments and underscores the need for instruments that go beyond grammatical or lexical knowledge to capture the appropriateness of language use in context.

Additionally, Kasper and Rose's (2002) model of interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) informs the development process by highlighting how learners acquire and perform speech acts in a second language. Their work underscores the variability in pragmatic development and the importance of sociocultural awareness and metapragmatic knowledge, both of which are crucial for designing authentic and valid assessment tasks.

The test development procedures are also influenced by the empirical work of Hudson, Detmer, and Brown (1995) and Jianda (2007), whose multi-phase models for



creating and validating pragmatics tests serve as methodological blueprints. These studies demonstrate the importance of piloting, expert validation, and item analysis in ensuring test reliability and contextual appropriateness.

Together, these theoretical perspectives form the foundation for designing an MDCT that is not only psychometrically sound but also sensitive to the social, cultural, and contextual dimensions of pragmatic competence.

### **2.3. Challenges and Considerations in DCT Development**

Despite the widespread use of Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) in pragmatic assessment, their design and implementation present several challenges that can impact the validity and reliability of the results. One of the primary concerns is the impact of cultural and contextual variability on participants' interpretation and performance. Since pragmatic norms differ significantly across cultures, the perceived appropriateness and interpretation of speech acts, such as requests and apologies, may vary, leading to inconsistent or biased responses. Additionally, the clarity of task instructions, the degree of contextual familiarity, and the authenticity of the communicative scenarios are crucial elements that can either enhance or undermine the effectiveness of the test. Poorly contextualized prompts may fail to elicit natural responses, while overly abstract situations may cause confusion or disengagement among test-takers, particularly EFL learners from diverse backgrounds.

Moreover, the fixed-response nature of traditional DCTs has been criticized for oversimplifying the dynamic nature of real-life communication. This limitation calls for more nuanced test designs that can account for multiple layers of pragmatic reasoning, including indirectness, politeness strategies, and socio-pragmatic awareness. In response to these challenges, the development of the current MDCT incorporated multiple safeguards to ensure both cultural sensitivity and construct validity. These included expert validation, iterative pilot testing with diverse learner groups, and scenario design based on authentic, cross-culturally informed interactions. Such measures aimed to enhance the ecological validity of the instrument and to produce a more reliable indicator of pragmatic competence in intercultural settings.

#### **2.4. Multiple Discourse Completion Tests (MDCTs)**

Recognizing the limitations of traditional Discourse Completion Tests (DCTs)—such as limited contextual richness and restricted scenario variety—researchers have increasingly turned to Multiple Discourse Completion Tests (MDCTs) as a more robust instrument for assessing pragmatic competence. MDCTs involve presenting test-takers with a broader range of communicative scenarios, each designed to elicit different speech acts and reflect varying degrees of social distance, power relations, and situational imposition.

This expanded structure allows for a more comprehensive and contextually nuanced evaluation of learners' pragmatic abilities, particularly in cross-cultural and intercultural settings. Empirical studies (e.g., Arabmofrad & Mehdiabadi, 2022; Hudson et al., 1995) have demonstrated the effectiveness of MDCTs in capturing the dynamic and multifaceted nature of real-world communication, thus enhancing both the validity and authenticity of pragmatic assessments.

#### **2.5. The Present Study: Frameworks and Approaches**

This study is grounded in several well-established theoretical frameworks from pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and language assessment, which collectively inform the design and validation of the Multiple Discourse Completion Test (MDCT). First, the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) provides a foundational typology for the systematic analysis of speech acts—particularly requests and apologies—across different cultural contexts.

To ensure the test's construct validity and communicative relevance, Bachman and Palmer's (1996) model of Communicative Language Ability is employed, with a particular focus on pragmatic competence as a core component of language use. Furthermore, Kasper and Rose's (2002) framework of interlanguage pragmatics informs the understanding of learner development and variability in pragmatic performance. From a sociopragmatic perspective, Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory underpins the construction of MDCT items by incorporating key variables such as power, social distance, and degree of imposition into scenario design.

These theoretical underpinnings collectively guide the methodology for item development, response analysis, and the creation of scoring rubrics, with the overarching aim of enhancing the validity, reliability, and cultural sensitivity of the test instrument. In

addition, the study explores the integration of computer-based platforms to streamline test administration and scoring, thereby increasing the efficiency and scalability of pragmatic assessment in EFL contexts.

Accordingly, the central research question guiding this study is:

1. How can an empirically developed and contextually appropriate Multiple-choice Discourse Completion Test (MDCT) be designed to assess pragmatic competence in requests and apologies across diverse language users?

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Design and Context of the Study**

The approach used in this research centers on the development and validation of a Multiple-Choice Discourse Completion Task (MDCT) to assess pragmatic competence in English, particularly regarding the speech acts of requests and apologies. This cross-cultural study compares native English speakers with EFL learners enrolled in graduate-level English Language Teaching (ELT) programs. A convenience sampling method was adopted to ensure a practical and representative selection of participants. The study was structured into eight phases: (1) Exemplar Generation, (2) Likelihood Investigation and Cultural Sensitivity Check, (3) Metapragmatic Assessment, (4) Pilot Testing and Expert Review, (5) Item Analysis, (6) Scoring Rubric Development, (7) Rater Training, and (8) Statistical Analysis.

#### **3.2. Participants and Sampling Procedure**

The study recruited a diverse group of participants, including both native English speakers and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners pursuing graduate-level studies (MA and PhD) in English Language Teaching (ELT). These participants contributed to various phases of the development and validation of the Multiple-Choice Discourse Completion Task (MDCT), which was designed to assess pragmatic competence, particularly in the speech acts of requests and apologies. A total of 21 educated native English speakers participated in this study; 13 participants were affiliated with the University of Exeter, and eight participants were from the University of Birmingham.

These participants were native speakers of English pursuing degrees in various academic fields, including but not limited to English Language and Linguistics. Their

contributions were crucial in evaluating and validating the test items for linguistic appropriateness, cultural authenticity, and establishing a pragmatic baseline for comparison. All were undergraduate or postgraduate students, and participation was based on convenience sampling.

A total of 92 Iranian EFL learners specializing in ELT at either the Master's or PhD level took part in the study. These participants were selected from the following institutions: Arak University (34 participants), Razi University (28 participants), Kermanshah Azad University (30 participants). Their involvement provided insight into how English pragmatic norms are interpreted and used within the Iranian sociocultural context.

To further diversify the participant pool and include additional regional perspectives, 34 Iraqi EFL learners also contributed to the study. Although the main cross-cultural focus of the research remained between Iranian learners and native English speakers, the inclusion of Iraqi participants added linguistic richness to several stages of the MDCT development process. These participants were also enrolled in TEFL programs at the same Iranian universities: Arak University (13 participants), Razi University (9 participants), Kermanshah Azad University (12 participants).

The study employed a convenience sampling strategy, which was appropriate for targeting a specific academic population, namely, graduate students in ELT programs and native English-speaking university students. This approach facilitated the inclusion of informed and accessible participants across both EFL and native-speaker groups. The sampling ensured a practical yet sufficiently representative composition for examining cross-cultural pragmatic competence in English.

For a full breakdown of participant distribution across research phases and institutions, see Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Participant distribution by group and institution.*

<b>Group</b>	<b>Institution</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
<b>Native English Speakers</b>	University of Exeter	13
	University of Birmingham	8
<b>Total Native English Speakers</b>		21
<b>Iranian EFL Learners</b>	Arak University	34
	Razi University	28
	Kermanshah Azad University	30

<b>Total Iranian EFL Learners</b>		92
<b>Iraqi EFL Learners</b>	Arak University	13
	Razi University	9
	Kermanshah Azad University	12
<b>Iraqi EFL Learners</b>		34
<b>Grand Total</b>		147

The study involved multiple phases with varying numbers of participants across different groups. The total number of participants included both native English speakers and non-native EFL learners from Iran and Iraq. Each phase of the research, such as exemplar generation, likelihood investigation, and cultural sensitivity check, involved different subsets of participants, with some phases having a greater number of non-native speakers. The detailed breakdown of participants by phase and group is presented in Table 2, illustrating the distribution of participants throughout the research process.

**Table 2.**

*Participants by Phase and Group (Native and Non-Native EFL Learners)*

	<b>Phase</b>	<b>Total Participant s</b>	<b>Native English Speakers</b>	<b>Total Non- Native Speakers (EFL Learners)</b>	<b>Iranian EFL Learners</b>	<b>Iraqi EFL Learners</b>
<b>1</b>	Exemplar Generation	147	21	126	92	34
<b>2</b>	Likelihood Investigation and Cultural Sensitivity Check	42	5	37	26	11
<b>3</b>	Metapragmatic Assessment	40	10	30	20	10
<b>4</b>	Pilot Testing and Expert Review	95	15	80	60	20
<b>5</b>	Item Analysis	-	-	-	-	-
<b>6</b>	Scoring Rubric Development	147	21	126	92	34
<b>7</b>	Rater Training	15	-	-	-	-
<b>8</b>	Statistical Analysis	-	-	-	-	-

### **3.3. Data Collection Procedures**

The approach used in this research focuses on the development and validation of a Multiple-Choice Discourse Completion Task (MDCT) aimed at assessing pragmatic competence in the use of English, particularly in the speech acts of requests and apologies. The study adopts a cross-cultural perspective by comparing native English speakers with EFL learners engaged in graduate studies (MA and PhD) in English Language Teaching (ELT).

The sampling strategy employed in this study followed a convenience sampling method. While not probabilistic, this approach enabled the inclusion of a diverse group of participants across linguistic and cultural backgrounds, thereby supporting the investigation of variations in English pragmatic competence from a cross-cultural standpoint.

The following sections present the specific stages of the methodology, including participant engagement, data collection, and the development and validation of the MDCT. This comprehensive approach aligns with the study's main goal of providing a nuanced understanding of pragmatic competence in diverse language learning and teaching environments.

#### **3.3.1. Phase One: Exemplar Generation**

The Exemplar Generation phase focused on collecting authentic, real-life scenarios involving requests and apologies from a diverse group of participants, forming the empirical foundation for subsequent phases of the MDCT development. A total of 147 individuals contributed to this phase, including 21 native English speakers, 92 Iranian EFL learners (34 from Arak University, 28 from Razi University, and 30 from Kermanshah Azad University), and 34 Iraqi EFL learners (13 from Arak University, nine from Razi University, and 12 from Kermanshah Azad University). Participants were provided with written prompts through structured questionnaires (administered in person and online), asking them to recall and briefly describe real-life situations where they had to make a request or offer an apology. These narratives were gathered in English to maintain consistency in linguistic performance and were later reviewed and categorized based on situational variables. This phase served to capture cross-cultural variation in pragmatic behavior by collecting naturalistic, personally experienced discourse events.

### **3.3.2. Phase Two: Likelihood Investigation and Cultural Sensitivity Check**

During this phase, participants assessed the scenarios using a Likert scale to evaluate based on their frequency and significance, as well as their cultural suitability. A total of 42 individuals took part in this phase, including five native English speakers, 26 Iranian EFL learners, and 11 Iraqi EFL learners. Participants provided ratings ranging from 1 to 5 and shared their insights on cultural sensitivity and appropriateness, ensuring that the scenarios were culturally relevant and easily understood.

### **3.3.3. Phase Three: Metapragmatic Assessment**

The Metapragmatic Assessment phase delved into participants' awareness and understanding of pragmatic elements, focusing on speech acts of request and apology. A total of 40 participants took part in this phase, including 10 native English speakers, 20 Iranian EFL learners, and 10 Iraqi EFL learners. Participants were presented with scenarios and prompted to provide metapragmatic insights, evaluating the speech acts' appropriateness, effectiveness, and cultural sensitivity. Their responses were meticulously analyzed to derive insights into metapragmatic awareness, contributing to the validity and reliability of the assessment tool.

The Metapragmatic Assessment phase explored participants' perceptions and comprehension of pragmatic aspects, specifically concentrating on the speech acts of requests and apologies. A total of 40 individuals participated in this stage, consisting of 10 native English speakers, 20 Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, and 10 Iraqi EFL learners. Participants were provided with various scenarios and asked to share their metapragmatic reflections, assessing the speech acts in terms of their appropriateness, effectiveness, and cultural relevance. Their responses were thoroughly analyzed to extract insights regarding metapragmatic awareness, contributing to the validity and reliability of the assessment tool.

### **3.3.4. Phase Four: Pilot Testing and Expert Review**

In this phase, participants interacted with the scenarios to gain insights into clarity, cultural authenticity, and language obstacles. At the same time, a panel of cross-cultural specialists examined the components of the MDCT. The Pilot Testing phase involved a total of 95 participants, including 15 native English speakers, 60 Iranian EFL learners, and 20 Iraqi

EFL learners. Furthermore, cross-cultural experts assessed the MDCT for cultural relevance and sensitivity. Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered, aiding in the enhancement of the assessment tool's validity and reliability.

### **3.3.5. Phase Five: Item Analysis**

This stage included a meticulous evaluation of each item in the MDCT to confirm its effectiveness and cultural appropriateness. The analysis aimed to investigate item reliability, discrimination index, and cultural significance. Items that exhibited high discriminatory strength and cultural sensitivity were kept, improving the assessment tool's validity and reliability.

### **3.3.6. Phase Six: Scoring Rubric Development**

In this phase, the responses previously collected from 147 participants (21 native English speakers, 92 Iranian EFL learners, and 34 Iraqi EFL learners) were utilized to inform the development of a scoring rubric. The rubric was crafted in collaboration with field experts to ensure consistency, objectivity, and cultural fairness in evaluating the test responses. The participant data served as a foundation for identifying common pragmatic patterns and acceptable response ranges, contributing to the validity and reliability of the final scoring system.

### **3.3.7. Phase Seven: Rater Training**

Training sessions were organized to guarantee that raters evaluated responses consistently and accurately with the scoring rubric created. A group of 15 raters were involved, comprising language instructors, researchers, and ELT experts at both MA and PhD levels. The training encompassed practice exercises and calibration to reduce rater bias and maintain consistency in assessment practices, thereby improving the validity and reliability of the assessment process.

### **3.3.8. Phase Eight: Statistical Analysis**

During the Statistical Analysis stage, a range of metrics was utilized to evaluate the validity and reliability of the MDCT. Analyses such as factor analysis, reliability coefficients (including Cronbach's alpha), and validity evaluations (comprising construct,



content, and criterion-related validity) were performed. These analyses provided empirical evidence supporting the validity and reliability of the MDCT as a pragmatic competence assessment tool across diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

### **3.4. Data Analysis Procedure**

To ensure the reliability and validity of the Multiple-Choice Discourse Completion Task (MDCT), a series of statistical analyses was conducted. The results confirmed the sound psychometric properties of the instrument.

Firstly, internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which yielded a value of 0.87. This high coefficient indicates that the items within the MDCT demonstrate strong internal consistency and that the instrument reliably measures the intended construct of pragmatic competence.

Secondly, an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was performed to examine the underlying structure of the MDCT. The results revealed a two-factor solution, corresponding to the two targeted speech acts—requests and apologies. These two factors collectively accounted for 62.4% of the total variance, suggesting that the structure of the MDCT is aligned with the theoretical foundation of pragmatic competence and adequately captures the dimensionality of the construct.

In addition, content validity was assessed through expert judgment. A panel of specialists in applied linguistics and cross-cultural pragmatics reviewed each item in terms of relevance, clarity, and cultural appropriateness. The Content Validity Index (CVI) for all items was reported to be above 0.80, indicating a high level of agreement among the experts regarding the representativeness and relevance of the items.

Lastly, to evaluate criterion-related validity, the scores obtained from the MDCT were correlated with those from an established pragmatic assessment tool. The Pearson correlation coefficient was found to be  $r = 0.56$  ( $p < .01$ ), reflecting a moderate and statistically significant relationship. This finding supports the MDCT's concurrent validity, demonstrating that the instrument measures pragmatic competence in a manner that is consistent with existing validated tools.

## **4. Results**

The statistical analysis provided empirical support for the reliability and validity of the Multiple-Choice Discourse Completion Task (MDCT) developed in this study. To assess

internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha was calculated and yielded a coefficient of 0.87, indicating a high degree of reliability among the items. This suggests that the instrument consistently measures the intended constructs across different participants.

An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to investigate the underlying structure of the MDCT. The analysis revealed a two-factor solution aligned with the two speech acts targeted by the instrument: requests and apologies. These two factors together accounted for 62.4% of the total variance, demonstrating that the items cluster meaningfully in accordance with the pragmatic categories they were designed to assess. To establish content validity, a panel of cross-cultural experts reviewed the items for clarity, relevance, and cultural appropriateness. The Content Validity Index (CVI) for all items exceeded the threshold of 0.80, indicating a strong level of expert agreement and supporting the representativeness of the items for assessing pragmatic competence.

Criterion-related validity was also examined by correlating participants' MDCT scores with their scores on a previously validated pragmatic assessment. The resulting Pearson correlation coefficient was  $r = 0.56$  ( $p < .01$ ), confirming a statistically significant and moderately strong relationship between the two measures. This finding suggests that the MDCT provides a valid estimate of learners' pragmatic competence as compared to existing instruments. In addition, item analysis was carried out to evaluate the discriminatory power of the test items. The results showed that most items demonstrated acceptable to strong discrimination indices, confirming their effectiveness in distinguishing between participants with varying levels of pragmatic competence.

Finally, to ensure consistency in scoring, inter-rater reliability was assessed following comprehensive rater training. The intra-class correlation coefficient (ICC) was calculated as 0.84, indicating a high level of agreement among raters and confirming the consistency and objectivity of the scoring rubric used in evaluating responses.

In response to the central research question, the results demonstrate that the MDCT was empirically developed through multiple stages, ranging from exemplar generation, cultural sensitivity checks, and metapragmatic assessment to expert validation and statistical analysis. These phases ensured that the test items were not only psychometrically sound but also contextually appropriate for diverse language users, including Iranian and Iraqi EFL learners and native English speakers. The strong reliability, clear factorial

structure, and cultural validation of the MDCT confirm its effectiveness in assessing pragmatic competence in requests and apologies across cultural boundaries.

## 5. Discussion

This study sought to design and validate a Multiple-Choice Discourse Completion Task (MDCT) for assessing pragmatic competence, with a specific focus on the speech acts of request and apology. By incorporating native speakers from the outset and employing a Likert-scale evaluation, this study adopted a methodologically innovative and culturally sensitive approach that addresses limitations found in earlier pragmatic assessments.

In the Exemplar Generation phase, data gathered from 147 participants—including native English speakers, Iranian EFL learners, and Iraqi EFL learners—allowed for the development of contextually rich and authentic scenarios. The diversity of contributors supported pragmatic representativeness and cultural variation, reinforcing Taguchi's (2012) emphasis on culturally situated pragmatics and echoing recent calls for inclusive pragmatic data (Derakhshan & Eslami, 2020). Moreover, the use of a Likert scale to evaluate scenario frequency and appropriateness provided a scalar understanding of pragmatic acceptability, avoiding the rigidity of dichotomous (0-1) scoring models traditionally used in MDCTs (Taguchi & Roever, 2021).

During the Likelihood Investigation and Cultural Sensitivity Check, 42 participants evaluated scenarios on cultural plausibility and frequency using a Likert scale. This step addressed concerns about ethnocentrism and pragmatic transfer, particularly in interlanguage contexts (Glaser, 2022). This methodology aligns with Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's (1998) emphasis on the cultural relevance of pragmatic items, as well as more recent research supporting multi-level, gradated measures of intercultural sensitivity (Zangoei, 2021).

The Metapragmatic Assessment phase offered insight into learners' awareness of underlying social rules, a crucial element in pragmatic competence (Kasper & Rose, 2002). Forty participants' feedback suggested that pragmatic appropriateness and interpretation vary based on socio-pragmatic awareness and L1-L2 transfer. Such insights affirm the theoretical significance of metapragmatic knowledge in language development (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010) and support more recent findings linking metapragmatic reflection to enhanced pragmatic accuracy in EFL learners (Liu, 2023; Takahashi, 2021).

In the Pilot Testing and Expert Review, feedback from 95 participants and a panel of intercultural experts helped refine the MDCT items for clarity, cultural appropriateness, and difficulty. Involving native and non-native reviewers early ensured face and content validity, supporting findings from recent literature that advocate for community-embedded test design (Schauer, 2021; Tajeddin et al., 2022).

Item Analysis further ensured statistical rigor and construct clarity. This phase filtered low-performing or culturally ambiguous items, optimizing the instrument's discriminatory power and reliability, consistent with language assessment best practices (Brown, 2001; Roever, 2005). The approach mirrors updated guidelines for test validation procedures in pragmatic research (Ishihara, 2020).

The Scoring Rubric Development included a broad range of raters and was piloted across varied cultural groups. The feedback led to a refined and transparent rubric capable of capturing subtle pragmatic deviations. The rubric's inter-rater reliability was confirmed through rater training sessions involving 15 raters, reducing scoring variability. This phase aligns with established frameworks for rater mediation in performance-based assessments (Lumley, 2005; Linacre, 2012) and responds to contemporary standards for fairness in assessment (Douglas & Myers, 2022).

The Statistical Analysis phase incorporated Cronbach's alpha, factor analysis, and multiple validity checks. Results demonstrated strong internal consistency and construct validity, confirming the MDCT's suitability for capturing multiple layers of pragmatic competence. These results are supported by recent validation studies in applied linguistics (Greenfield, 2021; Li & Taguchi, 2023).

Taken together, these phases outline a comprehensive answer to the central research question of how to design an empirically grounded and contextually appropriate MDCT for assessing pragmatic competence in requests and apologies. The stepwise integration of exemplar generation, cultural sensitivity checks, metapragmatic assessments, and psychometric validation ensured that the test items were culturally resonant and functionally authentic across different learner populations. Furthermore, involving both native and non-native speakers throughout the design process contributed to the development of a balanced, inclusive, and empirically robust instrument. As such, the resulting MDCT not only aligns with current theoretical understandings of pragmatics and

intercultural communication but also provides a practical tool for evaluating L2 pragmatic competence across diverse sociolinguistic contexts.

## 6. Conclusion

This study developed and validated a Multiple-choice Discourse Completion Test (MDCT) to assess pragmatic competence in the speech acts of requests and apologies across diverse cultural groups, including Iranian and Iraqi EFL learners and native English speakers. By integrating exemplar generation, cultural sensitivity checks, metapragmatic assessment, expert review, and rigorous statistical validation, the MDCT demonstrated strong internal consistency, construct validity, and inter-rater reliability. The findings highlight the importance of culturally grounded assessment tools that account for sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic variation, moving beyond traditional measures that often neglect cultural specificity. The stepwise methodology employed in this research provides a replicable model for future pragmatic assessment development. Pedagogically, the MDCT offers teachers and curriculum designers a reliable instrument for evaluating learners' pragmatic competence, thereby informing targeted instruction and promoting intercultural communicative ability. Theoretically, the study contributes to ongoing discussions in applied linguistics by bridging the gap between test design and cross-cultural validity. Despite its strengths, this research was limited by its reliance on a convenience sample and its primary focus on two speech acts. Future studies could expand the scope by including additional speech acts, employing larger and more diverse participant pools, and exploring technology-enhanced assessment formats to further enhance ecological validity and scalability.

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## **Appendix A**

### **a) Speech Acts of Apology:**

#### **Scenario 1:**

**You accidentally spill coffee on a colleague's important documents at work. How would you apologize?**

- a) "I'm so sorry for spilling coffee on your documents. Let me help you clean it up."
- b) "Oops! I didn't mean to spill anything. I hope this doesn't cause you too much trouble."
- c) "I feel terrible about the mess I made. What can I do to fix this?"
- d) "I truly apologize for the accident. I'll replace your documents if needed."

#### **Scenario 2:**

**You forget to return a borrowed book to your friend on time. How would you apologize?**

- a) "I'm really sorry for not returning your book on time. I'll get it to you tomorrow."
- b) "Sorry for the delay! I completely lost track of time. Can we set a time for me to return it?"
- c) "I apologize for forgetting your book. Is there a way I can make it up to you?"
- d) "I didn't mean to hold onto your book for so long. I'll return it immediately!"

#### **Scenario 3:**

**You accidentally break a dish at a friend's house during a dinner party. How would you apologize?**

- a) "I'm so sorry for breaking your dish. Let me help clean it up and replace it."
- b) "Oops! That was completely unintentional. Please forgive me for the accident."
- c) "I didn't mean to break it. I'll take care of the replacement."
- d) "I apologize for the mess. Is there anything I can do to fix this?"

#### **Scenario 4:**

**You missed an important deadline for submitting an assignment. How would you apologize to your professor?**

- a) "I sincerely apologize for missing the deadline. I'll complete the assignment and submit it as soon as possible."
- b) "I'm really sorry for the delay in submitting my assignment. It was not intentional, and I appreciate your understanding."
- c) "I apologize for the missed deadline. I have taken measures to prevent this from happening again."
- d) "I regret the mistake of not submitting the assignment on time. I will make sure to adhere to future deadlines."

#### **Scenario 5:**

**You forget a close friend's birthday and only realize it the next day. How would you apologize?**

- a) "I'm very sorry for forgetting your birthday. Can we celebrate together soon?"
- b) "Oops! I completely forgot your birthday. Let's plan a belated celebration!"
- c) "I feel terrible about forgetting your special day. I'll make it up to you, I promise!"
- d) "My apologies for the oversight. I hope you had a great day, even without me."

#### **Scenario 6:**

**You accidentally bump into someone on the street and spill their drink. How would you apologize?**

- a) "I'm truly sorry for bumping into you and spilling your drink. Let me buy you a new one."
- b) "Oops! My bad for the spill. Can I get you another drink?"
- c) "I didn't mean to cause a mess. I hope it didn't ruin your day."
- d) "I apologize for the accident. Let me help clean that up!"

**Scenario 7:**

**You accidentally send a private message to a group chat instead of to one person. How would you apologize?**

- a) "I apologize for the mix-up with my message. I didn't mean to send it to the group."
- b) "Sorry about that! That message was meant for someone else. My bad!"
- c) "My apologies for the confusion. I'll make sure to double-check next time."
- d) "I didn't mean to include everyone in that message. I hope it didn't cause any issues."

**Scenario 8:**

**You arrive late to a class without informing the instructor. How would you apologize?**

- a) "I'm sorry for being late to class. It won't happen again."
- b) "I apologize for my tardiness. I lost track of time."
- c) "My apologies for arriving late. I appreciate your understanding."
- d) "I didn't mean to disrupt the class. Sorry."

**Scenario 9:**

**You forgot to submit a paper by the deadline in your academic course. How would you apologize?**

- a) "I sincerely apologize for missing the submission deadline. Can I turn it in late?"
- b) "I'm really sorry for not submitting my paper on time. Is there any chance for an extension?"
- c) "I'm sorry for the mistake. I recognize how crucial deadlines are."
- d) "It was not my intention to miss the deadline. Thank you for your understanding regarding this issue."

**Scenario 10:**

**You missed an important group project meeting and inconvenienced your teammates. How would you apologize?**

- a) "I apologize for missing the meeting. I'll catch up on what I missed."
- b) "I'm really sorry for not being there. I understand it might have caused issues."
- c) "My apologies for my absence. I'll do my best to make up for the lost time."
- d) "I regret not making it to the meeting. I appreciate your understanding."

**b) Answer Sheet for the Questionnaire on Speech Acts of Apology**

Scenario	Option A	Option B	Option C	Option D
1	3 (Agree)	4 (Strongly Agree)	2 (Neutral)	1 (Disagree)
2	2 (Neutral)	3 (Agree)	4 (Strongly Agree)	1 (Disagree)
3	3 (Strongly Agree)	4 (Agree)	1 (Disagree)	2 (Neutral)
4	3 (Agree)	2 (Neutral)	4 (Strongly Agree)	1 (Disagree)
5	4 (Strongly Agree)	3 (Neutral)	2 (Agree)	1 (Disagree)
6	2 (Neutral)	4 (Strongly Agree)	3 (Agree)	1 (Disagree)
7	3 (Agree)	2 (Neutral)	4 (Strongly Agree)	1 (Disagree)
8	4 (Strongly Agree)	2 (Neutral)	3 (Agree)	1 (Disagree)
9	3 (Agree)	4 (Strongly Agree)	2 (Neutral)	1 (Disagree)
10	2 (Neutral)	3(Agree)	4 (Strongly Agree)	1 (Disagree)

## **Appendix B**

### **Speech Acts of Request:**

#### **Scenario 1:**

**You need to borrow a textbook from a classmate for an upcoming exam. How would you request it?**

- a) "Could I borrow your textbook for the exam? I promise to take good care of it."
- b) "Hey, would you mind if I borrowed your textbook? I really need it for studying."
- c) "Sorry to bother you, but could I please use your textbook for the upcoming exam?"
- d) "I was wondering if I could borrow your textbook for a couple of days. It would help me a lot."

#### **Scenario 2:**

**You're at a restaurant and want to ask the waiter for a glass of water. How would you request it?**

- a) "Excuse me, could I please have a glass of water?"
- b) "Could you please bring me a glass of water?"
- c) "A glass of water please."
- d) " Could I get a glass of water?"

#### **Scenario 3:**

**You need help understanding a difficult concept in class. How would you request assistance from your teacher?**

- a) "Excuse me, could you explain this concept to me? I'm having a hard time understanding."
- b) "Hey, could you help me with this topic? I'm really struggling to grasp it."
- c) "I was hoping you could clarify this concept for me. When would be a good time to talk?"
- d) "Sorry to interrupt, but could you please explain this to me? I'm finding it confusing."

#### **Scenario 4:**

**You're planning a group project and need input from your teammates. How would you request their ideas?**

- a) "Could everyone share their thoughts on this project? I'd love to hear your ideas."
- b) "Hey, can you all give your input on our project? Your ideas would really help."
- c) "I was wondering if we could brainstorm some ideas together. What do you all think?"
- d) "I apologize for the interruption, but could we take a moment to discuss our project ideas?"

#### **Scenario 5:**

**You need to ask a neighbor to keep the noise down because you have an important exam the next day. How would you request it?**

- a) "Excuse me, could you please keep the noise down? I have an important exam tomorrow."
- b) "Hey, do you mind lowering the volume? I need to study for an exam."
- c) "I was wondering if you could be a bit quieter. I have an important exam coming up."
- d) "Could you keep the noise down? I need to focus on studying for my exam."

#### **Scenario 6:**

**You need to borrow a pen from a classmate during an exam. How would you request it?**

- a) "Excuse me, could I borrow a pen for the exam? I forgot mine at home."
- b) "Hey, do you have an extra pen I could use? I really need one right now."
- c) "Is it possible for you to lend me a pen for the exam? That would be a big help."
- d) "Sorry to ask, but could I borrow your pen for the exam? I'd really appreciate it."

**Scenario 7:**

**You're at a friend's house and want to ask if you can use their computer to check your email.**

**How would you request it?**

- a) "Excuse me, could I use your computer for a moment to check my email?"
- b) "Hey, would it be okay if I used your computer quickly? I need to check something."
- c) "I was wondering if I could borrow your computer to check my email. Would that be alright?"
- d) " Could I use your computer for a bit? It won't take long."

**Scenario 8:**

**You need to ask your boss for a day off next week for a family event. How would you request it?**

- a) "Excuse me, could I please request a day off next week for a family commitment?"
- b) " Would it be possible for me to take a day off next week? I have a family event."
- c) "I was wondering if I could take a day off next week for a family occasion. Is that okay?"
- d) " Could I request a day off next week for a family event? I'd appreciate it."

**Scenario 9:**

**You're at a restaurant and want to ask the waiter for the check. How would you request it?**

- a) "Excuse me, could we please have the check?"
- b) "Could you bring us the check, please?"
- c) "I'd like to settle the bill now. Could you bring me the check?"
- d) "Could we get the check, please?"

**Scenario 10:**

**You need to ask a classmate for notes from a lecture you missed. How would you request them?**

- a) "Excuse me, could I please get a copy of your notes from the lecture I missed?"
- b) "Hey, do you mind sharing your notes from the lecture? I wasn't able to attend."
- c) "Would it be possible for me to borrow your lecture notes? I would be very grateful."
- d) "Sorry to ask, but could I get a copy of your notes from the lecture? I need to catch up."

**b) Answer Sheet for the Questionnaire on Speech Acts of Request**

Scenario	Option A	Option B	Option C	Option D
1	3 (Agree)	4 (Strongly Agree)	2 (Neutral)	1 (Disagree)
2	2 (Neutral)	3 (Agree)	4 (Strongly Agree)	1 (Disagree)
3	3 (Strongly Agree)	4 (Agree)	1 (Disagree)	2 (Neutral)
4	3 (Agree)	2 (Neutral)	4 (Strongly Agree)	1 (Disagree)
5	4 (Strongly Agree)	2 (Neutral)	3 (Agree)	1 (Disagree)
6	2 (Neutral)	4 (Strongly Agree)	3 (Agree)	1 (Disagree)
7	3 (Agree)	2 (Neutral)	4 (Strongly Agree)	1 (Disagree)
8	4 (Strongly Agree)	2 (Neutral)	3 (Agree)	1 (Disagree)
9	3 (Agree)	4 (Strongly Agree)	2 (Neutral)	1 (Disagree)
10	2 (Neutral)	3 (Agree)	4 (Strongly Agree)	1 (Disagree)