



The effect of explicit pragmatics instruction on EFL students' pragmatic competence in writing

Žaneta Voldánová* , Renata Povolná 

Masaryk University, Czechia

Key words

pragmatics
pragmatic competence
explicit pragmatics instruction
writing skills
EFL
quasi-experimental study

Abstract

As pragmatics serves as a vital component of accurate communication, it represents a key area of inquiry in modern linguistics and foreign language didactics. Research previously conducted in the field of pragmatics and writing shows that EFL students' pragmatic competence is often insufficient for them to produce pragmatically appropriate texts (Codina-Espurz and Salazar-Campillo, 2019; Zhorabekova et al., 2024; Qin et al., 2024) and that pragmatics instruction can lead to improvement of students' pragmatic competence and writing skills (Nguyen et al., 2015; Chen, 2016; Deveci and Hmida, 2017). This research looks into the influence of pragmatics instruction on Czech EFL students' writing skills from the perspective of several pragmatic aspects of texts, such as politeness, formal and informal style, or expression of speech acts and communicative purpose. The study presents results from a quasi-experiment carried out with second-year students of the Primary School Education programme at the Faculty of Education, Masaryk University, Brno. Overall, the findings support the benefits of explicit pragmatics instruction, especially with regard to the differences between formal and informal style and appropriate linguistic choices when expressing different speech acts and communicative goals in concrete contextual conditions.

1. Introduction

The importance of mastering the four key language skills – listening, speaking, reading, and writing – in successful acquisition of the English language is undeniable. However, linguistic knowledge is insufficient if the language user is unable to apply it accordingly in specific communicative situations. Taking the context and the addressee into account is especially crucial in written communication, in which immediate feedback from the addressee is usually not available. Therefore, the research presented in this article investigates pragmatics

* Corresponding author

instruction and writing, particularly the effect of explicit pragmatics instruction on EFL students' writing skills.

In our research, the combination of pragmatics instruction and writing was motivated by the fact that explicit instruction has the potential to help students develop in two areas which go hand in hand, i.e., to enhance their pragmatic competence and to improve their writing skills. Furthermore, writing instruction often tends to stand in the background (Voldánová, 2019) or is developed but not with adequate instruction on pragmatics, which, according to Nguyen et al. (2024), textbooks often lack. As a result, students frequently fail in adhering to the standards of pragmatically appropriate communication (e.g., Takahashi, 2001; Burgucu-Tazegül et al., 2016; Codina-Espurz and Salazar-Campillo, 2019; Zhorabekova et al., 2024; Qin et al., 2024).

The positive influence of pragmatics instruction on pragmatic competence and writing skills has already been confirmed by multiple studies (e.g., Nguyen et al., 2015; Chen, 2016; Deveci and Hmida, 2017). The present research covers a considerably wide area, focusing on multiple pragmatic aspects simultaneously and offering an insight into the Czech context.

Although the research is dedicated to a variety of interconnected phenomena, including the effect of pragmatics instruction on students' confidence about their writing skills and their attitude to pragmatics instruction and its relevance for their writing skills development, this article presents mainly preliminary results related to the impact of pragmatics instruction on EFL students' writing skills. The data were collected through a quasi-experiment conducted at the Faculty of Education, Masaryk University, Brno. It consisted of a pre-test, intervention in the experimental groups, a post-test, and a questionnaire for the experimental groups.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Pragmatics

The linguistic discipline of pragmatics has been selected for the research because of its tight connection to language in real-life communication, as it studies the factors that influence language choice in social interaction and the effects of this selection on others (Crystal, 1987), as well as the meaning of utterances in situations (Leech, 1983) or words in contexts (Cutting and Fordyce, 2021). *Context*, explained by Hirschová (2013) as the linguistic environment of an utterance, is one of the key concepts of this discipline. Another vital term is *communication situation*, described by Hirschová (2013) as the circumstances accompanying communication and all its relevant components, including purpose, audience, channel, and message. Both of these concepts belong to the basis of the intervention conducted in our research, focused on pragmatics instruction.

Clark (2022) mentions that pragmatics is devoted to how we decide what to communicate and how we deduce what others intend to communicate to us in a given situation. According to Yule (1996), pragmatics considers both the author of an utterance and their communicative

purpose and the addressee and relates the meaning of an utterance to the participants, place, time, and circumstances of the communicative act. Dascal (2003) points out that it studies implicit meaning (i.e., more is communicated than is explicitly expressed) and whether the utterance is in alignment with what the author actually intends to communicate. All of this makes pragmatics an important source of knowledge about proper interpersonal communication.

There are numerous concepts that belong to the field of pragmatics. Given the focus of the present research, the following ones are the most prominent: *speech acts*, *the co-operative principle*, *formality and informality*, *deixis*, *politeness* and *politeness strategies*, and *explicitness* and *implicitness*. These concepts were selected with regard to the respondents and their vital role in producing pragmatically appropriate written texts, and also because they are associated with meaning making in the concrete cultural, social, religious, professional, and interpersonal conditions under which language is produced (Mey, 2001; Senf, 2014). Speech acts (Searle, 1969, 1979) are important for students' successful written communication when expressing different communicative goals, such as apologies, thanks, invitations, promises, suggestions, and requests. The knowledge and application of the co-operative principle and its maxims, i.e., providing the right amount (maxim of quantity) of truthful (quality) and relevant (relation) information structured in a clear and perspicuous way (manner) (Grice, 1989), is a natural part of writing, where inappropriate amount and lack of clarity or relevance of information can lead to an even more serious misunderstanding than in speaking due to the absence of immediate feedback (Yule, 1996). Knowledge of the differences between formal and informal linguistic means enables students to apply the appropriate amount of explicit or implicit ways of expression in their daily written communication, especially with regard to the addressee, while the inability to distinguish between them and opt for the appropriate register and level of explicitness can lead to pragmatically and stylistically improper texts or even miscommunication. This goes hand in hand with the clear and precise use of deictic means (including tenses) as well as politeness features (including correct ways of address, and direct and indirect speech acts) which students use when forming their utterances in situations of social distance and closeness (Leech, 2014). This also plays an important role in the pragmatic appropriateness of students' writing, especially when they address their superiors.

When creating a bridge between pragmatics and didactics, it is crucial to consider the term *pragmatic competence*. Hirschová (2013) defines it as the use of competently created sentences based on the communication situation. Cutting and Fordyce (2021) understand it as the ability to use language in a socio-culturally acceptable manner and with regard to the participants of the interaction and context. Within the present research, both of these views are reflected especially in the data analysis. Pragmatic competence appears in a number of models. For example, in Bachman's (1990) language competence model, it is one of the two main components of language competence, which highlights the importance of adequate pragmatic

competence in successful communication. This suggests that language instruction in the EFL classroom should also comprise pragmatics instruction. Usó-Juan's and Martínez-Flor's (2008) communicative competence model views pragmatic competence as part of discourse competence, which is further integrated with language skills, including writing, thus making this model relevant for our research.

Since pragmatics focuses on communication in context, it has the potential to be perceived as motivating and practical by students. What is more, incorporating explicit instruction on concepts from pragmatics can contribute significantly not only to the development of students' pragmatic competence but also to their language skills, including writing, especially when it takes the addressee into consideration. This is supported by previous research showing that pragmatic competence can be successfully enhanced through instruction (Taguchi, 2015). On the contrary, no or insufficient pragmatics instruction can lead to pragmatic failure (Romanowski and Bandura, 2019). However, pragmatic skills are often neglected and underdeveloped at the expense of structural accuracy (Gvritishvili, 2025). Although concepts from pragmatics appear in language teaching fairly commonly, what is usually missing are explicit explanations. Therefore, this research revolves around explicit pragmatics instruction, i.e., providing explicit explanations of theoretical concepts, and practising application of the acquired theoretical knowledge in concrete activities such as writing assignments.

2.2 Writing

The skill of writing comprises a whole range of micro-skills, such as using correct word order, but also implementing appropriate communicative functions with respect to the form and purpose of the text (Brown, 2000). The important role of the purpose and the addressee is highlighted by Brown and Hood (1989), who also add the significance of content and situation. The close connection between writing and pragmatics, the two main disciplines of the present research, is emphasized by Romanowski and Bandura (2019), who point out the necessity of politeness awareness, as well as Yule (1996), who brings the lack of immediate feedback in written communication to attention. Pragmatic appropriateness is vital so that the communicated message can be as comprehensible as possible and interpreted by the addressee as accurately as possible. For that reason, the EFL students' ability to take the addressee and the context into account when producing written texts was among the phenomena that were explored in the present research, including the expression of appropriate levels of politeness, formality, and explicitness.

Writing is often divided into two forms – writing as a process and writing as a product – with both of them having a vital role in effective writing instruction as well as in our research. Writing as a process, which can come in various stages, e.g., *prewriting*, *writing*, *revising*, *editing*, *publishing* (Caswell and Mahler, 2004), *preparing to write*, *drafting*, *revising* (Brown and Hood, 1989), or *planning*, *drafting*, *editing*, *final version* (Harmer, 2004), was particularly utilised in

the intervention, especially during practice activities. Writing as a product, which emphasises the final text and its accuracy and content, was also involved in the intervention, mainly within homework tasks, and it played a major role in the evaluation of texts from the pre-test and post-test and provided primary data for the analysis. As it is always advisable to provide adequate corrective feedback (both on the process and the final product) (Nguyen et al., 2015; Pourmousavi and Mohamadi Zenouzagh, 2020; Basturkmen and Fu, 2021), the students were continuously given feedback on their work during the intervention.

Thanks to explicit pragmatics instruction, students can be led towards writing texts that are more appropriate in a given context, properly express the communicative purpose, and include the right amount of formality as well as appropriate politeness strategies. This is in line with previous research demonstrating the positive impact of pragmatics instruction on learners' writing skills and pragmatic performance (e.g., Nguyen et al., 2015; Deveci and Hmida, 2017). It is exactly what our research explores, with the focus on the influence of pragmatics instruction in the Czech university EFL context.

2.3 Research field

Previous studies addressing the topic of pragmatics and writing generally focus on EFL students' pragmatic competence as reflected in their writing (e.g., Burgucu-Tazegül et al., 2016; Codina-Espurz and Salazar-Campillo, 2019; Qin et al., 2024; Zhorabekova et al., 2024) or on pragmatics instruction and its impact on EFL students' pragmatic competence and writing skills (e.g., Nguyen et al., 2015; Chen, 2016; Deveci and Hmida, 2017; Pourmousavi and Mohamadi Zenouzagh, 2020), with the latter strand being more closely related to the present study. In terms of methodology, these studies employ a range of data collection tools, including corpora of spontaneously produced texts (Burgucu-Tazegül et al., 2016; Codina-Espurz and Salazar-Campillo, 2019; Qin et al., 2024; Zhorabekova et al., 2024), discourse-completion tasks (Nguyen et al., 2015; Deveci and Hmida, 2017), pre-tests and post-tests (Nguyen et al., 2015; Chen, 2016; Pourmousavi and Mohamadi Zenouzagh, 2020), and questionnaires (Nguyen et al., 2015; Chen, 2016). In this respect, the present research adopts a quasi-experimental design, implementing a pre-test and a post-test, a discourse-completion task, and a questionnaire, thereby sharing methodological common ground with several of the studies mentioned above.

Findings from previous studies consistently suggest that EFL students have weaknesses in their pragmatic competence and skills to express pragmatic aspects of texts appropriately. This highlights the importance of pragmatics instruction and indicates its positive effect on students' pragmatic competence and writing skills (e.g., Takahashi, 2001; Nguyen et al., 2015; Deveci and Hmida, 2017), thus supporting our research hypotheses.

Despite these contributions, research on pragmatics and writing remains limited in certain contexts, including the Czech tertiary EFL context, which underscores the relevance of the

present study. In addition, previous studies in the field tend to have a relatively narrow focus, examining a limited set of pragmatic features, whereas the present research offers a more comprehensive perspective by investigating a broader range of pragmatic dimensions simultaneously, thereby aiming to address this gap in the literature.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research aims, research question, and hypotheses

The principal aim of the research is to determine how explicit pragmatics instruction affects EFL students' writing skills in relation to their pragmatic competence. The research further investigates the impact of pragmatics instruction on students' confidence in writing and their attitudes to explicit instruction.

The main research question is:

What is the effect of explicit pragmatics instruction and practice on the development of EFL university students' writing skills?

Since the research is mainly quantitative, hypotheses were formulated and tested. To answer the main research question, the following theoretical hypothesis was formulated: *Explicit pragmatics instruction and practice have a positive effect on the development of EFL university students' writing skills.* It was further turned into the following statistical hypothesis: *After explicit pragmatics instruction and practice, EFL university students will achieve higher scores in a test of their writing skills than before the instruction and than students who will not be taught pragmatics.* For the statistical analysis of the data obtained from formal e-mails written in the pre-test and the post-test, these three final hypotheses were formulated:

H1: The experimental groups will show a significant improvement in formal e-mail writing in the post-test compared to the pre-test,

H2: The control groups will not show a significant improvement in formal e-mail writing in the post-test compared to the pre-test,

H3: The experimental groups will show a significantly greater improvement in formal e-mail writing in the post-test compared to the pre-test than the control groups.

3.2 Research sample

The research sample consisted of 77 second-year students of the Primary School Education programme. More specifically, they were students of the Language Practice course, and their language level according to the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2020) was at least B1 (intermediate). At this level, students have enough language knowledge to be able to comprehend explicit pragmatics instruction and apply the introduced concepts in practice. At the same time, typically they have not been explicitly taught pragmatics, and they lack the

adequate level of pragmatic competence. The above-mentioned course was considered suitable for the research, as it is devoted to the development of linguistic means as well as language skills, including writing. Incorporating the development of writing skills through pragmatics instruction is therefore in alignment with the nature of the course. Moreover, university students are expected to know pragmatic aspects of written texts and be able to consider and apply them properly in their own texts.

The respondents were informed how the research would be conducted and signed the informed agreement with the right to withdraw at any time.

3.3 Research methods and data collection tools

As stated earlier, the research is mainly quantitative; therefore, it seeks to achieve certain comparison of numerical data (Punch, 2015). The format of a quasi-experiment allows us to track and compare the dependent variables among groups, and the main purpose is to find explanation of causal relationships (Ferjenčík, 2000). The technique of parallel groups is expected to produce more reliable results than when only one group is part of the research (Chráska, 2016). Therefore, the respondents were divided into two control groups (37 students in total) and two experimental groups (40 students in total), since the course itself is divided into four seminar groups. The experimental groups underwent intervention, which included explicit instruction on concepts from pragmatics, in-class activities practising the application of the theoretical knowledge of these concepts, and mandatory homework connected to further practice, on which the students received feedback.

The chief data collection tools for answering the main research question were two tests – a pre-test, written at the beginning of the semester, and a post-test, written at the end of the semester. It contained several tasks; the task that was analysed in the context of this article was writing a formal e-mail. In the pre-test, the students were asked to write an e-mail (80–100 words long) to their English teacher and send them an essay that was supposed to be handed in in a class they missed. They were also supposed to request feedback on the essay by the end of the week. In the post-test, they had to write an e-mail (80-100 words long) to their English teacher again, this time requesting to reschedule a consultation for a later date and move it online as well as apologising for the trouble. In both tests, the tasks were formulated with the intention of making students express the speech acts of request and apology, which were chosen because they frequently appear in students' authentic daily communication with their teachers and because they often cause non-native speakers issues and pose a risk of pragmatic failure.

3.4 Data analysis

In the research, the data was primarily analysed quantitatively. The formal e-mails from the pre-test and post-test were analysed with the help of a rating scale from 0 to 5. It dealt with

six categories which were selected because of their direct relation to the concepts introduced during the intervention and their vital role in pragmatically appropriate communication.

In the category of *speech acts and communicative purpose*, the analysis focused on whether the students used an appropriate amount of adequately expressed speech acts (Searle, 1969, 1979), suitably chosen with regard to the context and addressee, and whether the texts adequately expressed the intended communicative goals, with a minimal risk of misunderstanding. Next, in the category of *the co-operative principle*, it was analysed if any of the four maxims (quality, quantity, relation, and manner) (Grice, 1989) were flouted and whether the flouting, if it occurred, was adequately admitted. As for the category of *explicitness and implicitness*, the aim was to discover whether the level of explicitness and implicitness was in agreement with the given context and addressee and whether it helped the message be understood. In the category of *formal and informal style*, the core of the research was to check whether the texts were consistently formal and contained adequate features of formality and all the parts required in a formal e-mail. As for *politeness*, it was analysed if the texts contained an appropriate amount of adequately chosen politeness features with regard to the context and addressee as well as face-saving acts (Brown and Levinson, 1987) and whether any face-threatening acts appeared. Finally, the category of *deixis* checked whether personal, spatial, and temporal deictic expressions were used correctly and effectively in the given context and with the given addressee and whether the application of deictic means contributed to the overall text comprehension.

As far as the analysis process is concerned, first, the main researcher read through all the formal e-mails collected in the pre-test and assigned points in each category based on the above-mentioned scale. The texts were studied carefully and read over multiple times. Then the same procedure followed for the post-tests. The scores in the individual categories as well as the overall scores were used for descriptive statistics and statistical tests, and they were compared both within and across groups, testing hypotheses *H1*, *H2*, and *H3*. After testing normality with the Shapiro-Wilk test, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used for each group separately, and the Mann-Whitney U test was used for comparing the control groups and the experimental groups.

After practising part of the analysis together with the main researcher in order to approach the assessment of the essays in the same way, the second rater read most of the e-mails (58 out of 77) both in the pre-tests and post-tests individually. Finally, she read them multiple times while assigning points in each category along the above-mentioned scale. The results assigned by the second rater were used for comparison with and confirmation of the results by the main researcher.

4. Results

4.1 Results from the main researcher

As explained above, the texts were systematically analysed based on a rating scale. Then the statistical analysis was conducted, the results of which are presented below.

Table 1 introduces the average total scores in each group, and Table 2 presents descriptive statistics connected with the total scores. They indicate that there was a considerable improvement in the experimental groups (EGs) and that these students outperformed the control groups (CGs) in the post-test.

Table 1. Average scores from the formal e-mail

Groups	Average number of points (pre-test)	Average number of points (post-test)
Experimental (EGs)	21.800	24.150
Control (CGs)	22.946	23.297

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the total scores from the pre-test and post-test

	Number of respondents	Mode	Median	Mean	Standard deviation
Pre-test EGs	40	23	23	21.800	4.937
Pre-test CGs	37	20	23	22.946	4.209
Post-test EGs	40	22	25	24.150	3.424
Post-test CGs	37	27	24	23.297	4.189

Table 3 gives the average scores from the pre-test and post-test in the individual categories achieved by the EGs and CGs.

Table 3. Average scores in the individual categories

Average score in the category	EGs pre-test	CGs pre-test	EGs post-test	CGs post-test
Speech acts and communicative purpose	3.125	3.595	3.850	3.676
The co-operative principle	3.525	3.649	3.850	3.973
Explicitness and implicitness	3.700	3.946	3.850	3.757
Formal and informal style	3.400	3.784	4.225	3.919
Politeness	4.400	4.297	4.425	4.135
Deixis	3.650	3.676	3.950	3.838

In both the EGs and CGs, the lowest score from the pre-test was reached in the category of *speech acts and communicative purpose*. On the contrary, the highest score was achieved in the category of *politeness*, where the average score was even higher than 4 points. In the post-test,

the weakest categories in the EGs were *speech acts and communicative purpose*, *the co-operative principle*, and *explicitness and implicitness*, although in all of them, there were certain improvements. By contrast, the weakest category in the CGs was the category of *speech acts and communicative purpose*, just as in the pre-test. Both the EGs and the CGs scored the highest in the category of *politeness*. In the EGs, there was at least some improvement in each category, while in the CGs, there was improvement only in four categories.

Table 4 captures descriptive statistics related to the improvement of all groups in the individual categories as well as overall results.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of all groups' improvement in comparison with the pre-test

	Number of respondents	Mode	Median	Mean	Standard deviation
Speech acts and communicative purpose improvement EGs	40	0	0.500	0.725	1.811
Speech acts and communicative purpose improvement CGs	37	0	0	0.081	1.588
The co-operative principle improvement EGs	40	1	0.500	0.325	1.607
The co-operative principle improvement CGs	37	0	0	0.324	1.334
Explicitness and implicitness improvement EGs	40	0	0	0.150	1.594
Explicitness and implicitness improvement CGs	37	-1	0	-0.189	1.244
Formal and informal style improvement EGs	40	0	1	0.825	1.259
Formal and informal style improvement CGs	37	1	0	0.135	1.110
Politeness improvement EGs	40	0	0	0.025	1.121
Politeness improvement CGs	37	0	0	-0.162	1.259
Deixis improvement EGs	40	0	0	0.300	1.137
Deixis improvement CGs	37	-1	0	0.162	1.365
Overall improvement EGs	40	-1	1.500	2.350	5.494
Overall improvement CGs	37	3	0	0.351	4.680

Table 4 indicates that the EGs reached a greater total improvement (by 2.350 points) than the CGs (0.351 points). Nonetheless, it was necessary to conduct statistical tests to test the hypotheses. First, the groups were tested separately, using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test (Wilcoxon test). For each hypothesis, the alternative hypothesis assumed that the score from the pre-test was lower than from the post-test. The significance level α was the standard 0.05 (5%). Table 5 shows the results from the EGs, while Table 6 presents those from the CGs.

Table 5. Wilcoxon signed-rank test – experimental groups

Score from the pre-test	Score from the post-test	W	p
Speech acts and communicative purpose	Speech acts and communicative purpose	111.500	0.009
The co-operative principle	The co-operative principle	203.500	0.120
Explicitness and implicitness	Explicitness and implicitness	158.000	0.228
Formal and informal style	Formal and informal style	63.500	< 0.001
Politeness	Politeness	174.000	0.489
Deixis	Deixis	87.000	0.055
Total score	Total score	204.500	0.008

In the categories of *speech acts and communicative purpose* and *formal and informal style*, the null hypothesis can be rejected at the significance level of 0.05; therefore, it can be stated that the students from the EGs improved significantly and that pragmatics instruction helped them improve their skills in expressing speech acts and communicative purpose adequately and adhere to standards of formal style. In the remaining categories, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected, so it cannot be stated that pragmatics instruction had a significant impact on students' development in the areas of the co-operative principle, explicitness and implicitness, politeness, and deixis.

What is pivotal for testing hypothesis *H1* (*The experimental groups will show a significant improvement in formal e-mail writing in the post-test compared to the pre-test.*) is the total score. The Wilcoxon test showed that the null hypothesis can be rejected at the significance level of 0.05, which supports *H1* and implies that the EGs improved significantly, which is a positive result. Thus, it can be assumed that pragmatics instruction contributed considerably to the students' improvement in their overall pragmatic competence and made writing a formal e-mail easier for them.

Table 6. Wilcoxon signed-rank test – control groups

Score from the pre-test	Score from the post-test	W	p
Speech acts and communicative purpose	Speech acts and communicative purpose	149.500	0.366
The co-operative principle	The co-operative principle	105.000	0.096
Explicitness and implicitness	Explicitness and implicitness	243.000	0.833
Formal and informal style	Formal and informal style	159.000	0.226
Politeness	Politeness	143.000	0.717
Deixis	Deixis	167.500	0.204
Total score	Total score	243.500	0.256

In the CGs, the Wilcoxon test showed that in not a single category can the null hypothesis be rejected at the significance level of 0.05, so no statistically significant improvement was observed. The same situation is also in the total score. The original hypothesis *H2* (*The control groups will not show a significant improvement in formal e-mail writing in the post-test compared to the pre-test.*) was

supported by the test results, which suggests that pragmatics instruction may have contributed to the improvement observed in the EGs.

In order to compare the improvement between the groups, a Mann-Whitney U test was conducted. The alternative hypothesis for each category as well as for the total score was formulated in such a way that the value in the EGs was higher than in the CGs, signifying that students from the EGs achieved a greater improvement than those from the CGs. The results are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Mann-Whitney U test – comparison of the groups

	U	p
Speech acts and communicative purpose improvement	879.500	0.074
The co-operative principle improvement	727.500	0.554
Explicitness and implicitness improvement	833.500	0.165
Formal and informal style improvement	973.500	0.007
Politeness improvement	788.000	0.307
Deixis improvement	776.500	0.352
Overall improvement	863.000	0.105

In the category of *formal and informal style*, it was found that at the significance level of 0.05, the null hypothesis can be rejected, and it is possible to state that there is a statistically significant difference between the groups. That implies that pragmatics instruction helped the students from the EGs improve their skills in adhering to the standards of formal style and this improvement was considerably greater than the CGs' improvement. In the other categories, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected, so it is not possible to claim that pragmatics instruction helped the students from the EGs develop in those areas to a statistically significantly greater extent than the students from the CGs.

As for the overall improvement, which is pivotal for *H3* (*The experimental groups will show a significantly greater improvement in formal e-mail writing in the post-test compared to the pre-test than the control groups.*), it was discovered that at the significance level of 0.05, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected. Therefore, it is not possible to claim that the difference between groups was statistically significant, and the results do not provide sufficient evidence supporting *H3*.

In order to complement the results from the statistical tests, examples of improvement of respondents from the EG were selected to demonstrate the actual comparison. For this article, several instances were chosen from the categories *speech acts and communicative purpose* and *formal and informal style* (presented in Tables 8 and 9), in which the students achieved statistically significant improvement.

Table 8. Examples of EG's improvement in speech acts and communicative purpose

Respondent	Improvement	Pre-test issues	Post-test outcome
R7	2→2	serious shortcomings in both the apology and the request	serious shortcomings in both the apology and the request remain
R23	3→4	moderate shortcomings in the expression of the request	minor shortcomings in the expression of the request
R17	0→5	neither the apology nor the request conveys the intended communicative purpose	speech acts and communicative purpose expressed appropriately
R34	1→5	the apology does not convey the intended communicative purpose	speech acts and communicative purpose expressed appropriately

In the category of *speech acts and communicative purpose*, the most frequent improvement was 0 or 1 point, as the modal values were 0 and +1. An example of no improvement is R7, whose pre-test and post-test texts have serious shortcomings in both the apology and the request, resulting in a high risk of misunderstanding. In the pre-test, she changed the assigned communicative purpose (*I want to say, that my essay is attached at the agreed app.*) and failed to request feedback by the end of the week; in the post-test, she failed to request rescheduling the consultation. R23 improved by 1 point; her pre-test text shows moderate shortcomings in the request (*Also I would to ask you if you can send the feedback on my essay (...); Can it possible?*), whereas in the post-test, she expressed the assigned speech acts only with minor issues (*I want to ask you if it would be possible change our meeting for the consultation. ; I apologise you to make trouble.*)

Examples of substantial improvement are R17 and R34, who improved by 5 and 4 points respectively. In the pre-test, R17 apologised for something different than was assigned and formulated an offer instead of a request (*If you want, I would like to send you my essay (...)*). R34 apologised for an upcoming class instead of a previous one and changed the communicative purpose (*I would like to apologise for my absence in following English lesson; I gave my essay to your colleague in your office.*), leading to a high risk of misunderstanding. In the post-test, R17 and R34 produced appropriately expressed speech acts, (e.g., R17: *Could we meet online on 21st January, please?*, R34: *I am writing this e-mail to apologize from our meeting we were supposed to have tomorrow in the morning.*), and the risk of misunderstanding was minimal.

Table 9. Examples of EG's improvement in formal and informal style

Respondent	Improvement	Pre-test issues	Post-test outcome
R14	3→3	appropriate formal features predominate; the text does not adhere to certain formal conventions	appropriate formal features predominate; the text does not adhere to certain formal conventions
R36	3→4	appropriate formal features predominate; the text does not adhere to certain formal conventions	appropriate formal features predominate; all formal conventions are adhered to
R5	2→5	the text contains a very similar level of both formal and informal features; it does not adhere to some formal conventions	appropriate formal features clearly predominate; all formal conventions are adhered to
R40	3→5	appropriate formal features predominate; it does not adhere to certain formal conventions (greeting, closing)	appropriate formal features clearly predominate; all formal conventions are adhered to

In the category of *formal and informal style*, the most frequent improvement was also 0 or 1 point. An example of no improvement is R14, whose pre-test and post-test texts contain mostly appropriate formal features, although some informal features occur, and certain formal conventions are not adhered to. In the pre-test, she skipped the greeting, opening, sign-off, and signature (*Dear Mr/Mrs I couldn't come (...); Thank you for your answer. – end of the e-mail*), whereas in the post-test, there are shortcomings in the greeting and closing (*Could we please postpone this meeting? Kind regards, (...)*). R36 improved by 1 point. His pre-test text contains some informal features (*I hope everything will be ok.*) and issues with adhering to certain formal conventions, more specifically, greeting, opening, closing, and sign off; in the post-test text, appropriate formal features predominate, although informal features rarely occur (*Have a nice day, surname*), and all formal conventions are adhered to. A considerable improvement can be seen in R5 and R40, whose post-test texts were better by 3 or 2 points, respectively. R5 showed a very similar level of both formal and informal features in the pre-test and problems in adhering to some formal conventions (greeting, closing, signature) (*Have a nice day. X. Y.*), while in R40's pre-test text, some informal features appear and certain formal conventions are not adhered to (*Dear Mrs... (teacher); (...)* by the end of this week? Your sincerely, name surname). In the post-test texts, appropriate formal features clearly predominate and all formal conventions are adhered to (e.g., R5: *Dear Mr. Sparkle, I am writing to you to ask (...); (...)* thank you for your time. Best regards, name surname; R40: *Thank you for the response. Kind regards, name surname*), indicating that the respondents grasped the concept of formal and pragmatically appropriate writing.

4.2 Results from the second rater

The second rater, who was thoroughly instructed on the rating scale and process, assessed part of the texts (particularly texts written by 58 out of 77 students – in one EG and in one CG) in order to provide a second expert's insight. The overall scores are presented below in Tables 10, 11, and 12.

Table 10. Wilcoxon signed-rank test – experimental group – second rater

Score from the pre-test	Score from the post-test	W	p
Total score	Total score	69.000	0.006

Table 11. Wilcoxon signed-rank test – control group – second rater

Score from the pre-test	Score from the post-test	W	p
Total score	Total score	160.000	0.351

Table 12. Mann-Whitney U test – second rater

	U	p
Overall improvement	528.500	0.046

The data in all three tables suggest a positive effect of explicit pragmatics instruction on the students' writing skills. That is because the statistical testing of the second rater's assessment shows that at the significance level of 0.05, there has been a significant improvement in the EG's total score, while there was no significant improvement in the CG. Moreover, according to the second rater, the overall improvement of the experimental group was significantly greater than the improvement of the control group.

4.3 Comparison of the results

It is important to emphasise that the second rater did not assess e-mails by all participants. However, even the partial evaluation of the texts puts the research into a broader and more grounded context and increases the reliability of the results.

Despite the second rater working with a slightly different number of texts, the Wilcoxon test for the EG and the CG showed very similar findings, discovering significant improvement in the EG's total score and insignificant improvement in the CG. The raters varied in the Mann-Whitney U test, where the main researcher did not discover a statistically significant difference between the groups in terms of overall improvement, whereas the second rater did.

In order to check the inter-rater reliability, the intraclass correlation coefficient was calculated using a two-way mixed-effects model with single measurements (ICC(3,1)) for the overall improvement (for the 58 participants assessed by both raters). As shown in Table 13, the results indicated an excellent level of inter-rater reliability, demonstrating that the two raters assessed the texts consistently and that the overall results obtained in the research can be considered reliable.

Table 13. Intraclass correlation – overall improvement

Type	Point estimate	Lower 95% CI	Upper 95% CI
ICC(3,1)	0.938	0.898	0.963

5. Discussion

In order to answer the main research question *What is the effect of explicit pragmatics instruction and practice on the development of EFL university students' writing skills?*, three statistical hypotheses were formulated. The results are discussed below.

Regarding *H1 (The experimental groups will show a significant improvement in formal e-mail writing in the post-test compared to the pre-test.)*, the Wilcoxon test showed significant improvement only in *speech acts and communicative purpose* and *formal and informal style*. These categories were the ones in which students achieved the weakest scores in the pre-test, and the fact that the students in the EGs managed to improve significantly indicates that explicit pragmatics instruction was beneficial for them in that improvement. While the students from the EGs improved in other categories as well, the Wilcoxon test did not reveal a statistically significant improvement. This could be caused by the students' scores being fairly high already in the pre-test. Nonetheless, what is especially crucial in the context of *H1* is the overall improvement. The null hypothesis was rejected; therefore, it can be concluded that a statistically significant improvement was observed in the EGs, which highlights the benefits of the intervention for students' performance in writing better formal e-mails with regard to the pragmatic aspects of the texts.

As for *H2 (The control groups will not show a significant improvement in formal e-mail writing in the post-test compared to the pre-test.)*, the Wilcoxon test did not reveal significant improvement in any of the categories, and the same result appeared in the overall score, thus supporting *H2*. This implies that pragmatics instruction may have contributed substantially to the improvement of the EGs.

In terms of *H3 (The experimental groups will show a significantly greater improvement in formal e-mail writing in the post-test compared to the pre-test than the control groups.)*, the Mann-Whitney U test showed a statistically significant difference between the groups only in *formal and informal style*. It can be assumed that the pragmatics instruction contributed to the EGs' improvement especially in terms of adhering to the formal style requirements significantly better in comparison with the CGs. The test did not discover a statistically significant difference in the overall improvement, although the second rater's data showed a significant difference in the overall improvement, which can be perceived positively. The possible reasons why there was not a statistically significant difference between the groups are the size of the sample or the mild level of the effect of the intervention. It would be interesting and beneficial to repeat the research with a bigger sample or with the inclusion of more extensive pragmatics instruction.

Based on the data collected from statistical testing, the results indicate that incorporating explicit pragmatics instruction and practice of concepts from pragmatics has a positive impact on EFL university students' writing skills with regard to producing pragmatically appropriate formal e-mails. The improvement is primarily apparent in the categories of *speech acts and communicative purpose* and *formal and informal style*, as illustrated above by selected examples from the pre-test and post-test.

There are several limitations to the present research. Quantitative research tends to lead to generalisation. During the statistical analysis, factors such as the students' language level or length of studying English were not considered. However, these social factors are the same or very similar for all the participants. Moreover, the exposure of the students to English in their free time was not taken into consideration at all. Nevertheless, the pre-test and the post-test were designed in such a way that the analysed data were directly linked to what the students were able to acquire thanks to the intervention, thus making the rating scale correspond with the topics dealt with in classes and homework tasks. Another limitation is that not all students from the EGs were present in each class, so they did not have equal exposure to pragmatics instruction. In order to reduce the effect of their absence, all students were obliged to hand in homework from each class related to pragmatics so that they had to get familiar with each studied pragmatics concept. Finally, the time dedicated to explicit instruction at class was not extensive (roughly 30 minutes per one 100-minute class a week), so it is probable that had the students worked with pragmatics concepts more intensively, they would have achieved an even greater progress. At the same time, the research confirms that even a lower amount of pragmatics instruction can be beneficial.

During the research, a broad variety of data was collected. There are many possibilities for further exploration, e.g., the effect of pragmatics instruction on students' performance in writing informal e-mails or on their confidence in writing. The EGs' questionnaire responses can also generate interesting findings about EFL university students' attitudes to pragmatics instruction and its contribution to their writing skills development.

6. Conclusion

The present research supports the benefits of the implementation of explicit pragmatics instruction in EFL university students' classes because it can help students develop their writing skills, especially in terms of appropriate choices of features of formal style and adequate expression of speech acts and communicative purpose. The analysis of the formal e-mails written in the pre-test and post-test showed that the students from the experimental groups, who received explicit pragmatics instruction, improved significantly in the categories of *speech acts and communicative purpose* and *formal and informal style* and that in the latter category their progress was statistically significantly greater than that of the students from the control groups, who had no explicit instruction. Furthermore, the EGs improved

significantly in their overall performance, whereas the latter did not improve significantly in any of the categories included in the research or in the total score.

In conclusion, it can be stated that pragmatics instruction may have a positive influence on EFL university students' writing skills. The findings are consistent with a number of previous studies (e.g., Chen, 2016; Deveci and Hmida, 2017; Codina-Espurz and Salazar-Campillo, 2019; Qin et al., 2024), which also demonstrate the important role of teaching pragmatics, including adequate corrective feedback (Nguyen et al., 2015; Pourmousavi and Mohamadi Zenouzagh, 2020), in the development of students' pragmatic competence and its reflection in their written performance.

References

- Bachman, L. F. (1990). *Fundamental considerations in language testing*. Oxford University Press.
- Basturkmen, H., & Fu, M. (2021). Corrective feedback and the development of second language grammar. In H. Nassaji & E. Kartchava (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of corrective feedback in second language learning and teaching* (pp. 367–386). Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, K., & Hood, S. (1989). *Writing matters: Writing skills and strategies for students of English*. Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, H. D. (2000). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy* (2nd ed.). Longman.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals of language usage*. Cambridge University Press.
- Burgucu-Tazegül, A., Han, T., & Engin, A. O. (2016). Pragmatic failure of Turkish EFL learners in request emails to their professors. *International Education Studies*, 9(10), 105–115. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1116055>
- Caswell, R., & Mahler, B. (2004). *Strategies for teaching writing*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Chen, Y.-S. (2016). Understanding the development of Chinese EFL learners' email literacy through Exploratory Practice. *Language Teaching Research*, 20(2), 165–180. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168814562014>
- Chráska, M. (2016). *Metody pedagogického výzkumu: Základy kvantitativního výzkumu* (2nd ed.). Grada.
- Clark, B. (2022). *Pragmatics: The basics*. Routledge.

- Codina-Espurz, V., & Salazar-Campillo, P. (2019). Openings and closing in emails by CLIL students: A pedagogical proposal. *English Language Teaching*, 12(2), 57–67. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v12n2p57>
- Council of Europe (2020). *Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment – Companion volume*. Council of Europe Publishing. <https://www.coe.int/lang-cefr>
- Crystal, D. (1987). *The Cambridge encyclopedia of language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Cutting, J., & Fordyce, K. (2021). *Pragmatics: A resource book for students* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Dascal, M. (2003). *Interpretation and understanding*. John Benjamins.
- Deveci, T., & Hmida, I. B. (2017). The request speech act in emails by Arab university students in the UAE. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 13(1), 194–214. <https://www.jlls.org/index.php/jlls/article/view/569>
- Ferjenčík, J. (2000). *Úvod do metodologie psychologického výzkumu: Jak zkoumat lidskou duši*. Portál.
- Grice, P. (1989). *Studies in the way of words*. Harvard University Press.
- Gvritishvili, S. (2025). Developing Pragmatic Competence in the EFL Classroom: A Discourse-Based Strategy. *International Journal of Multilingual Education*, 26, 361–377. <https://doi.org/10.22333/ijme.2025.10534>
- Harmer, J. (2004). *How to teach writing*. Longman.
- Hirschová, M. (2013). *Pragmatika v češtině*. Karolinum.
- Leech, G. N. (1983). *Principles of pragmatics*. Longman.
- Leech, G. N. (2014). *The pragmatics of politeness*. Oxford University Press.
- Mey, J. L. (2001). *Pragmatics: An introduction*. (2nd ed.) Blackwell.
- Nguyen, M. T. T., Renandya, W., Pham, T. T. T., & Pham, H. T. (2024). Learning how to write socially appropriate emails through textbooks: An evaluation of international English textbooks. *TEFLIN Journal*, 35(1), 66–89. <https://doi.org/10.15639/teflinjournal.v35i1/66-89>
- Nguyen, T. T. M., Do, T. T. H., Nguyen, A. T., & Pham, T. T. T. (2015). Teaching email requests in the academic context: A focus on the role of corrective feedback. *Language Awareness*, 24(2), 169–195. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09658416.2015.1010543>
- Pourmousavi, Z., & Mohamadi Zenouzagh, Z. (2020). A comparative study of the effect of teacher's group and individual feedback on Iranian EFL learners' learning of speech acts

- in apology letter writing. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, 5(14). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40862-020-00088-w>
- Punch, K. F. (2015). *Úspěšný návrh výzkumu* (2nd ed.). Portál.
- Qin, W., Jia, R., & Ren, W. (2024). Pragmatic competence in an email writing task: Influences of situation, L1 background, and L2 proficiency. *Written Communication*, 41(4), 726–755. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07410883241263543>
- Romanowski, P., & Bandura, E. (2019). *Intercultural foreign language teaching and learning in higher education contexts*. IGI Global.
- Searle, J. (1969). *Speech acts: An essay in the philosophy of language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Searle, J. (1979). *Expressions and meaning: Studies in the theory of speech acts*. Cambridge University Press.
- Senf, G. (2014). *Understanding pragmatics*. Routledge.
- Taguchi, N. (2015). Instructed pragmatics at a glance: Where instructional studies were, are, and should be going. *Language teaching* 48(1), 1–50. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444814000263>
- Takahashi, S. (2001). The role of input enhancement in developing pragmatic competence. In K. R. Rose & G. Kasper (Eds.), *Pragmatics in language teaching* (pp. 171–199). Cambridge University Press.
- Usó-Juan, E., & Martínez-Flor, A. (2008). Teaching intercultural communicative competence through the four skills. *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses*, 21, 157–170. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/d7bd/0d8dbdfd25eac9a932716db4fbfd910e380d.pdf>
- Voldánová, Ž. (2019). *Relatable group writing in teaching writing to young learners and its influence on their approach to writing* [Master's thesis, Masaryk University]. Archiv závěrečných prací MUNI. <https://is.muni.cz/th/ggtv4/?kod=np2093>
- Yule, G. (1996). *Pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.
- Zhorabekova, A., Kassymova, G. K., & Xu, W. (2024). Enhancing students' pragmatic and self-efficacy skills by writing emails. *Iasayt ýniversitetiniń habarshysy*, 134(4), 423–436. <https://doi.org/10.47526/2024-4/2664-0686.1320>