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**Pragmatic Use of Mitigation in
English by Iraqi EFL
University Learners:
Challenges and Strategies**
A B S T R A C T

The present study looks into the strategies that Iraqi university learners of English use in their spoken production. It studies requests and refusals speech acts only. Data were collected through a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) involving 120 students representing the four academic years (30 students per year). Students in higher academic years showed greater awareness of mitigation strategies. Most individuals of this group, however, will choose to communicate euphemistically or overly formally. The main reason is L1 interference and/or limited instruction in pragmatics. There were statistical differences at different academic levels. The suggestion made in the study is to teach mitigation strategies explicitly within the context of the situation and culture to enhance the pragmatic competence of learners. © 2026 JTUH, College of Education for Human Sciences, Tikrit University

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الاستخدام التداولي لأساليب التلطيف في اللغة الإنجليزية لدى طلبة الجامعات العراقية متعلمي اللغة
الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية: التحديات والاستراتيجيات

محمد حسن محي / الجامعة المستنصرية / كلية الآداب

الخلاصة:

تتناول هذه الدراسة الاستراتيجيات التي يستخدمها طلبة الجامعات العراقية متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية في إنتاجهم الشفهي. ويقتصر البحث على دراسة أفعالي الكلام المتمثلين في الطلب والرفض فقط. جُمعت البيانات من خلال اختبار إكمال الخطاب (DCT) شمل ١٢٠ طالباً من أربعة مستويات دراسية، بواقع ٣٠ طالباً لكل مستوى. وقد أظهرت النتائج أن طلبة المستويات المتقدمة يمتلكون وعياً بأساليب التلطيف، إلا أن معظم أفراد هذه الفئة يميلون إلى التعبير بأسلوب ملطّف مفرط أو شديد الرسمية. ويُعزى ذلك أساساً إلى تأثير اللغة الأم و/أو محدودية التعليم التداولي. كما كشفت النتائج عن وجود فروق ذات دلالة إحصائية بين المستويات الدراسية المختلفة. وتوصي الدراسة بضرورة تدريس استراتيجيات التلطيف بصورة

صريحة ضمن السياقين الثقافي والموقفي بهدف تعزيز الكفاءة التداولية لدى المتعلمين.
الكلمات الرئيسية: التداولية - استراتيجيات التلطيف - متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية - التحديات
التواصلية - الاستراتيجيات التداولية.

1. Introduction

The English expression of mitigation and its practical use has cognitive, socio-rhetorical and linguistic dimensions. Mitigation can be viewed as a strategic tool that protects self-image and promotes communication effectiveness useful in face-threatening acts and it relates to the heterogeneity of linguistic mechanisms (Marco & Arguedas, 2021).

This paper aims at illuminating the situation of mitigation in communication through an exploration of these dimensions. Appropriate communicative ability in English is not just a question of grammar. It is equally about the right pragmatic strategy like mitigation.

This is the use of linguistic devices in order to lessen the impact of potential threats to the face (Brown & Levinson, 1987) Speakers often use mitigation to soften a request, criticize someone or decline an invitation. Iraqi learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) find it difficult to learn these strategies. This is mainly because the pragmatics of Arabic and English are different. Accordingly, this study investigates the mitigation strategies used by students of the Department of English at Mustansiriyah University in their English spoken production. This goes through the trends of development across academic levels and the common challenges along with their effective solutions. This research is essential for curriculum design and teacher training in Iraq, which could help improve EFL classrooms through pragmatics instruction.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Mitigation

The following subsections deal with definitions of mitigation and the factors that influence its use:

2.1.1 Definition and Functions of Mitigation

Mitigation is defined as "the process of reducing the perceived strength or seriousness of an utterance" (Fraser, 1990, p. 26). In interlanguage pragmatics, it plays a crucial role in achieving politeness and maintaining social harmony (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989).

In English, mitigation often involves the use of hedges (e.g., *maybe, perhaps*), modal verbs (*could, would*), interrogative forms (*Could you...?*), and justifiers (*because...*).

House (1996) declares that mitigation has various functions:

- Softening directives (e.g., requests, commands)
- Reducing the impact of negative feedback
- Indirectly expressing disagreement or refusal

According to Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, strategies are used by speakers to maintain face and avoid offending.

2.1.2 Contextual Factors Influencing Mitigation Use

A variety of contextual factors have a considerable effect on the pragmatic use of mitigation in English by Iraqi EFL university learners. Learners' cognitive, metacognitive, emotional, and sociocultural factors influence their language learning processes. When integrated into classroom practices, these factors may enhance effective communication and learning, or alternatively inhibit interaction. The socio-cultural background of learners is a crucial factor that determines their willingness to engage in mitigated speech acts since it affects their perception of politeness and face-saving strategies (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2022).

2.1.3 Types of Mitigation Strategies Used

The effective usage of mitigation strategies in English by Iraqi EFL university learners is a multi-faceted phenomenon entailing uses of many more linguistic devices intended to shrink the threat of communication. Mitigation strategies are essential for maintaining politeness and managing face-threatening acts. As per Ali and Salih (2020), a complete taxonomy of mitigation devices such as indirect speech acts, tag questions, parenthetical verbs, disclaimers, impersonal

constructions, hedges, and euphemisms. Language sometimes communicates undesirable or potentially face-threatening messages. These devices lessen the force of a speech act. Indirect speech acts occur when a speaker conveys meaning implicitly rather than explicitly. For example, a speaker may say ‘*Could you pass the salt?*’ instead of issuing a direct command, thereby reducing the imposition on the listener. Indirectness allows speakers to maintain politeness while minimizing imposition on the listener. A speaker may use expressions such as “he’s so smart, isn’t he?” which is a tag question. It invites agreement and softens possible tough impact. Hedging words help soften the impact of the statement. Disclaimers that precede possibly face-threatening acts serve to buffer the impact of the utterance in that they mark the speaker’s awareness. Impersonal constructions remove the speaker from the statement, thereby reducing its personal impact. Uncertainty is communicated through hedge language. Only “perhaps,” “maybe” or “sort of” can be used to make the statement believable. Euphemisms are words that replace a word or phrase that may be too harsh or improper. Instead, a milder version is used. As per Ali & Salih (2020), these devices enable politeness and help in preserving interpersonal harmony.

Use of these mitigators is not only a gloss choice, but also a reflection of sociopragmatic norms. Speakers of different sociocultural backgrounds use different means of mitigation. This is what Mancera Cestero (2020) says. The specific strategy that speakers select is influenced by the features of speaker culture, the relationship of interlocutors and the discourse context. Differentiation in mitigation strategies reveals the importance of learners’ interpretative frameworks which they develop while learning and in foreign language use (Cestero Mancera, 2020).

In brief, Iraqi EFL learners use different forms linguistic and sociopragmatic variables in their mitigation strategies use. These strategies allow speakers to communicate politely and tactfully without giving discomfort or unwanted feeling to anyone. It may be easier for the EFL learners to learn the language if they learn.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This research uses two theoretical frameworks as the basis.

2.2.1 Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987)

According to Brown and Levinson, speakers have a choice of strategies in order to counter face threats. According to context mitigate lessens the threat to a positive or negative face. The positive face is an individual's desire to be liked and appreciated, and negative face is the desire to not be imposed upon. Mitigation reduces face-threatening acts (FTAs) in both dimensions.

2.2.2 Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP)

The ILP framework details how second language learners develop pragmatic competence over time (Kasper & Rose, 2002). Interlanguage pragmatics examines how learners' second-language pragmatic behavior is evaluated in relation to target-language norms. According to Rose and Kasper (2001), pragmatic development follows a gradual pattern influenced by sociocultural context, cognitive development and instructional methods. In other words, learners' interlanguage pragmatic performance is commonly evaluated in relation to target-language norms, while acknowledging that pragmatic competence develops gradually and is shaped by instructional and sociocultural factors.

2.3 Pragmatics Instruction in EFL Contexts

Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) play an important role in the teaching of pragmatics for effective cross-cultural communication among Learners. Pragmatics is often ignored in standard language lessons that mainly focus on grammar and vocabulary. It refers to how language actually works in the social context. By increasing students' awareness of pragmatic elements and their importance in communication, EFL teachers can bridge this gap. Nagasaka and Brock (2005) claim that teachers can assist the learners' understanding by placing the use of the language in context and explaining the role of pragmatics in particular. By learning this way, learners' communicative competence improves. Also, when they finally meet real people, they need to have interactions that are pragmatically appropriate (Nagasaka & Brock, 2005).

EFL teaching has some challenges when it comes to integrating pragmatics. Many teachers do realize pragmatics is an important thing in teaching. However, Ivanova (2018) noted that many of them are still confused as to what pragmatics is. Almost half of the teachers surveyed (43%) could not name any of them, or gave wrong examples. So here we see a lack of pragmatic awareness

(Ivanova, 2018) Some professional development is needed to enable teachers to understand and teach on the subject and pragmatics to improve the student learner's communicative competence overall.

In the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, a pragmatics course plays an important role in enhancing the learners' communicative competence. Pragmatics studies how people use language and produce meaning as they interact with each other. It is a branch of linguistics which is concerned with social language. When learners do not have an environment with native speakers, it is essential to teach them pragmatics explicitly in the EFL setting. According to Alinezhad (2015), 'this very instruction' helps connect linguistic competence with the ability to use it in social interaction.

Effective communication includes pragmatic competence. It encompasses both verbal and non-verbal communication too. It helps learners move harmoniously in varying contexts of culture without suffering misunderstandings from pragmatic failures. For instance, if I simply say, 'The door is open', you may take it to mean the door is open; or you may take it to mean, 'Please close the door'. EFL students misinterpret these cues without applying pragmatic knowledge, causing breakdowns (Shu, 2018). By adding pragmatic parts to the EFL syllabus, the language ability of the learners can be enhanced through real life.

Pragmatic use of mitigation in English is also important because it deals well with an ideal self-image while achieving interaction goals. The study emphasizes that the mitigation has cognitive, social, as well as linguistic dimensions. These aspects are useful in many discursive genres, helping to ensure the communicative efficiency and social tranquility, (Marco and Arguedas, 2021).

2.4 Related Studies

2.4.1 Cross-Cultural Studies on Mitigation

Many studies have compared the usage of mitigation across cultures. For instance, Al- Momani (2009) discovered that Jordanian EFL learners use request strategies less than native speakers of English, making their speech seem abrupt or rude.

In the Arab world, Al-Juraywi investigated the use of mitigation in Saudi EFL learners by focusing on the learners' pragmatic transfer in the refusals of advanced Saudi learners of English as a foreign language (SEFL) in terms of the frequency and content of the semantic formulas, and whether their refusals correspond more to those of Saudi native speakers of Arabic (NSA) or native speakers of English (NSE). It was noted that there was frequent reliance on direct expressions, especially among lower-proficiency.

Studies in other Middle Eastern countries show similar patterns. For instance, Al-Batal (1994) studied Egyptian Arabic speakers and found that they prefer indirectness in high-power situations, which contrasts with the preference for directness observed in some Iraqi learners (Al-Azawei, 2011).

2.4.2 Studies on Iraqi EFL Learners

Few studies have specifically addressed mitigation strategies among Iraqi EFL learners and explored the use of politeness strategies in spoken discourse and found that Iraqi learners often transfer pragmatic patterns from Arabic, resulting in over-directness in English.

Another researcher by as Darweesh & Al-Aadili (2017) explores how Iraqi EFL university students employ the speech acts of advice and suggestion. The researchers analyzed responses from 50 undergraduate learners using a discourse completion task (DCT). Findings indicate a preference for direct strategies and highlight gender-based differences in politeness and status sensitivity.

A recent study by Betti (2021) compared mitigation and euphemism giving a special importance to a variety of strategies used by speakers to indicate their intent to mitigate the force of an utterance.

In their 2023 study, Ghazi and Ali delved into the recognition of impoliteness strategies by Iraqi EFL learners, using gender, age, and place of residence as the variables. According to the findings, these demographic aspects significantly impact learners' responsiveness to the awareness and interpretation of impoliteness.

2.4.3 Developmental Trends in Mitigation Use

Pragmatic competence develops gradually, including mitigation, as research shows (Rose, 2000; Bardovi-Harlig, 2001). More direct, literal forms are acquired at first before the more nuanced strategies for effective mitigation.

According to House (2002) the application of a mitigation would depend on the linguistic and cultural knowledge of the speaker. Iraqi learners may comprehend mitigation grammars but incapable of understanding the sociopragmatic meaning.

Takahashi and Beebe (1987) show that even advanced learners produce mitigated speech that is inappropriate due to lack of culture.

3. Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do Iraqi EFL learners at different academic levels perform in terms of recognizing and producing mitigated speech acts?
2. What types of mitigation strategies are most commonly used by Iraqi EFL learners?
3. Are there statistically significant differences in mitigation use between students from different academic years?
4. What are the main challenges faced by Iraqi EFL learners in using mitigation effectively?

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants

Four groups of thirty students in the Department of English at Mustansiriyah University were selected. They were separated into four categories based on their academic year.

Academic Year	Number of Participants
First Year	30
Second Year	30
Third Year	30
Fourth Year	30

All participants had completed formal English instruction prior to university entry and were enrolled in the Department of English, ensuring a broadly comparable baseline of grammatical knowledge across groups.

4.2 Instrumentation

Research data was gathered through a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) that used 10 situational contexts for producing requests and refusals. Different levels of formality and power distance appeared in each scenario, producing different degrees of mitigation.

Participants were requested to write the responses for each prompt in English. Afterwards, we coded their responses for the type and presence of mitigation used.

4.3 Procedure

The researcher implemented the DCT with the students in class. Students were given 45 minutes to solve. The completed responses that were gathered were analyzed with version 26 of SPSS.

4.4 Data Analysis

Ways of analyzing quantitative data were done by researchers. They ran the descriptive statistics tests first. They then used one-way ANOVA followed by Tukey HSD post hoc tests. In the end, they conducted the Pearson analysis. Through these methods, they examined the relationship between the academic level and college mitigation use to determine:

- Frequency of mitigation strategies
- Differences between academic levels
- Correlation between academic level and mitigation use.

Using thematic analysis, we identified common errors made and the sources of difficulty.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Overall Performance in Using Mitigation

In total, only 38% of all answers included specific strategies for mitigation. Most responses were either unmitigated or only minimally softened. Many Iraqi

EFL learners seem unaware of the necessity for mitigation in some communicative contexts, particularly where formality or power is a factor.

Table 1. Mean Number of Mitigated Responses (out of 10) and Percentage by Academic Year

Academic Year	Mean (out of 10)	Percentage
First Year	2.2	22%
Second Year	2.9	29%
Third Year	4.1	41%
Fourth Year	6	60%

Note. Means represent the average number of mitigated responses per student across 10 DCT situations; percentages are the same values converted into percentages.

As shown in Appendix D1, the mean scores reflect students' average performance across ten discourse completion tasks, with percentages provided here for ease of interpretation. The table in Table 1 shows a clear developmental tendency in which students that are at a higher level tend to use more mitigation than students that are at a lower level. This confirms earlier findings that pragmatic competence develops over time, with increased exposure and instruction (Rose, 2000; Bardovi-Harlig, 2005).

5.2 Types of Mitigation Strategies Used

Participants used a variety of mitigation devices, but frequency varied significantly.

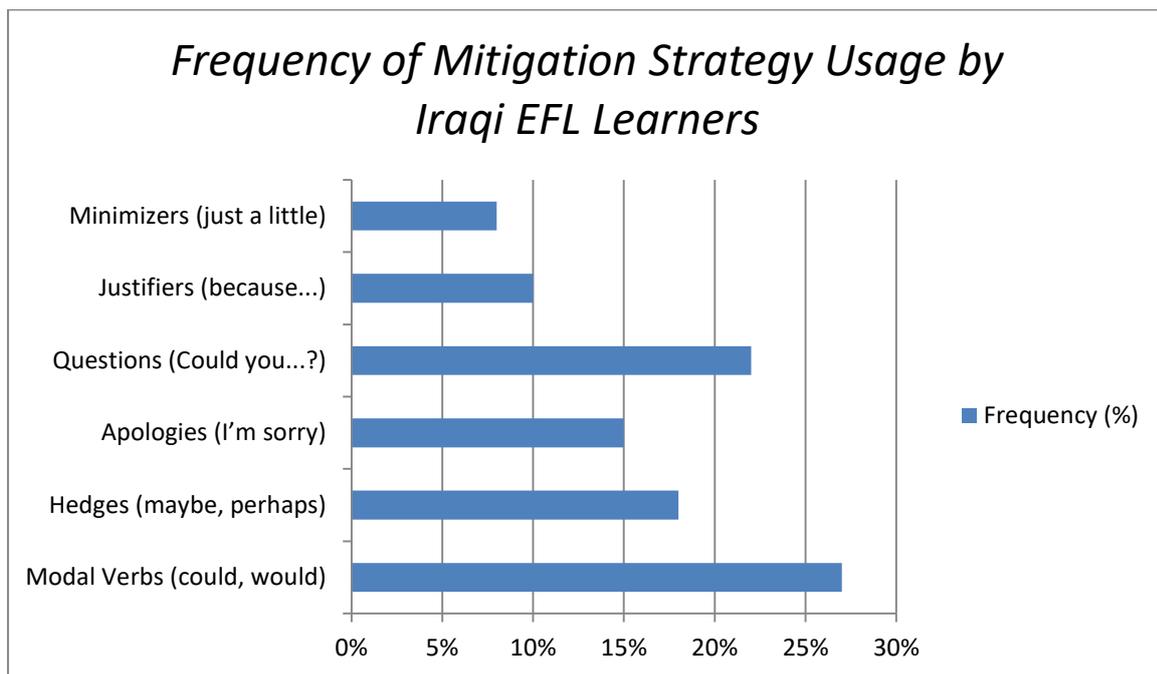
Table 2. Distribution of Mitigation Strategy Usage

Strategy Type	Frequency (%)
Modal Verbs (could, would)	27%
Hedges (maybe, perhaps)	18%
Apologies (I'm sorry)	15%
Questions (Could you...?)	22%
Justifiers (because...)	10%
Minimizers (just a little)	8%

Note: Percentages represent the proportion of each mitigation strategy out of the total number of mitigation strategies coded (i.e., strategy tokens), not the

proportion of responses. A single response could therefore contain more than one mitigation strategy.

Accordingly, the percentages in Table 2 reflect the relative frequency of mitigation strategy types rather than mutually exclusive response categories. Modal verbs and interrogative forms were the most commonly used strategies, perhaps because they are the easiest and first grammar forms taught in class. Despite the usage of hedges and minimizers, however, they still do not seem to apply other softeners.



5.3 Statistical Analysis

To find out whether the differences in mitigation use across academic levels were statistically significant, one-way ANOVA was done with the help of SPSS version 26. the number of discourse completion task responses that contained at least one mitigation strategy (out of 10) was the dependent variable and academic level was the independent variable.

Academic level was treated as an ordered numerical variable for analytical purposes, allowing the use of Pearson correlation.

Table 3.a ANOVA Output

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	12.89	3	4.3	12.89	0.001
Within Groups	38.64	116	0.33		
Total	51.53	119			

The one-way ANOVA showed a statistically significant difference in mitigation use across academic years, $F(3, 116) = 12.89, p < .001, \eta^2 = .26$. An important factor in the pragmatic competence related to mitigation development is the academic level as it shows a large effect size.

Table 3.b Tukey's HSD test post hoc comparisons

Comparison	Mean Difference	Sig.
First vs Fourth	-3.8	0.001
Second vs Fourth	-3.1	0.001
First vs Third	-1.9	0.005

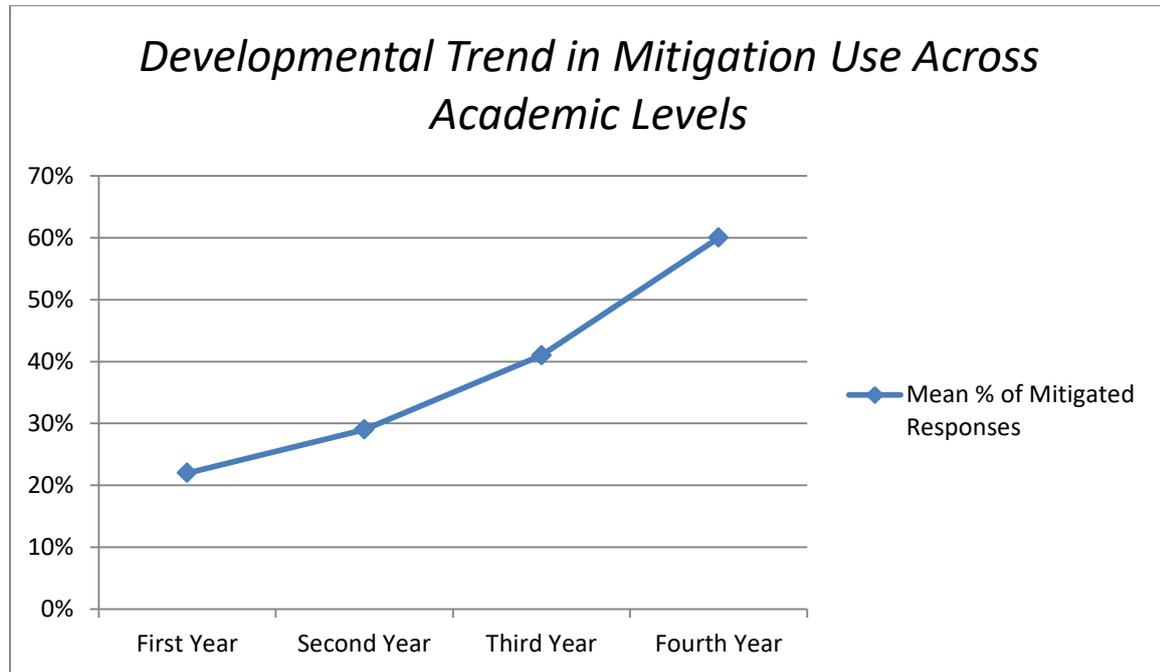
According to Tukey's HSD test post hoc comparisons:

- Fourth-year students used much more mitigation than first- and second-year students ($p < .001$).
- Third-year students outperformed first-year students ($p < .01$), but not second-year students.

After seeing steady progress throughout the study, the biggest gains happen in the last year, possibly due to taking more advanced-level courses or using native speaker materials or teaching practice.

There was a moderate positive correlation between academic level and mitigation use, $r = .43, p < .01$ according to a Pearson correlation test. This provides evidence that academic level and pragmatic ability are related, but separate contexts.

Chart 1 Developmental Trend in Mitigation Use Across Academic Levels



5.4 Qualitative Findings

- A study of responses showed similar problems.
- A literal translation from Arabic – being over polite by constantly using “please”.
- Overuse of apologies, even when unnecessary.
- Underuse of indirectness, especially in high-power scenarios.

For example, one participant responded to a refusal prompt with "Please I don't want to do this.". This response combines a politeness marker (“please”) with a blunt refusal, indicating confusion about appropriate mitigation placement. Another common error was the use of excessive apologies, such as: "I am so very sorry, but no thank you.". While polite, this over-formalization may sound unnatural in casual English interaction.

6. Discussion

The findings are in line with previous researchers' views that pragmatic competence develops gradually. EFL students from Iraq, especially those from lower academic backgrounds, are not aware of mitigation strategies and use direct or over-formalized expressions.

Higher academic-level students, who presumably have greater exposure to English instruction showed better use of mitigation, probably due to having more exposure to English media and classroom instruction and practice. Nonetheless, even students in their fourth-year are not able to demonstrate target-like pragmatic behavior as described in previous studies.

The statistical analysis identified a moderate positive relationship between academic level and mitigation use. Therefore, the longer the exposure to English, the greater the chances of a pragmatic development. The relatively low overall mitigation rate indicates a lack of reactive knowledge on the part of learners.

The qualitative findings further strengthen the effect of L1 transfer and insufficient pragmatic training. A number of students have tried to apply Arabic politeness norms to English, which can be problematic and seen as rude.

7. Conclusion

The findings of this paper suggest that Iraqi EFL learners face problems in the pragmatic use of mitigation. Academic advancement helps improve use of mitigation, yet the majority of learners remain oblivious to the cultures and contexts that dictate polite speech in English. Key findings include:

- A developmental trend in mitigation use across academic years.
- Frequent reliance on simple strategies like modal verbs and questions.
- Persistent issues related to L1 transfer and insufficient pragmatic instruction.

To address these challenges, language educators should incorporate explicit teaching of mitigation strategies into the curriculum. Instruction should be oriented to real-life communicative situations and may include audiovisual materials and role-plays and analysis of the Arabic and English pragmatic norms.

Subsequent studies could develop longitudinal interventions to enhance pragmatic awareness. Alternatives include examining the extent to which technology-enhanced learning environments can help promote mitigation skills in EFL learners.

Appendices

Appendix A: Discourse Completion Task (DCT)

Instructions: Please respond to the following situations in English. Imagine yourself in each scenario and write what you would say.

1. You want your friend to lend you their notes.
2. Your professor is busy but you need help with an assignment.
3. You are asked to attend a meeting you cannot go to.
4. Someone asks you to borrow money and you don't want to.
5. You want to ask your colleague to send you an email.
6. Your neighbor plays loud music late at night.
7. You receive a gift you don't like.
8. You are offered a job you don't want.
9. You are asked to give a presentation but forgot your notes.
10. You are running late for a meeting and need someone to cover for you.

Appendix B: Sample Student Responses

Prompt	Student Response	Mitigation Strategy Used
1	"Can I please borrow your notes?"	Interrogative + politeness marker (please)
2	"Excuse me, Professor, but I really need your help."	Apology + Direct Request
3	"I'm very sorry, but I can't come to the meeting."	Apology + Refusal
4	"I can't give you money because I don't have any."	Justifier
5	"Would you mind sending me the email?"	Conventional indirect request

Appendix C: Coding Scheme for Mitigation Strategies

STRATEGY TYPE	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLES
Modal Verbs	Use of could, would, might	“Could you help me?”
Hedges	Words like maybe, perhaps	“Maybe we could try...”
Apologies	Expressions like I'm sorry	“Sorry, I can't help.”
Questions	Turned into interrogative form	“Would you mind...?”
Justifiers	Explanations like because...	“I can't because...”
Minimizers	Words like just, a little	“Just a quick question...”

Appendix D: SPSS Output Tables

Table D1: Descriptive Statistics

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
First Year	30	2.2	0.8	1	4
Second Year	30	2.9	0.9	1	4
Third Year	30	4.1	1	2	5
Fourth Year	30	6	1.2	3	7

Table D2: ANOVA Output

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	12.89	3	4.3	12.89	0.001
Within Groups	38.64	116	0.33		
Total	51.53	119			

Table D3: Post Hoc Test (Tukey HSD)

Comparison	Mean Difference	Sig.
First vs Fourth	-3.8	0.001
Second vs Fourth	-3.1	0.001
First vs Third	-1.9	0.005

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