



# **Evaluating the Representation of Pragmatic Competence in Two Advanced EFL Textbooks Used in Romania: A Textual Analysis of *Upstream* C1–C2**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This study explores the representation of pragmatic competence in the widely used EFL textbook series Upstream in Romanian context, focusing specifically on levels C1 and C2. The central aim is to assess how sociopragmatic variation and intercultural pragmatics are represented, and how learners are expected to perform in particular contexts. Using a qualitative content analysis methodology supported by a CEFR-based checklist, the study examines two textbooks widely used in Romania at high school level for EFL instruction, selected for their alignment with advanced-level communicative goals. This is a purely textual analysis, and speech acts such as requests, refusals, suggestions, and apologies are analyzed using Searle's (1976) taxonomy and the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) framework. Findings reveal that while a variety of speech acts appear in both levels, they often occur in decontextualized dialogues with minimal socio-pragmatic or intercultural elaboration. Explicit metapragmatic instruction is largely absent, limiting learners' awareness of cultural appropriateness. These results contribute to textbook evaluation by identifying a gap between CEFR sociolinguistic descriptors and actual pedagogical practice. The study concludes by recommending the integration of pragmatically enriched input, intercultural reflection, and context-sensitive tasks to support learners in achieving advanced communicative competence.*

**Keywords:** *pragmatic competence, speech acts, EFL textbooks, sociopragmatic variation, intercultural pragmatics, textbook evaluation*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Pragmatics, defined as the study of meaning in context and the negotiation of communicative intentions, has become a central area of inquiry in applied linguistics and language pedagogy [1]. Unlike other linguistic subfields that focus on formal aspects of language, pragmatics highlights the appropriateness of utterances relative to participants, situations, and cultural norms [2]. In the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), pragmatic competence is now recognized as an essential component of communicative competence [3]. Learners who fail to develop pragmatic skills often risk misunderstanding interlocutors, deviating from cultural norms, and damaging interpersonal relationships, even when their grammatical accuracy is high [4].

Globalization and increased intercultural contact have further emphasized the necessity of pragmatic competence for successful communication [5]. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) explicitly requires advanced learners (C1–C2) to use language “flexibly and effectively for social purposes, including emotional, allusive and joking usage” [6, p. 76].

Despite this, research consistently shows that textbooks, which remain the main input source in many EFL contexts, provide limited and fragmented pragmatic content. Studies conducted in Turkey [7], Iran [8], Germany [9], China [10], and Vietnam [11] reveal that pragmatic elements are sporadic, decontextualized, or accompanied by little explicit guidance.

In the Romanian context, Popovici [12] noted that pragmatic competence is rarely addressed systematically, creating a misalignment between CEFR descriptors and classroom practice.

This present paper investigates the representation of pragmatic competence in the Upstream series at C1 and C2 levels, which are widely used in Romanian schools. The analysis focuses on four speech acts such as: requests, refusals, suggestions, and apologies, using Searle's taxonomy [13] and the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) framework [14]. The study addresses three research questions:

1. What types of speech acts are represented in Upstream C1 and C2?
2. How are these speech acts contextualized in terms of sociopragmatic variation and intercultural content?



3. To what extent do the textbooks provide explicit metapragmatic instruction aligned with CEFR descriptors?

Through these questions, the paper adds to the continuing debate over whether advanced EFL textbooks effectively equip learners for real-world communication.

## 1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 1.1. DEFINING PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE

Hymes [15] defined the concept of communicative competence as a contrast to Chomsky's linguistic competence, highlighting that linguistic knowledge includes the knowledge of when, where, and with whom to communicate. Bachman [3] later integrated pragmatic competence into his model of communicative language ability while differentiating it from organizational competence. Leech [16] and Thomas [4] distinguished between pragmalinguistics, describing the linguistic methods for performing speech acts, and sociopragmatics, which refers to contextual and cultural appropriateness.

Bachman [3] highlighted two principal components of pragmatic competence: illocutionary competence, which refers to the capacity to interpret and perform communicative acts, and sociocultural competence, which describes the ability to adapt the use of language to certain contexts. Recent studies in interlanguage pragmatics emphasize that pragmatic development is different from grammatical development and needs specific instructional support [17].

The development of pragmatic competence involves particular challenges for EFL learners. Research on interlanguage pragmatics reveals that learners possessing considerable grammatical proficiency continue to make pragmatic errors [18]. Thomas [4] described pragmatic failure as the inability to interpret intended meaning, noticing that such errors are frequently seen as rudeness rather than linguistic weakness. Bardovi-Harlig [19] argued that pragmatic competence does not develop spontaneously but requires deliberate instruction. Taguchi [20] noted that pragmatic abilities may be taught through instruction, particularly when learners engage with authentic input and are encouraged to reflect on appropriateness.

Textbooks play a major role in this process. Vellenga [21] noted that EFL textbooks frequently feature dialogues that are brief, formulaic, and lacking context, accompanied by minimal metapragmatic comments. In the absence of explicit instruction, learners may retain patterns without comprehending their social application. Research in multiple contexts reinforce this concern: Ulum [7] discovered that pragmatic components in Turkish textbooks were inconsistent; Meihami and Khanlarzadeh [8] emphasized the omission of apologies in Iranian textbooks; Barron [9] indicated that German materials presented only implicit contextual information; Jiang and Deng [10] pointed out that Chinese textbooks included speech acts without register differentiation; and Ton Nu & Murray [11] highlighted that Vietnamese textbooks dedicated only 5.5% of content to pragmatics.

### 1.2. PRAGMATICS, INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE, AND THE ROMANIAN CONTEXT

In the Romanian context, several scholars have emphasized the persistent difference between curricular goals and the content of EFL textbooks.

Popovici [12] argued that pragmatic competence is rarely addressed systematically in textbooks, leading to a gap between CEFR descriptors and classroom reality. The analysis shows that grammar and vocabulary dominate instructional content, while speech acts and contextualized dialogues are often sidelined. As a result, learners may perform well in testing situations but remain unprepared for authentic communication [16].

The consequences of neglecting pragmatics in EFL instruction are best captured by the concept of pragmatic failure. Thomas [4] defined it as "the inability to understand what is meant by what is said" (p. 91). Unlike grammatical mistakes, which may be dismissed as minor slips, pragmatic errors are often interpreted as rudeness, impoliteness, or even dishonesty [4]. For instance, inappropriate use of refusals or requests may not simply mark a learner as inexperienced but can threaten the face of interlocutors and lead to communicative breakdowns.

From an intercultural perspective, Byram [22] argued that communicative competence requires more than mastering forms of language: learners must also develop "skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and a critical cultural awareness" (p. 36). Without preparation, students may encounter difficulties managing differences in politeness norms, levels of formality, and culturally bound expectations in intercultural settings.

## 2. METHODOLOGY



This study used a qualitative content analysis approach, suitable for systematically identifying recurring themes, structures, and implicit messages in language teaching materials, as Krippendorff [24] notes, since it allows researchers to assess not only what content is present but also how it is framed and contextualized.

The corpus consisted of *Upstream Advanced C1* and *Upstream Proficiency C2* (Evans & Dooley, Express Publishing) [25], both widely used in Romanian high schools for advanced EFL instruction and exam preparation. These volumes correspond to CEFR levels C1 and C2, where learners are expected to demonstrate flexible and context-sensitive pragmatic ability.

The analysis examined every unit of both textbooks, taking into account dialogues, listening scripts, reading passages, speaking prompts, and writing tasks. Special emphasis was placed on the “Communication” subsections in each unit, which are specifically designed to develop learners’ use of speech acts. For example, *Upstream C1* includes tasks on making and responding to suggestions in Unit 2 (*Escape Artists*), apologizing in Unit 3 (*People Power*), and polite requests in Unit 6 (*A Job Well Done*).

In *Upstream C2*, Unit 7 (*Born to Win!*) features practice in *making decisions, expressing opinions, agreement and disagreement, making and rejecting suggestions, and speculating and evaluating*. Unit 9 (*Another Day, Another Dollar*) focuses on *expressing approval and disapproval, making assumptions, evaluating, and suggesting alternatives*. These activities directly engage with refusal and negotiation strategies and therefore provided ideal material for pragmatic analysis.

Table 1 below presents a sample distribution of the target speech acts across representative units in both textbooks.

**Table 1. Distribution of Target Speech Acts in Upstream C1 and C2**

| Textbook    | Unit                                 | Main Theme          | Target Speech Acts                                         |
|-------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| Upstream C1 | Unit 2 – Escape Artists              | Travel, leisure     | Making/responding to suggestions                           |
| Upstream C1 | Unit 3 – People Power                | Family, appearances | Apologizing                                                |
| Upstream C1 | Unit 6 – A Job Well Done             | Work, professions   | Polite requests                                            |
| Upstream C2 | Unit 7 – Born to Win!                | Sports, achievement | Negotiating, expressing (dis)agreement                     |
| Upstream C2 | Unit 9 – Another Day, Another Dollar | Business, workplace | Refusals, expressing disagreement, suggesting alternatives |

The analysis was guided by three complementary frameworks.

First, Searle’s taxonomy of speech acts [13] was used to classify utterances into representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations.

Then, the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) framework [14] was applied to examine realization strategies for requests, refusals, suggestions, and apologies, including directness levels and mitigation devices.

Finally, the CEFR sociolinguistic and pragmatic descriptors [6] were used to evaluate whether the pragmatic content of the textbooks aligns with advanced-level expectations, such as the ability to adapt register, manage politeness, and demonstrate intercultural awareness. The procedure involved three stages.

First, all textbook units were read and coded for the presence of the target speech acts. Coding followed open and axial principles [26], allowing both inductive identification of pragmatic instances and deductive classification according to Searle’s taxonomy.

Then, each speech act was analyzed for contextualization, focusing on whether the task provided information about interlocutor roles, social distance, or power relations. For example, apologies in *Upstream C1* appear in dialogues between peers but rarely include commentary on hierarchical differences.

Finally, the study assessed the presence or absence of metapragmatic information, explicit explanations of pragmatic norms or cultural variation, which previous research has identified as crucial for raising learner awareness [21].

To ensure reliability, the coding scheme was piloted on one unit from Upstream C1 before full application, allowing refinement of categories and consistent identification of pragmatic features.

### 3. RESULTS

#### 3.1 FREQUENCY AND DISTRIBUTION OF SPEECH ACTS

The analysis revealed that speech acts were present across both textbooks, but inconsistently distributed. In *Upstream C1*, directives such as requests and suggestions appeared more frequently in the “Communication” subsections of Units 2 and 6, while expressives such as apologies were less common, occurring mainly in Unit 3.

In *Upstream C2*, acts involving refusals, evaluations, and negotiations were most prominent in Units 7 (*Born to Win!*) and 9 (*Another Day, Another Dollar*). Unit 7 integrates tasks such as *making and rejecting suggestions, expressing agreement and disagreement, speculating, and evaluating*, while Unit 9 emphasizes *expressing approval and disapproval, making assumptions, and suggesting alternatives*. Apologies were rare and tended to appear implicitly within formal or argumentative contexts.

This uneven distribution mirrors findings from other EFL textbook analyses, where certain acts like requests dominate while others such as refusals and apologies remain underrepresented [29].

Table 2 below summarizes the observed distribution of target speech acts in both textbooks.

**Table 2. Observed Distribution of Target Speech Acts in Upstream C1 and C2**

| Speech Act   | Upstream C1<br>(Units 1–10)             | Upstream C2<br>(Units 1–10)                                 | Overall Pattern                    |
|--------------|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Requests     | Frequent, esp. Unit 6 (A Job Well Done) | Present, often in formal contexts                           | Strong presence, mostly directives |
| Suggestions  | Explicit in Unit 2 (Escape Artists)     | Common in Unit 7 (Born to Win!)                             | Balanced representation            |
| Apologies    | Explicit in Unit 3 (People Power)       | Rare, indirect references                                   | Underrepresented overall           |
| Refusals     | Minimal representation                  | Implied or explicit in Unit 9 (Another Day, Another Dollar) | Stronger presence in C2            |
| Negotiations | Rare, implicit in group tasks           | Explicit in Unit 7 (Born to Win!)                           | Developed in C2, limited in C1     |

#### 3.2 PRAGMATIC DEPTH AND CONTEXTUALIZATION

Although the textbooks introduce a range of speech acts, these are often presented in decontextualized dialogues. For instance, learners may practice making polite requests (e.g., “Could you...?”) or offering suggestions without being told about interlocutor status, power relations, or cultural norms. This aligns with Ulum’s findings in the Turkish context, where pragmatic elements were present but lacked sociopragmatic depth [7]. The absence of such contextual variables restricts learners’ ability to transfer forms to authentic communication, particularly in intercultural situations.

#### 3.3 ABSENCE OF METAPRAGMATIC INSTRUCTION

Another consistent finding was the near absence of explicit metapragmatic information. Neither Upstream C1 nor C2 provide teacher notes or learner prompts explaining why a certain speech act form is appropriate in one context but not another. This absence highlights Vellenga’s observation that ESL/EFL textbooks rarely include meta-level pragmatic explanations [21] and without such guidance, learners are left to infer appropriateness from limited examples, which risks overgeneralization or pragmatic failure.

#### 3.4 ALIGNMENT WITH CEFR DESCRIPTORS

When compared with CEFR sociolinguistic descriptors for advanced learners, both textbooks do not meet the expected standards. At C1 and C2 levels, learners are expected to “use language flexibly and effectively for social purposes” and to demonstrate sensitivity to register and intercultural variation [6, p. 123]. However, the pragmatic input in Upstream is mostly form-focused, with little





emphasis on intercultural variation or politeness strategies across cultures. Similar gaps were seen by the researchers, in Vietnamese and Chinese EFL textbooks, where pragmatic elements occupy less than 6% of content [11], [10].

#### 4. DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings of this study confirm earlier claims that pragmatic content in EFL textbooks is often present but underdeveloped. In Upstream C1 and C2, speech acts such as requests, refusals, suggestions, and apologies are distributed across units, yet they are introduced in limited and decontextualized ways. This reflects Vellenga's observation that ESL/EFL textbooks typically include dialogues but rarely provide information about usage, appropriateness, or variation [21].

Similarly, Ulum reported that pragmatic input in Turkish high school textbooks was fragmented and unsystematic [7], a pattern mirrored in the Romanian context analyzed here.

Barron's textbook study on requests in the German context also resonates with the present findings. She noted that learners were introduced to conventional forms but not to sociopragmatic variation, which led to overgeneralization and insufficient awareness of politeness strategies [30]. The same tendency was observed in Upstream, where polite request forms such as "Could you...?" were presented without commentary on hierarchical relationships or intercultural differences.

The limited pragmatic depth is particularly concerning at advanced CEFR levels. According to the CEFR, C1 - C2 learners should be able to express themselves fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions and to adapt language flexibly to a variety of formal and informal contexts [6].

However, the absence of explicit sociopragmatic guidance in Upstream leaves learners with grammatical competence but insufficient pragmatic awareness. Popovici has argued that Romanian learners often are grammatically proficient but at the same time are underprepared for authentic intercultural encounters due to pragmatic underrepresentation in textbooks [5].

The underrepresentation of speech acts like refusals and apologies creates a risk of pragmatic failure in international communication. Thomas defined pragmatic failure as the "inability to understand what is meant by what is said" [4, p. 91], emphasizing that such failures can damage interpersonal relations.

Learners relying solely on *Upstream* may therefore struggle to handle politeness and negotiation appropriately in real-life communication.

Future research should investigate ways to more systematically integrated pragmatic content in EFL textbooks by context-sensitive dialogues that reflect real-world communicative variables such as power relations, register shifts, and politeness conventions.

As Takkaç Tuglar emphasizes, pragmatic competence requires learners to be aware of cultural norms, interpersonal dynamics, and situational factors [27]. Empirical investigations are therefore needed to determine how such awareness can be effectively cultivated through instructional materials and pedagogical design at advanced proficiency levels.

Further studies should also explore the role of explicit metapragmatic instruction in developing learners' pragmatic awareness. Teacher-led commentary that clarifies why particular speech acts are contextually appropriate has been found to support learners' ability to notice and apply pragmatic norms [21].

Moreover, future inquiry should investigate how intercultural reflection tasks can be combined within textbook content to promote deeper understanding of cross-cultural pragmatics. Drawing on Byram's model of Intercultural Communicative Competence, and especially the dimension of "critical cultural awareness" [22, p. 35] comparative, cross-contextual analyses, conducted across global and local educational settings, would offer valuable evidence on how EFL textbook design can better align with CEFR communicative goals.

#### CONCLUSION

The results revealed that while both textbooks provide opportunities to practice a range of speech acts, they frequently present them in decontextualized dialogues with little or no sociopragmatic elaboration.

Requests and suggestions were more prominently represented, particularly in Upstream C1, while refusals and apologies were relatively underrepresented, especially in Upstream C2. This unbalanced coverage limits learners' exposure to the pragmatic diversity necessary for advanced communication.



Another significant finding was the absence of explicit metapragmatic instruction, such as cultural notes or commentary on appropriateness.

As Vellenga stated, textbooks that fail to provide such guidance leave learners to infer pragmatic rules without sufficient support [21]. The absence of intercultural reflection tasks intensifies the problem, as learners are not encouraged to compare English pragmatic norms with those of their L1, a step considered essential in developing intercultural communicative competence [23].

These findings have important pedagogical implications.

First, there is a need to supplement textbook content with authentic dialogues that highlight register, politeness conventions, and intercultural variation.

Second, teacher materials should incorporate metapragmatic explanations and reflection prompts to help learners understand not just how but also why a speech act is realized in particular manners.

Third, curriculum designers should ensure that textbook content is aligned with CEFR pragmatic descriptors, which emphasize flexibility, appropriateness, and intercultural awareness at advanced levels [6].

However, this study has its own limitations as it does not account for how teachers and learners might supplement or adapt the materials in practice. Future research could investigate classroom implementation, examining whether and how teachers mediate pragmatic content during instruction. Comparative analyses of local Romanian materials and global series would also expand understanding of how different contexts address pragmatic competence.

In conclusion, while Upstream C1 and C2 succeed in offering advanced learners structured linguistic practice, their treatment of pragmatics remains insufficient to meet CEFR expectations. Addressing these gaps through context-sensitive, interculturally oriented, and explicitly metapragmatic tasks would better equip Romanian learners to achieve true communicative competence in English.

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