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## Pragmatic Failure in EFL Learners' Emails and AI Grammar Tools Feedback

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the pragmatic failures found in EFL learners' academic email communication and evaluates the extent to which AI grammar tools can detect and address such failures. Drawing on theories of interlanguage pragmatics and politeness, the research identifies recurring issues in the realization of requests, apologies, and formal politeness—where learners often produce grammatically correct yet pragmatically inappropriate messages. These failures commonly stem from first-language pragmatic transfer and a lack of explicit instruction in target language norms. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, the study analyzed a corpus of 640 elicited emails from 80 EFL university students and assessed feedback from Grammarly, Quillbot, and ChatGPT using comparative qualitative and quantitative analysis. While the tools effectively corrected surface-level errors, they fell short in addressing context-sensitive pragmatic nuances such as indirectness, tone, and formality. The findings underscore the distinction between linguistic and pragmatic competence, highlight the limitations of current AI tools in fostering pragmatic awareness, and emphasize the need for explicit, context-rich instruction. This study contributes to a more integrated understanding of how human expertise and AI technologies can collaboratively support pragmatic development in digital language learning environments.

**Keywords:** AI feedback, EFL writing, email pragmatics, pragmatic competence

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## INTRODUCTION

Mastering a second language involves more than acquiring grammatical accuracy and vocabulary; it requires the ability to use language appropriately in diverse social and cultural contexts. This ability, known as pragmatic competence, is especially important in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, where learners frequently engage in cross-cultural communication (Kentmen et al., 2023). However, EFL instruction often focuses heavily on linguistic form while neglecting pragmatic aspects, leading to what is commonly referred to as *pragmatic failure* (Hammouri & Al-Khanji, 2023). Such failures occur when learners unintentionally produce language that, while grammatically correct, is inappropriate or misunderstood within the cultural norms of the target language.

(Altakhaineh et al., 2024). These misunderstandings can result in negative perceptions or communication breakdowns.

Email, as a dominant form of communication in academic and professional contexts, poses specific pragmatic challenges for EFL learners. Its hybrid nature—combining elements of both spoken and written discourse—requires careful mechanics attention to tone, politeness, and appropriate framing (Alemi & Maleknia, 2023; Safont, 2024). Unlike face-to-face interaction, email lacks immediate feedback, making it crucial for writers to anticipate how their messages may be interpreted (Lim et al., 2022). Many EFL learners struggle in this area, often transferring pragmatic norms from their first language that may be perceived as overly direct, impolite, or inappropriate in English-speaking environments.

At the same time, advancements in artificial intelligence have led to the widespread adoption of grammar and writing tools such as Grammarly, Quillbot, and ChatGPT. These tools assist users by offering real-time feedback on grammar, mechanics, and style, and are increasingly relied upon by EFL learners to improve their writing (Krajka & Olszak, 2024). While effective in correcting surface-level errors, the extent to which these tools can detect and address deeper pragmatic issues remains unclear (Bahr, 2024). Pragmatic appropriateness is highly context-dependent and culturally nuanced—elements that current AI systems may struggle to evaluate due to their reliance on statistical patterns rather than social and cultural understanding.

This study explores the intersection of pragmatic competence and AI-assisted writing by examining how EFL learners exhibit pragmatic failures in email communication and assessing the ability of AI grammar tools to identify and correct these issues. This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do EFL learners' emails exhibit instances of pragmatic failure in expressing requests, apologies, and formal politeness?
2. To what extent do AI grammar tools (e.g., Grammarly, Quillbot, ChatGPT) identify and address pragmatic failures in EFL learners' email writing?

Given the centrality of email in global academic and professional exchanges (Letmathe & Noll, 2024), and the growing role of AI in language learning (Williyan et al., 2024), this inquiry is both timely and relevant. By identifying the specific challenges learners face and evaluating the feedback provided by AI tools, the study aims to inform more effective pedagogical practices and guide the integration of technology in EFL instruction.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

This study draws on foundational concepts from pragmatics and second language acquisition, particularly interlanguage pragmatics, speech act theory, and politeness

theory. These frameworks offer a comprehensive lens for understanding the nature of pragmatic failure in EFL learners' written communication.

Pragmatic competence refers to the ability to use language appropriately in various social and cultural contexts (Sharma et al., 2022). It encompasses more than grammatical and lexical knowledge—it requires an understanding of speaker intentions, social hierarchies, and culturally appropriate interactional norms. For EFL learners, achieving pragmatic competence is especially challenging, as it involves navigating implicit meanings, unfamiliar conventions, and context-sensitive norms of communication. Pragmatic failure occurs when learners use language inappropriately or are misunderstood in social interactions (Kale et al., 2021). Such failures can be classified into pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic types (Thomas, 1995). Pragma-linguistic failure results from using incorrect linguistic forms to express intent, such as overly direct requests in contexts where indirectness is preferred. Socio-pragmatic failure stems from cultural mismatches between the learner's native norms and those of the target language, leading to misinterpretations or perceptions of impoliteness. A third type, malaprop-pragmatic failure, involves grammatically correct but contextually unsuitable utterances due to lexical confusion or speech errors.

Interlanguage pragmatics explores how language learners develop the ability to perform sociocultural functions in the target language (Marcet & Sasamoto, 2023). A key insight from this field is that grammatical accuracy alone does not guarantee communicative effectiveness. Pragmatic transfer, or the application of first-language norms to second-language use, often contributes to pragmatic breakdowns, especially in nuanced interactions such as requests or apologies. Speech act theory emphasizes that language is used to perform actions, including requesting, apologizing, and promising (Panther, 2022). These acts are deeply rooted in cultural expectations and vary in formality, directness, and tone depending on the context. Misusing speech acts can result in unintended offense or communication failure. Politeness theory offers a useful framework for analyzing how speakers manage social relationships through language (Garcés-conejos & Blitvich, 2024). It centers on the concept of "face," or one's public self-image, and identifies strategies that help mitigate face-threatening acts, such as requests and apologies. Politeness strategies range from direct expressions to more subtle, indirect approaches. Choosing the appropriate level of politeness depends on factors such as social distance, power dynamics, and perceived imposition.

Together, these theories provide the foundation for understanding how pragmatic failures occur in EFL email communication—especially in how learners express requests, apologies, and formal politeness. This study approaches pragmatic failure as a deviation from the expected norms of the target language, shaped by cultural transfer and limited instructional focus, and revealed through inappropriate speech act realization or politeness strategy use in written correspondence.

### Previous Studies, Research Gap, and Novelty

A growing body of research has examined pragmatic failures in EFL learners' written communication, particularly in the genre of email writing. Studies consistently highlight learners' struggles with conveying appropriate levels of politeness, indirectness, and formality when performing key speech acts such as requests and apologies (Alfghie & Mohammadzadeh, 2021; Alhusban & Alshehri, 2022; Haristiani & Christinawati, 2024; Saleem et al., 2021). These pragmatic shortcomings often stem from the direct transfer of first-language norms into English, leading to unintended rudeness, over-directness, or informality in professional or academic emails. Typical issues include abrupt request formulations, missing or informal greetings and closings, and inadequate use of softening devices or politeness markers. Learners also frequently omit contextual elements like self-introduction or justification for the email, which can undermine clarity and appropriateness.

At the same time, advancements in Artificial Intelligence (AI) have introduced a range of grammar and writing tools—such as Grammarly, Quillbot, and ChatGPT—that are widely adopted by EFL learners to support their writing (AbuHussein & Badah, 2025; Liang et al., 2024; Yuan et al., 2024; Zhao, 2023). These tools are highly effective at identifying surface-level issues such as grammar, spelling, punctuation, and vocabulary. However, their ability to detect and respond to pragmatic failures—particularly those rooted in culture, context, or social norms—remains limited. While AI can suggest rewording for clarity or tone, it often lacks the contextual awareness necessary to identify inappropriate requests, overly casual apologies, or impolite forms of address. Research comparing human and AI feedback generally finds that AI performs well with technical corrections but struggles with the subtleties of pragmatic competence.

Despite these insights, few studies have examined the intersection between EFL learners' pragmatic difficulties and the feedback capabilities of AI grammar tools. Most existing research tends to treat these domains separately—either focusing on learners' pragmatic performance in academic writing or on the linguistic accuracy promoted by AI systems. This separation has left a significant gap in understanding how effectively AI tools can support pragmatic development, particularly in complex written genres like email communication. Moreover, many existing studies emphasize short-term writing improvements without investigating whether learners actually develop a better understanding of pragmatic norms over time as a result of using these tools.

This study aims to address these gaps by offering an integrated analysis of how pragmatic failure manifests in EFL learners' emails and how AI grammar tools respond to such issues. Unlike prior research that broadly assesses writing quality, this study focuses on email—a digital communication form that demands both linguistic precision and pragmatic appropriateness. Because of its hybrid nature, email requires writers to balance clarity, politeness, and formality, making it a revealing site for studying pragmatic competence.

The novelty of this study lies in its multifaceted approach. First, it takes a genre-specific focus by concentrating exclusively on email writing, which blends written and spoken norms and often exposes pragmatic missteps more clearly than other forms. Second, it offers a detailed analysis of specific speech acts—requests, apologies, and formal politeness—that are particularly susceptible to pragmatic failure due to their social sensitivity. Third, it evaluates the feedback mechanisms of prominent AI grammar tools, not merely in terms of surface-level corrections, but in their ability to detect and respond to deeper, context-dependent pragmatic issues. Lastly, the study bridges theoretical frameworks from interlanguage pragmatics with practical evaluations of AI performance, offering actionable insights for both language educators and developers of writing support technologies.

By situating EFL learners' pragmatic challenges within the evolving landscape of AI-assisted writing, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how digital tools can—and cannot—support the development of effective, contextually appropriate communication. It underscores the continuing need for explicit instruction in pragmatics while highlighting the potential and limitations of AI technologies in supplementing this instruction in increasingly digital language learning environments.

## **METHODS**

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design to comprehensively investigate pragmatic failure in EFL learners' emails and the efficacy of AI grammar tools in addressing these failures. This approach allowed for both an in-depth qualitative analysis of the nuances of pragmatic errors and a systematic, comparative evaluation of AI tool performance.

### **Research Design**

The research paradigm employed was primarily mixed-methods, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches. This design was chosen to leverage the strengths of each method: qualitative inquiry provided rich, detailed insights into the nature and manifestations of pragmatic failures in authentic email contexts, while quantitative elements facilitated the systematic comparison and evaluation of AI grammar tools' corrective capabilities (Creswell & Clark, 2011). This triangulation of methods enhanced the validity and reliability of the findings, offering a more holistic understanding of the complex phenomena under investigation.

The overall research strategy involved two main phases. The first phase, addressing Research Question 1, utilized a corpus-based qualitative analysis of EFL learner emails. This approach allowed for the identification, categorization, and detailed interpretation of naturally occurring pragmatic errors in a specific communicative genre (email) (Troiani et al., 2024). Corpus linguistics, as the empirical study of language in its natural occurrence, is particularly suited for discerning patterns and features of language use, including pragmatics. The second phase, addressing Research Question 2, adopted a comparative experimental design. This involved systematically applying selected AI grammar tools to a subset of the collected emails containing identified pragmatic failures

and then evaluating the AI-generated feedback against established pragmatic norms and expert human judgment. This comparative element allowed for a direct assessment of the AI tools' capabilities and limitations in pragmatic error correction.

### **Subjects of the Research**

The population for this study consisted of university-level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. This demographic was chosen due to their increasing engagement in academic and professional email communication, where pragmatic competence is particularly critical. The sample comprised 80 EFL university students (40 males, 40 females) from diverse linguistic backgrounds ensuring a representation of various L1 pragmatic transfer patterns. Participants were selected based on convenience sampling from intermediate to advanced English proficiency levels (B2-C1 on the CEFR scale), as assessed by a standardized English proficiency test. This proficiency range was chosen to ensure that any identified pragmatic failures were not solely attributable to basic linguistic deficiencies but rather to a lack of pragmatic competence. The sample size of 80 participants aimed to provide a sufficiently robust dataset for qualitative analysis of email content and to facilitate meaningful comparisons in the AI tool evaluation.

The object of research was a corpus of authentic email communications written by these EFL learners. These emails were elicited through a series of Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) designed to simulate common academic and semi-formal scenarios requiring requests, apologies, and expressions of formal politeness (Kentmen et al., 2023). This method, while semi-controlled, allowed for the collection of targeted speech acts in a written format, which is crucial for analyzing email-specific pragmatic phenomena (Hammouri & Al-Khanji, 2023). The scenarios varied in terms of social distance and power dynamics between the sender (student) and receiver (e.g., professor, administrative staff, peer), as these factors significantly influence politeness strategies (Nicholas et al., 2023).

### **Data Collection**

Data collection for this study involved a two-pronged approach to address both research questions effectively. For Research Question 1, focusing on how EFL learners' emails exhibit pragmatic failures, the primary data collection method was the use of Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs). Eight distinct email-based scenarios were developed, each designed to elicit specific speech acts (requests, apologies, formal politeness) in varying social contexts (e.g., student to professor, student to administrative staff, student to peer). Participants were instructed to compose an email response for each scenario, simulating real-life communication. This method, commonly used in interlanguage pragmatics research, allows for the collection of targeted linguistic data while providing some contextual control. The scenarios were carefully crafted to include elements that would potentially trigger pragmatic challenges, such as requesting an extension, apologizing for a missed deadline, or making a formal inquiry. A total of 640 emails (8 scenarios x 80 participants) were collected, forming the primary corpus for analysis.



For Research Question 2, investigating the extent to which AI grammar tools identify and address pragmatic failures, the collected email corpus served as the input. Three prominent AI grammar tools were selected for evaluation. The study used Grammarly Premium (Version 1.9.2, web-based interface), Quillbot Premium (as of March 2025 release), and ChatGPT-4 (via the ChatGPT Plus subscription on OpenAI, March 2025 model update). These specific versions were selected based on their widespread availability and advanced feedback capabilities at the time of the study. These tools were chosen due to their widespread use among EFL learners and their advanced capabilities in natural language processing. The procedure involved systematically inputting each of the 640 EFL learner emails into each of the three AI tools. For Grammarly and Quillbot, the suggested corrections for grammar, spelling, punctuation, and style were meticulously recorded. For ChatGPT, specific prompts were formulated to elicit feedback on pragmatic appropriateness, politeness, and suggestions for rephrasing requests and apologies in a more culturally sensitive manner. The AI-generated feedback, including highlighted errors, suggested revisions, and explanatory notes, was then meticulously documented for subsequent analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis phase was structured to address each research question systematically, employing a combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques. For Research Question 1, the analysis of EFL learners' emails for pragmatic failures involved a qualitative content analysis approach, supplemented by quantitative frequency counts. The 640 emails were manually coded by two independent expert raters (native English speakers with extensive experience in EFL pedagogy and pragmatics) using a detailed coding scheme derived from Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory (Panther, 2022; Garcés-conejos & Blitvich, 2024). The coding scheme focused on identifying instances of pragmatic failure, categorizing them into pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic types (Thomas, 1995). Specific attention was paid to the realization of requests (e.g., directness, use of internal/external modifiers), apologies (e.g., use of IFIDs, responsibility statements, explanations, offers of repair), and formal politeness (e.g., appropriateness of greetings, closings, subject lines, lexical choices reflecting social distance and power). Inter-rater reliability was established through Cohen's Kappa, ensuring consistency in coding. Frequency counts were then generated for each type of pragmatic failure across the corpus, providing a quantitative overview of prevalence.

For Research Question 2, evaluating the extent to which AI grammar tools identified and addressed these pragmatic failures, a comparative qualitative analysis was conducted. The AI-generated feedback for each email was meticulously compared against the pragmatic failures identified by the human expert raters. The analysis assessed whether the AI tools (Grammarly, Quillbot, ChatGPT):

1. Detected the pragmatic failure (e.g., flagged an overly direct request).
2. Provided appropriate feedback (e.g., suggested a more indirect phrasing, explained the politeness issue).
3. Offered effective corrections (e.g., rephrased the email to be pragmatically

appropriate).

A rubric was developed to score the AI tools' performance on a scale of 0 (no detection/inappropriate feedback) to 3 (accurate detection and effective correction). This rubric was applied independently by the two expert raters, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion. Thematic analysis was also employed for the qualitative data generated by ChatGPT's more discursive feedback, identifying recurring patterns in its explanations and suggestions related to pragmatic issues.

Validity and reliability measures were integrated throughout the analysis. To ensure the validity of the pragmatic failure identification, the coding scheme was rigorously developed based on established theoretical frameworks (Speech Act Theory, Politeness Theory) and refined through pilot coding. The use of authentic email data, albeit elicited through DCTs, aimed to enhance ecological validity. Reliability was addressed through the independent coding by two trained expert raters and the calculation of inter-rater reliability. For the AI tool evaluation, the structured rubric and the comparative approach against human expert judgment served to ensure consistency and objectivity in assessing AI performance. The detailed documentation of all AI-generated feedback also allowed for transparency and replicability of the analysis.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are presented in two subsections, corresponding to the two research questions. The first subsection details the manifestations of pragmatic failure in EFL learners' emails, while the second explores the extent to which AI grammar tools identified and addressed these failures.

### Findings for Research Question 1

#### *Pragmatic Failures in Requests*

The analysis of EFL learners' emails revealed recurring patterns of pragmatic failure in their request formulations. These failures were not due to grammatical inaccuracies, but rather stemmed from inappropriate levels of directness, insufficient mitigation, and a lack of awareness of politeness conventions expected in English academic and professional communication. The table below summarizes key examples of such pragmatic failures, along with brief explanations and suggested alternatives for more appropriate expression.

**Table 1**

Pragmatic Failures in EFL Learners' Email Requests

Case	Excerpt	Pragmatic Issue	Suggested Alternative
<b>Overly Direct Request to a Professor (Excerpt 1)</b>	<i>"I need to ask you for an extension on my assignment. I want to submit it next week."</i>	Overuse of direct expressions and want-statements in a	<i>"I was wondering if I could request an extension on the</i>



		high-power distance context	<i>assignment due next week."</i>
<b>Insufficient Mitigation in a High-Imposition Request (Excerpt 2)</b>	<i>"Could you help our event? We need financial support."</i>	Lack of background, justification, or gratitude in a significant request	<i>"We are organizing a local event and would truly appreciate any financial support you could offer."</i>
<b>Imperative Use in a Peer-to-Peer Request (Excerpt 3)</b>	<i>"Please send me the article. I need it for my presentation."</i>	Use of imperative form sounds abrupt, even with "please," offering no room for refusal	<i>"Could you send me the article for my presentation?" or "I was hoping you could share it with me."</i>

These examples highlight the importance of pragmatic awareness in effective written communication. Even when linguistic forms are accurate, failing to consider social context and relational dynamics can lead to unintended rudeness or misinterpretation. Addressing these subtle yet impactful errors requires more than grammar correction—it calls for explicit instruction in politeness strategies and contextual language use.

### *Pragmatic Failures in Apologies*

Apologizing appropriately in written communication is a nuanced skill that requires more than just expressing regret. In the email data, many EFL learners relied heavily on formulaic expressions without incorporating elements expected in English-speaking contexts, such as acknowledging responsibility or showing empathy. These pragmatic shortcomings often stem from L1 transfer, resulting in apologies that appear insufficient or insincere. The following table presents examples of such pragmatic failures in apology expressions, along with interpretations and improved alternatives.

**Table 2**  
Pragmatic Failures in EFL Learners' Email Apologies

Case	Excerpt	Pragmatic Issue	Suggested Alternative
<b>Minimal Apology for a Significant Offense (Excerpt 4)</b>	<i>"I am sorry for my absence. I was sick."</i>	Over-reliance on a simple apology formula (IFID) without elaboration or responsibility-taking	<i>"I sincerely apologize for missing class. I was unwell and should have informed you earlier."</i>
<b>Denial of Responsibility (Excerpt 5)</b>	<i>"I apologize for the misunderstanding, but it wasn't my fault."</i>	Apology is weakened by denying responsibility, which may be perceived as insincere or defensive	<i>"I apologize for the misunderstanding. I'll make sure to communicate more clearly in the future."</i>

While these apologies are grammatically sound, they often fall short of pragmatic expectations in formal English communication. Effective apologies typically require more than acknowledgment—they demand sensitivity to the context, acceptance of responsibility, and sometimes a gesture toward making amends. Without these elements, even well-intended messages may fail to achieve their communicative goals.

### *Pragmatic Failures in Formal Politeness*

Formal politeness in email communication involves more than using polite expressions—it encompasses appropriate openings, closings, tone, and structural conventions that signal respect and professionalism. In the data, EFL learners frequently deviated from these norms, often due to L1 transfer or a lack of exposure to formal English email conventions. The table below outlines several common pragmatic failures in formal politeness, offering examples and practical alternatives.

**Table 3.**

Pragmatic Failures in EFL Learners' Formal Email Politeness

Case	Excerpt	Pragmatic Issue	Suggested Alternative
<b>Informal Opening and Closing in a Formal Email (Excerpt 6)</b>	<i>"Hi professor, here is my assignment. Thanks."</i>	Informal greeting and closing not suited for academic hierarchy	<i>"Dear Professor [Last Name], Please find my assignment attached. Sincerely, [Your Name]"</i>
<b>Absence of Essential Framing Elements (Excerpt 7)</b>	<i>(No subject line)"Hello, this is my assignment. Attached."</i>	Missing subject line, no self-identification, and minimal content, leading to confusion or disregard	<i>Email with subject line, clear self-introduction, and brief contextual message</i>
<b>Structural Informalities (Excerpt 8)</b>	<i>"good day ms this is your student NAME delivering my answer of civ assignment."</i>	Lack of capitalization, punctuation, and title formatting creates an impression of carelessness and informality	<i>"Good day, Ms. [Last Name]. I am [Full Name], submitting my Civics assignment. Thank you."</i>

These examples demonstrate that even simple framing choices—such as how one begins or ends an email—carry important pragmatic weight in English academic communication. Errors in formality, structure, or tone may undermine the speaker's intent, despite grammatical accuracy. Cultivating pragmatic competence in these areas is essential for ensuring that learners' messages are not only understood, but also appropriately received within the target culture.

### **Findings for Research Question 2**

The evaluation of AI grammar tools (Grammarly, Quillbot, ChatGPT) in identifying and addressing pragmatic failures in EFL learners' emails revealed a consistent pattern:

while highly effective at correcting surface-level linguistic errors, their capacity for nuanced pragmatic correction was significantly limited.

#### *AI Tools' Performance on Pragmatic Failures in Requests*

AI writing tools displayed mixed performance when responding to EFL learners' pragmatically inappropriate requests. While most tools managed to recognize and improve surface-level issues of directness through softer lexical choices, they generally fell short in addressing deeper, socio-pragmatic concerns such as contextual sensitivity, relational hierarchy, and politeness strategies. The table below summarizes how Grammarly, Quillbot, and ChatGPT handled selected examples of pragmatic failure in email requests.

**Table 4**

AI Tools' Feedback on Pragmatic Failures in EFL Learners' Requests

Case	Original Excerpt	AI Feedback Summary	Interpretation
<b>Overly Direct Request</b> (Excerpt 1)	"I want to submit it next week."	<b>Grammarly/Quillbot:</b> Suggested "I would like to..." or "I hope to..." <b>ChatGPT (when prompted):</b> Offered indirect forms like "Would it be possible..."	Grammarly and Quillbot provided basic lexical softening; ChatGPT gave more nuanced alternatives with a short rationale. None addressed deeper politeness strategies or contextual framing.
<b>Insufficient Mitigation in High-Imposition Request</b> (Excerpt 2)	"Could you help our event? We need financial support."	<b>Grammarly/Quillbot:</b> No significant feedback; possibly flagged grammar only <b>ChatGPT (when prompted):</b> Suggested adding background, gratitude, and softer phrasing	Grammarly and Quillbot failed to detect pragmatic inappropriateness. ChatGPT, with explicit prompting, improved the phrasing but still missed fuller mitigation strategies like disarmers.

These findings illustrate a recurring pattern: AI tools are generally effective in identifying and revising linguistic forms to appear more polite but struggle with subtler, context-dependent elements of pragmatic appropriateness. While ChatGPT shows promise when explicitly guided, current AI systems still lack the depth to autonomously address the full spectrum of politeness and mitigation strategies crucial in formal English requests.

#### *AI Tools' Performance on Pragmatic Failures in Apologies*

Apologies in formal email communication require more than just grammatically correct expressions—they must also convey sincerity, responsibility, and cultural sensitivity. AI tools were found to perform adequately when reformulating apologies at a surface level but struggled to grasp deeper socio-pragmatic elements. The table below illustrates how AI tools handled common pragmatic failures in EFL learners' apologies.

**Table 5**

AI Tools' Feedback on Pragmatic Failures in EFL Learners' Apologies

Case	Original Excerpt	AI Feedback Summary	Interpretation
<b>Minimal Apology for Significant Offense</b> (Excerpt 3)	<i>"I am sorry for my absence. I was sick."</i>	<b>Grammarly/Quillbot:</b> No changes <b>ChatGPT (when prompted):</b> Suggested elaboration: "I sincerely apologize... any inconvenience it may have caused."	Grammarly and Quillbot accepted the apology as-is, focusing only on grammar. ChatGPT improved formality and tone but lacked deeper suggestions like repair or responsibility-taking.
<b>Denial of Responsibility</b> (Excerpt 4)	<i>"I apologize for the misunderstanding, but it wasn't my fault."</i>	<b>Grammarly/Quillbot:</b> Minimal or no feedback <b>ChatGPT (when prompted):</b> Warned that "but" clause undermines sincerity; recommended softening or removal	Grammarly and Quillbot failed to flag the pragmatic flaw. ChatGPT addressed the face-threatening effect of deflecting blame but required prompting and lacked deeper cultural insight.

While AI tools can improve lexical politeness and formality when guided, they generally fall short in addressing the full complexity of culturally appropriate apologies. Their feedback often remains limited to surface-level language, reinforcing the need for explicit prompts and human oversight when dealing with contextually rich and face-sensitive communicative acts.

#### *AI Tools' Performance on Pragmatic Failures in Formal Politeness*

Although AI grammar tools can correct surface-level errors in formality, they often fail to detect subtler issues related to formal politeness, especially those involving conventional academic etiquette and socio-pragmatic appropriateness. The following table demonstrates how AI tools responded to common pragmatic lapses in EFL learners' formal email communication.

**Table 6**

AI Tools' Feedback on Pragmatic Failures in Formal Politeness

Case	Original Excerpt	AI Feedback Summary	Interpretation
<b>Informal Opening and Closing</b> (Excerpt 5)	<i>"Hi professor, here is my assignment. Thanks."</i>	<b>Grammarly/Quillbot:</b> No pragmatic flag; only capitalized <b>ChatGPT (prompted):</b> Suggested	Grammarly and Quillbot addressed only surface issues. ChatGPT provided accurate etiquette advice, but required specific

		formal greeting and sign-off replacements	prompting to identify these pragmatic nuances.
<b>Missing Framing Elements</b> (Excerpt 6)	(No subject line) "Hello, this is my assignment. Attached."	<b>Grammarly/Quillbot:</b> No feedback on missing subject line or identity <b>ChatGPT (prompted):</b> Recommended subject line, self-introduction	Structural elements like self-introduction and subject lines were ignored by Grammarly/Quillbot. ChatGPT offered clear corrections, but its insight relied on being prompted for etiquette.
<b>Structural Informalities</b> (Excerpt 7)	"good day ms this is your student NAME delivering my answer of civ assignment."	<b>Grammarly/Quillbot:</b> Fixed capitalization and punctuation <b>ChatGPT (prompted):</b> Recommended full formal phrasing and register improvement	Grammarly/Quillbot excelled at grammar corrections. ChatGPT went further with phrasing, but none explained how these informalities affect perceived politeness or professionalism.

While AI tools can enhance formality and correctness, especially when prompted, they still lack the socio-pragmatic depth to fully interpret or explain how conventional politeness strategies function within hierarchical and culturally sensitive settings. This highlights the continuing need for human input in fostering pragmatic competence among EFL learners.

Overall, the findings for Research Question 2 indicate that while AI grammar tools are highly effective in enhancing the grammatical and lexical accuracy of EFL learners' emails, their ability to identify and address pragmatic failures remains significantly limited. They perform well on pragma-linguistic issues that can be reduced to clear linguistic rules (e.g., directness of requests, basic formality markers) but struggle with socio-pragmatic nuances that require a deep understanding of social context, cultural norms, and implied meanings. This limitation stems from their statistical model of language, which does not fully capture the complexities of human social cognition and contextual variability.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study illuminate a critical dichotomy in EFL learners' email communication: while learners may demonstrate grammatical accuracy, their pragmatic competence frequently falters, leading to communication breakdowns. Simultaneously, the research highlights both the strengths and the inherent limitations of current AI grammar tools in addressing these nuanced pragmatic shortcomings.

Analysis of EFL learners' emails consistently revealed pervasive pragmatic failures in realizing requests, apologies, and formal politeness. Learners often relied on overly direct request strategies, such as imperatives and "want-statements," even in formal academic contexts—forms that may be perceived as impolite or overly assertive. This reflects broader trends observed in EFL learners' pragmatic development, where appropriate levels of indirectness and mitigation are difficult to master and frequently influenced by native language (L1) transfer (Qin et al., 2024). Apologies were similarly marked by minimal elaboration and inadequate responsibility-taking, suggesting reliance on formulaic expressions that fail to convey the sincerity or deference typically expected in English (Diegoli, 2022). The most widespread issues, however, occurred in expressions of formal politeness. Learners frequently omitted or misused conventional email framing elements, such as greetings, closings, and subject lines, and showed structural informalities like inconsistent capitalization and punctuation (Algryani & Al Jardani, 2023). While these issues may appear minor, they collectively undermine the formality and perceived professionalism of written communication in academic contexts. These patterns underscore the ongoing challenge EFL learners face in navigating the socio-cultural intricacies of English, particularly in email, a medium devoid of non-verbal cues.

In evaluating the role of AI grammar tools, the study found that these technologies consistently excelled in correcting grammatical, lexical, and mechanical errors. Grammarly and Quillbot, in particular, provided efficient surface-level feedback, and ChatGPT, when prompted, generated more expansive suggestions with brief explanations regarding tone and politeness (Mizumoto et al., 2024). However, all tools displayed significant limitations in detecting and remedying nuanced pragmatic failures. They struggled with context-dependent issues such as indirectness, cultural appropriateness, and face-saving strategies. Frequently, they failed to recognize utterances that were grammatically correct but pragmatically inappropriate (Dentella et al., 2024). Even when relevant suggestions were offered, the explanations lacked depth and socio-cultural grounding. These findings echo broader research indicating that, despite advancements in natural language processing, AI tools lack the social cognition and contextual awareness required for robust pragmatic judgment (Nishant et al., 2024). For instance, in evaluating apology strategies, ChatGPT was found to perform below human raters in both appropriateness and tone, reaffirming the persistent gap between AI feedback and human-like pragmatic understanding.

It is also important to note that AI grammar tools are rapidly evolving, with frequent updates that enhance their linguistic and functional capabilities. The findings presented in this study reflect the performance of specific tool versions at the time of data collection. As newer versions of Grammarly, Quillbot, and ChatGPT are released, their ability to detect and address pragmatic nuances may improve. Therefore, while the current results highlight existing limitations in socio-pragmatic feedback, these findings may not be fully generalizable to future iterations of the same tools. Ongoing evaluation is necessary to monitor how advancements in AI language modeling, especially those aimed at incorporating socio-cultural awareness and user context, influence their role in language learning and teaching.



One core reason AI grammar tools struggle with socio-pragmatic issues lies in their limited access to contextual, cultural, and interpersonal knowledge. Socio-pragmatic competence involves understanding implicit social norms, power dynamics, politeness expectations, and culturally appropriate behavior—all of which require nuanced human judgment and experiential knowledge. Current AI tools, including large language models like ChatGPT, are trained on vast textual data but do not possess genuine situational awareness or theory of mind. As a result, they often fail to interpret how a message might be perceived by a human recipient in a specific social or cultural context. While they may offer formal or polite alternatives when prompted, these suggestions are based on probabilistic patterns rather than an actual grasp of relational sensitivity, intent, or cultural appropriateness. Consequently, AI-generated feedback tends to overlook or oversimplify face-threatening acts, indirectness, or the subtleties of formality that are crucial to effective socio-pragmatic communication.

This study makes several theoretical contributions to the fields of Applied Linguistics and Educational Technology. First, it reinforces the essential distinction between linguistic competence and pragmatic competence, a foundational concept in Interlanguage Pragmatics. The data show that EFL learners are capable of producing grammatically accurate emails that are pragmatically inappropriate, underscoring that mastery of grammar alone is insufficient for effective communication (Rodríguez Velasco, 2022). This finding supports the long-held view that communicative competence involves not only knowing the rules of grammar but also the rules of use.

Second, the study extends Politeness Theory by offering empirical evidence on how specific face-threatening acts—particularly requests and apologies—are inappropriately realized in digital written discourse. Learners' frequent use of direct strategies and omission of mitigating devices often compromised the recipient's positive and negative face, with real consequences for perceived politeness and appropriateness (Nursanti et al., 2023). Importantly, the study demonstrates that current AI tools, while effective at language correction, are ill-equipped to mitigate these face threats due to a lack of pragmatic sensitivity (Dentella et al., 2024).

Third, this research contributes to the growing understanding of AI's role in language learning. It provides concrete evidence that while AI tools are powerful in surface correction, they falter in interpreting and teaching the culturally variable, context-dependent aspects of pragmatic meaning (Brandt & Hazel, 2025). This supports the view that AI, while capable of generating human-like language, does not possess an intrinsic understanding of social norms, context, or the interpersonal dynamics that inform real-world communication (Roberts et al., 2024). The tools' inability to fully grasp indirectness, ambiguity, and cultural variability highlights the limitations of current AI architectures in processing the social dimensions of language use.

The findings of this study carry several important pedagogical implications, particularly for EFL writing instruction and the integration of educational technology. First, the persistent pragmatic failures observed in learners' emails underscore the need for explicit

instruction in pragmatics. The assumption that pragmatic competence develops implicitly through exposure is insufficient. Teachers must actively incorporate instruction on socio-pragmatic and pragma-linguistic norms governing speech acts such as requests, apologies, and formal politeness. Learners should also be made aware of how L1 norms may differ from English conventions, potentially leading to miscommunication or perceived rudeness.

Second, teachers should incorporate practical, context-rich strategies into their instruction to effectively foster learners' pragmatic competence. This includes using authentic examples and role-play activities, such as real-world email samples and simulated writing tasks, to help students identify and practice appropriate politeness strategies and conventional framing elements across diverse communicative situations. Instruction should also focus on explicit linguistic strategies, teaching a variety of indirect request forms, hedging devices, and mitigating expressions. For apologies, educators should guide learners beyond basic formulas toward more comprehensive realizations that include acknowledgment of responsibility, expressions of regret, and possible offers of repair. Additionally, it is essential to explicitly teach formal email conventions—such as appropriate greetings, closings, subject lines, and self-identification—to ensure students understand the expectations of professional written communication. Teachers must also raise learners' awareness of the limitations of AI grammar tools; while helpful for correcting grammar and vocabulary, these tools are unable to fully capture pragmatic appropriateness or social nuance, and should be treated as supplementary aids rather than replacements for human judgment. A hybrid feedback model is therefore recommended, in which AI handles surface-level corrections while instructors provide the deeper, context-sensitive feedback necessary for developing robust pragmatic awareness.

To effectively implement the proposed hybrid feedback model (where AI tools support surface-level corrections and teachers provide deeper, context-sensitive input) targeted teacher training is essential. Teachers need professional development that equips them not only with the knowledge of interlanguage pragmatics and speech act theory but also with practical strategies for identifying and addressing pragmatic failures in student writing. Training should include modules on analyzing email discourse, giving constructive feedback on pragmatic appropriateness, and guiding learners in interpreting AI-generated feedback critically. Moreover, educators should develop digital literacy skills that enable them to integrate AI tools meaningfully into writing instruction without over-relying on them. Such training can empower teachers to mediate between technology and pedagogy, ensuring that learners benefit from both automated assistance and human judgment in developing their pragmatic competence.

Finally, curriculum developers should incorporate dedicated modules on pragmatic competence—particularly in genres like email writing—within broader EFL syllabi. Moving away from grammar-centric instruction toward more communicative, culturally sensitive pedagogy will better prepare learners for authentic, global communication. Additionally, teacher education programs must equip instructors with the skills and resources necessary to teach pragmatics effectively, recognizing that successful language

use involves more than grammatical form—it requires sensitivity to context, culture, and social relationships.

Despite the valuable insights yielded by this study, several limitations must be acknowledged, particularly concerning cultural and technological generalizability. Culturally, the findings are influenced by the specific backgrounds of the participating EFL learners, whose pragmatic norms and transfer patterns may not fully represent the diversity of global English learners. Learners from different sociocultural contexts might exhibit distinct patterns of pragmatic failure or respond differently to AI feedback, limiting the applicability of the results across broader populations. Technologically, the study evaluated only three widely-used AI grammar tools (Grammarly, Quillbot, and ChatGPT) at a specific point in their developmental cycle. Given the rapid evolution of AI technologies, newer or updated models may yield different results. Moreover, the feedback quality may vary depending on how users prompt or interact with these tools, which could influence their performance in real-world settings. These limitations suggest that caution should be exercised in generalizing the findings universally, and further cross-cultural, longitudinal, and tool-diverse investigations are recommended to validate and extend the current results.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study has critically examined the pragmatic failures commonly found in EFL learners' email communication and evaluated the extent to which AI grammar tools can address these issues. The findings revealed that learners frequently struggle with appropriately expressing requests, apologies, and formal politeness, often due to the transfer of L1 pragmatic norms and a lack of explicit instruction in English-language conventions. While learners' emails were often grammatically correct, they were pragmatically inappropriate, leading to unintended impressions of rudeness or unprofessionalism. In parallel, AI grammar tools like Grammarly, Quillbot, and ChatGPT demonstrated high accuracy in correcting surface-level errors but consistently failed to address deeper socio-pragmatic issues such as indirectness, tone, and contextual sensitivity. These limitations underscore the divide between linguistic proficiency and pragmatic competence, emphasizing that effective communication requires more than grammatical accuracy, especially in culturally sensitive genres like academic email writing. The study contributes both theoretically and pedagogically by reinforcing the critical role of pragmatic competence in language learning and by exposing the current limitations of AI in supporting this aspect. However, its scope is limited by contextual factors such as participant demographics and the nature of the data collection method. Future research should pursue longitudinal studies on AI's role in pragmatic development, cross-cultural investigations of L1 influence, and the design of more pragmatically aware AI systems. Additionally, studies should explore hybrid feedback models that integrate AI's efficiency with human teachers' contextual insight. Ultimately, while AI can be a valuable aid in refining language form, the responsibility for cultivating learners' pragmatic awareness still rests with educators. Moving forward, a balanced, collaborative approach will be essential to equipping EFL learners with the skills to

communicate both correctly and appropriately in an increasingly AI-mediated, intercultural world.

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