

# A Critical Evaluation of Huang (2022): Revisiting L2 Pragmatic Competence through Implicit and Explicit Instruction

Hongyuzhi Ren | Student ID: 1811691 | Module: HPEN7004 Key Issues in Linguistics | Lecturer: Dr. Jessica Clapham

## 1. Introduction

The development of **pragmatic competence**—the ability to use language appropriately in social and cultural contexts—has become a central concern in second language acquisition (SLA) and applied linguistics. Research in the past three decades has shown that grammatical proficiency alone does not ensure successful communication; learners must also acquire the sociocultural and pragmatic rules governing language use (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Bardovi-Harlig, 2013). This awareness has led to the emergence of **instructional pragmatics**, which investigates how classroom teaching can foster pragmatic competence in L2 learners.

Within this domain, a key debate concerns the relative effectiveness of **implicit** versus **explicit instruction**. Explicit instruction involves metapragmatic explanation and direct feedback, whereas implicit instruction exposes learners to contextualised input without overt focus on pragmatic rules. Scholars such as Taguchi (2011) and Rose (2005) have argued that both methods may support pragmatic development but through different cognitive mechanisms. The pedagogical question of which approach better enhances learners' pragmatic awareness and performance remains unresolved.

In her 2022 study published in *System*, **Huang** revisits this debate by examining the effects of implicit and explicit instruction on L2 learners' pragmatic competence, focusing on the speech act of refusals. Using pre- and post-tests, she compares the two instructional modes in terms of learners' pragmatic awareness, appropriateness, and strategy use. The study aims to clarify how different forms of instruction contribute to pragmatic development in classroom contexts.

This critique will evaluate Huang's (2022) article in relation to its **theoretical coherence**, **methodological design**, and **interpretation of results**. It will further assess how effectively the

author's work advances understanding of pragmatic instruction within applied linguistics. The next section discusses the theoretical foundations that underpin Huang's study.

## 2. Theoretical Considerations

Huang's (2022) study is theoretically grounded in two key frameworks within applied linguistics and second language pragmatics: **Schmidt's (1993) Noticing Hypothesis** and **Kasper and Rose's (2002) model of pragmatic competence**. These theories collectively argue that L2 learners must not only be exposed to pragmatic input but also consciously notice and process it in order to internalise pragmatic norms. Huang adopts these models to justify her investigation into the effects of implicit and explicit instruction, claiming that the level of learner awareness—conscious or unconscious—determines the effectiveness of pragmatic learning.

According to the Noticing Hypothesis, input becomes intake only when learners consciously register linguistic and pragmatic features in context. Explicit instruction, therefore, is assumed to promote noticing by providing metapragmatic information and direct feedback, while implicit instruction allows learners to infer rules through repeated exposure. Huang's interpretation aligns with this view, proposing that explicit instruction may accelerate pragmatic awareness. However, she also acknowledges the potential value of implicit learning in developing automaticity and fluency in communication.

The theoretical coherence of Huang's framework lies in its **integration of cognitive and instructional perspectives**. By linking cognitive noticing processes with pedagogical implementation, she successfully situates her research within the broader tradition of form–function mapping in SLA. Nevertheless, the framework exhibits several limitations. First, it **conceptualises pragmatic learning primarily as a cognitive process**, thereby downplaying social-interactional factors such as politeness norms, relational power, and cultural variability. Pragmatic competence involves not only individual cognition but also social negotiation and contextual adaptation.

Second, the theory presupposes a clear dichotomy between implicit and explicit learning, yet in classroom practice, the boundary between the two is often blurred. Learners may notice pragmatic

features even in so-called implicit conditions, and explicit explanations often rely on prior exposure. This theoretical oversimplification raises questions about construct validity—whether “implicit” and “explicit” instruction are truly separable constructs or points on a continuum.

Finally, while Huang’s model draws from established theories, it does not clearly articulate how these theories interact. The relationship between noticing, awareness, and pragmatic performance remains implicit in her framework. A more detailed theoretical model could have clarified whether noticing mediates between instruction and pragmatic development, or whether it interacts dynamically with other learner variables such as motivation and proficiency.

In sum, Huang’s study demonstrates solid theoretical grounding and relevance to SLA pedagogy. Yet its reliance on cognitive theories without sufficient consideration of sociocultural and dynamic perspectives limits its explanatory depth. Future research could benefit from integrating sociocognitive or usage-based approaches to capture the full complexity of pragmatic learning in classroom contexts.

### 3. Methodological Evaluation

Huang (2022) employs a **quasi-experimental design** to examine the effects of implicit and explicit instruction on L2 learners’ pragmatic competence, focusing specifically on the speech act of refusals. The study involves two intact classes of university EFL learners, assigned respectively to explicit and implicit instructional conditions. Data were collected through a **Discourse Completion Task (DCT)** and **role-play performance**, administered as both pre-test and post-test. The instructional treatment lasted four weeks and included targeted lessons on sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic features of refusal strategies.

The methodology demonstrates several strengths. First, the inclusion of both DCT and role-play provides **triangulation** of data, allowing comparison between learners’ written pragmatic awareness and their spoken performance. Second, the use of a control group enhances the **internal validity** of the study, ensuring that observed differences can be attributed to instructional type rather than external variables. Third, Huang’s focus on a single speech act ensures a manageable research scope and allows for detailed analysis of learners’ pragmatic development.

However, the study also exhibits methodological limitations. The **sample size**—approximately 60 learners—limits generalisability, especially since participants were drawn from a single institution and shared a homogeneous cultural background. Pragmatic competence is context-dependent, and findings from one cultural-linguistic group may not apply to others. Furthermore, the short treatment duration (four weeks) provides limited insight into the **long-term retention** of pragmatic gains.

Another issue concerns the **ecological validity** of the research instruments. While DCTs are widely used in interlanguage pragmatics, they often elicit idealised responses that do not fully reflect spontaneous interaction. Similarly, role-plays, though more interactive, are still artificial classroom tasks that may not capture authentic pragmatic behaviour. These limitations suggest that pragmatic competence was measured in a **controlled rather than naturalistic context**, which may inflate performance accuracy.

In addition, Huang's analysis relies primarily on **frequency counts and ANOVA tests** without incorporating qualitative interpretation of learners' discourse. This restricts the depth of understanding regarding how and why learners choose certain strategies. A mixed-method approach—combining statistical and qualitative discourse analysis—could have yielded richer insights into the cognitive and social processes underlying pragmatic learning.

In summary, Huang's methodology is well-structured and pedagogically relevant, but constrained by its small sample size, short-term focus, and limited ecological validity. While the study successfully compares instructional modes, future research should incorporate longitudinal data and authentic communicative contexts to capture the full complexity of L2 pragmatic development.

#### **4. Results and Relevance to Theory**

Huang (2022) reports that both instructional conditions—implicit and explicit—led to measurable improvement in learners' pragmatic competence, as shown in post-test scores for pragmatic awareness, appropriateness, and strategy use. However, the explicit instruction group outperformed the implicit group in terms of accuracy and pragmatic awareness, whereas the implicit group demonstrated more

natural and contextually flexible language use. These results partially support the predictions of the **Noticing Hypothesis** (Schmidt, 1993), which posits that conscious awareness facilitates the internalisation of linguistic and pragmatic forms. Huang concludes that explicit metapragmatic explanation accelerates noticing and enhances learners' understanding of sociopragmatic norms.

The results also align with **Kasper and Rose's (2002)** distinction between pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge. Explicit instruction appears to benefit the acquisition of pragmalinguistic forms (e.g., formulaic expressions, mitigation devices), while implicit learning fosters sensitivity to contextual and relational cues. This finding illustrates the complementary nature of the two modes of instruction and underscores the multifaceted nature of pragmatic competence.

Nevertheless, the study's interpretation of results raises several theoretical concerns. The link between noticing and pragmatic development is **correlational rather than causal**; improvement in performance does not necessarily confirm that noticing occurred, as other factors such as motivation, memory, or task familiarity may have influenced outcomes. Moreover, the assumption that explicit instruction inherently promotes deeper learning overlooks the possibility that **over-explicit teaching** might reduce spontaneity and hinder pragmatic fluency.

Another limitation lies in the study's **narrow operationalisation** of pragmatic competence. The post-test measures primarily assess learners' ability to produce contextually appropriate refusals, but pragmatic competence extends beyond single speech acts to encompass discourse management, politeness negotiation, and cultural adaptability. Hence, while Huang's findings provide empirical support for cognitive-based theories of instruction, their theoretical generalisability to broader pragmatic behaviour remains limited.

Overall, Huang's results are conceptually consistent with her theoretical framework, yet they also highlight tensions between cognitive and communicative dimensions of pragmatics. The study successfully demonstrates that explicit instruction can enhance pragmatic awareness, but future research should explore how such awareness translates into sustained, authentic interactional competence.

## 5. Critical Reflection

Huang's (2022) study makes a significant contribution to applied linguistics and L2 pragmatics by empirically comparing the effects of implicit and explicit instruction on learners' pragmatic competence. It succeeds in connecting cognitive theories—particularly the Noticing Hypothesis—with classroom pedagogy, thereby providing a theoretically grounded perspective on instructional pragmatics. The paper's design and results reinforce the pedagogical importance of raising learners' pragmatic awareness, which has long been identified as a neglected component of communicative competence.

A key strength of Huang's study lies in its **pedagogical relevance**. By focusing on the teachability of pragmatic norms, it bridges the long-standing gap between linguistic theory and classroom practice. The integration of pre- and post-tests, role-play, and DCT provides measurable evidence that pragmatic competence can be systematically developed through targeted instruction. Moreover, the comparative approach contributes to a nuanced understanding of how explicit explanation and implicit exposure serve complementary roles in pragmatic learning.

However, the study also reflects several conceptual and methodological shortcomings. Theoretically, its reliance on a cognitive model underestimates the role of **social and cultural variability** in pragmatic behaviour. Pragmatic competence is not merely a matter of noticing linguistic input but also of negotiating interpersonal relationships and power dynamics within specific sociocultural contexts. This limitation suggests that future research should integrate **sociocognitive or intercultural frameworks** to capture the interaction between cognition, context, and identity.

Methodologically, the restricted sample size and short instructional duration constrain the generalisability of the findings. The study's reliance on controlled tasks such as DCTs further limits the ecological validity of its conclusions. Incorporating longitudinal designs, authentic classroom observations, or corpus-based analyses would provide richer insights into how pragmatic competence develops over time and across contexts.

Despite these limitations, Huang's (2022) work remains a valuable reference for researchers and practitioners interested in pragmatic instruction. It demonstrates that L2 pragmatic competence is both teachable and measurable, while also reminding us that pragmatic learning is dynamic, context-bound, and culturally mediated. Ultimately, the study contributes to an evolving understanding of how theory-informed pedagogy can foster not only pragmatic accuracy but also intercultural communicative competence—an essential goal in modern language education.

## References

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