

Advancing Intercultural Education Through ELT: Corpus-Driven Work With Conversational Implicatures

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This article evaluates a corpus-supported approach to teaching conversational implicature in Greek secondary schools, with the dual aim of developing learners' pragmatic skills and intercultural awareness. Sixty junior-high students were assigned to either an experimental or control condition. The experimental cohort engaged with the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) to examine real-world dialogic excerpts, build "language maps", and rehearse meanings through structured role-plays. Relative to the control group, the experimental group achieved a 28% gain in average scores, and between-group differences were statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). Post-intervention interviews indicated deeper recognition of language's cultural underpinnings and high learner acceptance. Overall, the study evidences that corpus integration in English language instruction can robustly promote intercultural learning and pragmatic competence.

Keywords: conversational implicature, corpus-based pedagogy, pragmatic competence, intercultural education, English language teaching (ELT)

Introduction

Pragmatics sits at the heart of successful communication. In second-language learning—here, English—pragmatic ability concerns learners' capacity to interpret and produce context-appropriate meanings across varied social and cultural situations (Taguchi, 2019). A key facet is competence with conversational implicature: inferring implied meanings that signal community norms and culturally situated expectations.

In Greece, English occupies a prominent position in schooling, functioning both as a compulsory subject and as a vehicle for intercultural aims. As noted by Byram (1997), English provides access to diverse cultural resources and can cultivate intercultural understanding. Yet classroom practice frequently foregrounds grammar and vocabulary while under-addressing pragmatics, even though pragmatic development is essential for effective intercultural communication.

Pragmatic Competence and Intercultural Communication

Pragmatic competence is best understood as a layered construct that integrates multiple forms of knowledge to support successful interaction across cultures. Key dimensions include: (a) linguistic awareness—control of grammatical and lexical resources; (b) social intelligence—the capacity to read contextual signals such as intonation, stance, and gesture; and (c) cultural sensitivity—an informed grasp of communities' values, norms, and expectations.

Taken together, these dimensions enable learners to move beyond literal decoding toward interpreting how utterances do things in context. A routine formula like “thank you”, for instance, does not carry the same force everywhere: In some communities it functions as a conventional courtesy, whereas elsewhere it may index profound gratitude or even signal an anticipated reciprocal act. As Ishihara and Cohen (2010) note, such cross-cultural variability underscores why cultural sensitivity is integral to developing pragmatic ability.

Insufficient pragmatic development can precipitate more than local misreadings; in transnational settings it can erode cooperation and strain relationships. Where interpretive frames diverge, the risk of misalignment grows, and with it the likelihood of communicative breakdowns.

For these reasons, pedagogy that foregrounds pragmatics directly supports learners’ social and cultural adaptation. Students who cultivate pragmatic awareness are better positioned to engage in intercultural exchanges effectively, enhancing both their linguistic performance and their readiness to meet the cultural demands of international communication.

Conversational Implicatures

Conversational implicature is central to Grice’s (1975) cooperative principle, which frames successful interaction as a coordinated enterprise. Through implicature, interlocutors recover meanings that are not explicitly stated by drawing on contextual cues and assumptions about speaker intent. This inferencing process is indispensable for grasping what is meant as opposed to merely what is said.

Mastery of implicature extends beyond vocabulary and grammar. It presupposes sensitivity to culturally grounded norms, social conventions, and expectations that govern how messages are produced and received. As Thomas (1995) emphasizes, without such cultural awareness, learners are prone to misread implied meanings.

Within Greek classrooms, work with implicature is often demanding, particularly when examples hinge on culture-specific knowledge that does not map neatly onto Greek communicative practices. The challenge underscores a broader distinction: knowing the linguistic code versus developing pragmatic competence—the capacity to interpret utterances as socially and culturally situated actions.

Greek learners may struggle with items that trade in indirection—humor, irony, or veiled critique—precisely because these rely on background cultural scripts. When those scripts are unfamiliar, students can miss the intended force of an expression.

A further complication is curricular: Instruction has historically prioritized grammatical accuracy and lexis, frequently oriented toward high-stakes certification (e.g., national exams or internationally recognized suites, such as Cambridge and Michigan). While such assessments reward form-focused proficiency, they seldom probe pragmatic performance or culturally conditioned interpretation. Consequently, students may achieve correctness without communicative adequacy in complex, international contexts.

Corpus-assisted pedagogy offers a productive way forward. Large, authentic datasets enable learners to observe how meanings are negotiated in real discourse and to notice recurrent patterns of implicature across contexts. By engaging with corpus-based exemplars of implied meaning, students can practice interpreting indirectness and culture-specific cues.

In practical terms, Greek teachers can design technology-supported tasks that invite learners to mine English corpora—such as the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)—and contrast findings with Greek

usage. Such activities simultaneously build pragmatic insight and foster intercultural awareness, both of which are essential for effective global communication.

Cultural Awareness and Empirical Studies

Cultural awareness—core to intercultural education—grows when learners engage with varied cultural settings that widen their perspectives and equip them to navigate difference. Far from being peripheral, such tasks are central to building intercultural competence in Byram's (1997) sense, which foregrounds critical cultural consciousness and the ability to negotiate meanings across communities.

Empirical work underscores this. Kecskes (2015) reports that exchange experiences foster heightened sensitivity to cultural variation and a clearer grasp of how language is shaped by context. Likewise, Deardorff (2006) shows that intercultural competence is primarily cultivated through experiential learning that demands active participation and interaction with multiple viewpoints.

Classroom design matters. Structured dialogue about cultural issues provides a low-risk space for perspective-taking; Göbel and Helmke (2010) link such group discussions to gains in intercultural empathy and critical thinking. Literary study offers another pathway: As C. Kramsch and O. Kramsch (2000) argue, texts encode social, moral, and historical imaginaries, allowing learners—when reading across traditions—to compare value systems and deepen intercultural sensitivity (see also Romero-Trillo, 2002).

Performance-based tasks complement analytic ones. Role-plays help learners inhabit alternative cultural identities, rehearse plausible scenarios, and refine communicative strategies that account for cultural variability (Byram & Wagner, 2018). Parallel approaches—simulations and digitally mediated exchanges—have also been shown to strengthen pragmatic and cultural awareness (Chun, 2011).

These practices align with Vygotskian perspectives on learning as fundamentally social (Vygotsky, 1978). By participating in intercultural activities, students not only learn about others but also learn to interrogate their own cultural assumptions, a process highlighted by Liddicoat and Scarino (2013).

Research Methodology

This study investigates a corpus-assisted pedagogy for teaching conversational implicature that purposefully integrates linguistic form with cultural meaning. Drawing on large, authentic datasets—specifically the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA; >1B words spanning spoken, written, and academic registers; Davies, 2008)—learners explore how expressions function across contexts by attending to frequency patterns, collocations, and shifts in sense.

We designed three mutually reinforcing tasks to target pragmatic growth:

1. Corpus-guided dialogue analysis: Students queried COCA to locate dialogic excerpts and identified implicature-rich expressions (e.g., “I wouldn't do that if I were you”), articulating the implied stance and conditions of use. Framed as inquiry-based learning, the activity required students to examine evidence and propose context-sensitive interpretations.
2. Culturally situated role-plays: Learners rehearsed scenarios—such as professional dinners or interactions while traveling—explicitly practicing implicature in performance. Cultural notes derived from COCA examples were integrated so that students could see how cultural frames modulate indirect meaning. The design follows a social-constructivist view of learning as interactionally mediated (Vygotsky, 1978).

3. Mind-mapping of pragmatics and culture: Students built concept maps linking common implicature types to cultural norms (e.g., politeness conventions, degrees of directness, and avoidance of open-conflict). Using corpus-derived instances as anchors, the maps supported organized noticing and metacognitive reflection on language-culture relations.

Participants and design: The intervention took place in two lower-secondary schools in Attica ($N = 60$). Over six weeks (two-hours weekly), students completed: (a) a pre-test of pragmatic competence, (b) a targeted instructional phase implementing the three tasks, and (c) a post-test plus interviews. Classes were assigned to an experimental condition ($N = 30$; corpus-based instruction) or a control condition ($N = 30$; conventional teaching emphasizing memorized dialogues and explicit politeness rules).

Measures and data collection: Pragmatic competence was assessed with a purpose-built instrument comprising multiple-choice and open-response items focused on implicature interpretation. Post-instruction, semi-structured interviews elicited learners' experiences with the tasks, providing qualitative data to complement the test results.

Research Findings

The study provides converging quantitative and qualitative evidence that corpus-supported instruction meaningfully strengthens learners' command of conversational implicature. Test data show clear performance advantages for students who engaged with corpus-based tasks, and interview data corroborate these gains with reports of higher engagement and deeper cultural insight.

Relative to traditional instruction, the corpus condition yielded a 28% increase in mean scores (control: +10%). On multiple-choice items targeting implicature, correct responses in the experimental group rose from 52% → 81%, compared with 50% → 60% in the control group (see Table 1). Open-ended work in the experimental cohort featured fuller contextualization and explicit links between implied meanings and cultural frames.

Table 1

Pragmatic-Competence Outcomes by Group

Measure	Experimental (Pre)	Experimental (Post)	Δ Experimental	Control (Pre)	Control (Post)	Δ Control
Mean test score	-	-	+28%	-	-	+10%
MCQ: Implicature interpretation (correct %)	52%	81%	+29 pp	50%	60%	+10 pp
Open-ended responses	Baseline	Context-rich, culture-linked explanations	↑ quality	Baseline	Limited cultural framing	↔/slight ↑

Between-group differences were statistically reliable (t -test, $p < 0.01$). The effect size was Cohen's $d = 0.85$ (large), and $\eta^2 = 0.32$, indicating that roughly one-third of performance variance is attributable to the intervention.

Perception data align with test results. In the experimental group, 87% rated corpus-based activities as more engaging than conventional tasks, often pointing to the value of working with authentic dialogue. Students also credited culture-integrated role-plays with helping them compare norms across cultures; as one learner put it, "I see why English relies on indirectness—It's tied to politeness conventions". Seventy-eight percent reported greater confidence using English in international contexts, citing improved grasp of pragmatic and cultural cues.

Control-group responses were more muted: 45% found their activities engaging and 30% felt they had improved in understanding cultural differences, with many calling for more interactive, hands-on work (see Figure 1).

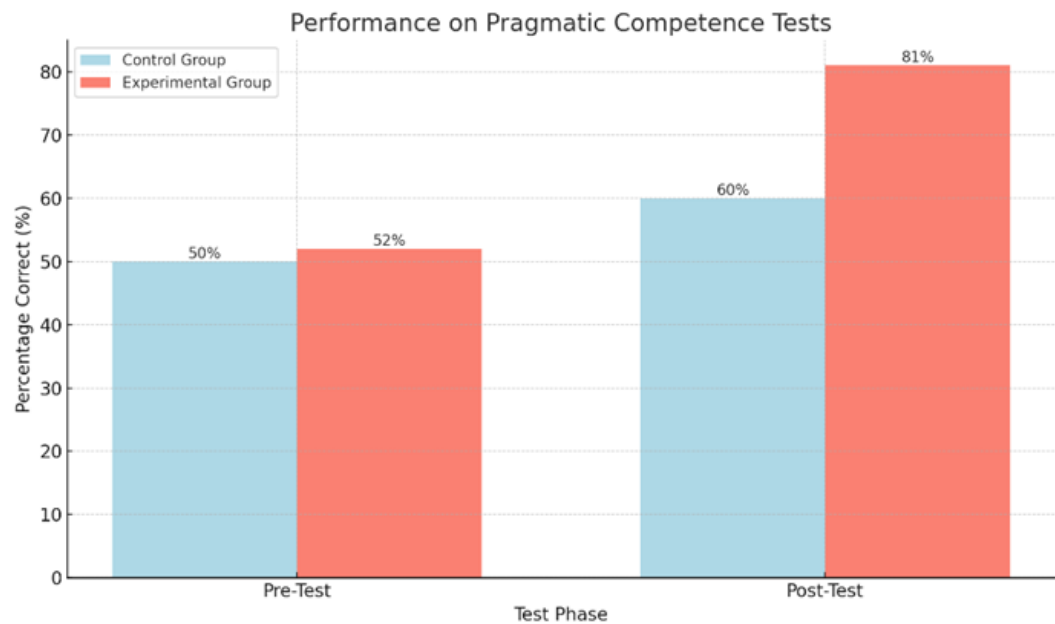


Figure 1. Comparison of pragmatic-competence performance: Experimental group vs. control group.

Table 2

Student Feedback: Engagement, Cultural Insight, and Confidence

Dimension	Experimental group (%)	Control group (%)
Activity engagement/interest	87	45
Cultural-difference understanding	Strong gains reported (qualitative)	30
Confidence for international communication	78	-

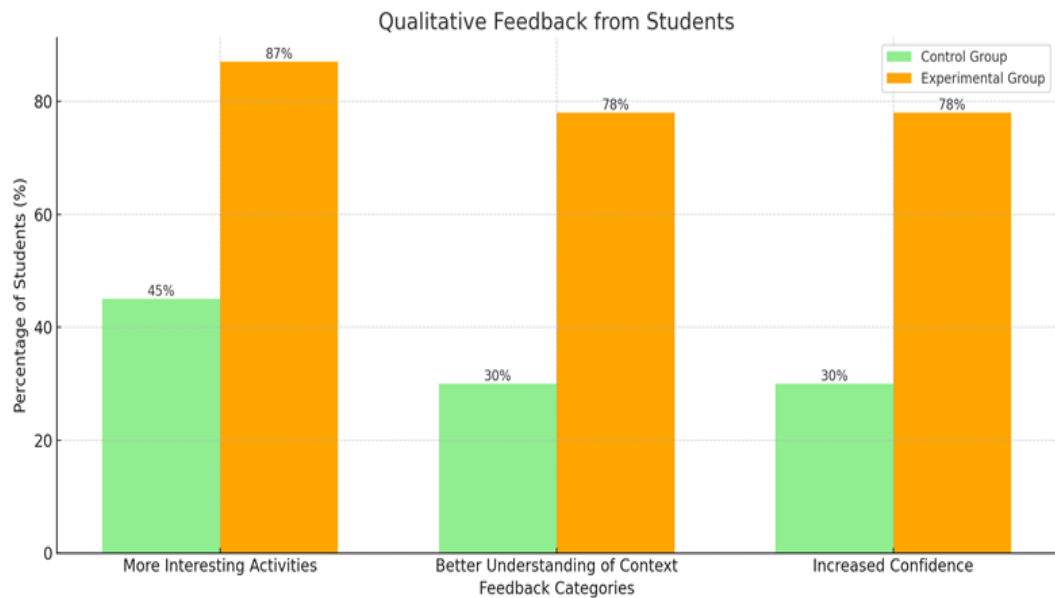


Figure 2. Student feedback on activities: Interest, understanding, and confidence.

Corpus-informed pedagogy appears to deliver dual benefits: measurable gains in pragmatic performance and expanded intercultural awareness. The authenticity of corpus data likely functions as both a cognitive scaffold (supporting noticing and inference) and a motivational lever, making a strong case for wider, systematic use of corpora in Greek ELT (see Figure 2 & Table 2).

Conclusions

English language instruction can meaningfully advance intercultural education when it foregrounds pragmatics—especially the interpretation of conversational implicature. Corpus-informed pedagogy (e.g., using COCA) appears to build learners' pragmatic alertness and cultural sensitivity, translating into more effective participation in international interactions. Beyond test gains, the approach seems to nurture dispositions central to intercultural competence, notably critical thinking and empathy.

The study's scope, however, warrants caution. With $N = 60$ students from two Attica schools and a six-week timeline, claims to broad generalizability or durability are limited. The intervention centered on a single corpus (COCA), precluding comparisons with alternative datasets or tools, and qualitative insights were derived from student self-reports, which can introduce subjectivity.

Even so, the instructional takeaways are clear. Teachers can leverage corpora to make pragmatic features visible and teachable, while culturally framed role-plays can scaffold strategy use that is sensitive to differing norms. The same design aligns well with integrated models like Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), positioning learners for both high-stakes assessments and authentic cross-cultural communication outside the classroom.

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