

Phatic Production and Interlocutor Status: A mixed- methods study of pragmatic appropriateness in EFL academic WhatsApp interaction

Producción Fática y Estatus del interlocutor. Un estudio de métodos mixtos sobre la adecuación pragmática en la interacción académica por WhatsApp en inglés como lengua extranjera

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ABSTRACT

Conducted at the Facultad de Lenguas, Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, this study examines whether the pragmatic appropriateness of EFL learners' phatic production in academic WhatsApp interactions differs by interlocutor status, and what this implies for instruction. Using a mixed-methods, cross-sectional design, the study analyzed 50 EFL learners' responses to a Discourse Completion Task by means of Wilcoxon signed-rank tests and qualitative interpretative analysis. Appropriateness was significantly higher toward professors than peers in openings and closings, but not in maintenance, revealing that learners' sociopragmatic sensitivity is concentrated in the ritualized acts of opening and closing interactions, while they struggle to moderate peer register in digital academic interaction.

KEY WORDS

Phatic production, pragmatic appropriateness, sociopragmatic competence, interlocutor status, academic WhatsApp interaction

RESUMEN

El presente estudio fue realizado en la Facultad de Lenguas de la Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla y examina si la adecuación pragmática de la producción fática de estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera (ILE) en interacciones académicas por WhatsApp difiere según el estatus del interlocutor, y qué implica esto para la enseñanza. Mediante un diseño transversal de métodos mixtos, el estudio analizó las respuestas de 50 estudiantes de ILE de una Tarea de Completamiento Discursivo (Discourse Completion Task, DCT) por medio de pruebas de rangos con signo de Wilcoxon y análisis cualitativo interpretativo. La adecuación fue significativamente mayor hacia los profesores que hacia los pares en las aperturas y los cierres,

pero no en el mantenimiento, lo que revela que la sensibilidad sociopragmática de los estudiantes se concentra en los actos ritualizados de apertura y cierre de las interacciones, mientras que tienen dificultades para moderar el registro entre pares en la interacción académica digital.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Producción fática, adecuación pragmática, competencia sociopragmática, estatus del interlocutor, interacción académica por WhatsApp

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, digital messaging has become a useful resource for foreign language learners, expanding learning outside the classroom to integrate knowledge into digital spaces learners already use to communicate. WhatsApp, among the most widely used instant-messaging applications, portrays this evolution: now it serves not only as a communication channel, but as a space for continuous interaction between students and professors where regular messaging is currently the norm (Tragant et al., 2022; Andújar & Salaberri-Ramiro, 2021). Consequently, this interaction acquires particular significance in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, where learners must constantly modulate their register to the person they are addressing. In addition, much of the social work that sustains such exchanges is phatic: talk whose primary purpose is to establish, maintain and close contact rather than convey information (House & Kádár, 2023). This phatic communication does not consist of a single form; rather, it is organized into the ritualized acts of opening and closing an interaction and the ongoing maintenance of contact across its course (Laver, 1975; House & Kádár, 2022), and in digital messaging it is often accomplished through formulaic expressions and emojis (Aull, 2019; Toma, 2025).

Considering this, phatic production appropriateness is a matter of pragmatic competence, and specifically of sociopragmatic sensitivity since learners must judge what suits a given interlocutor and modulate their register accordingly. Nevertheless, these needs differ significantly by interlocutor status. Addressing a professor calls for an academic register attentive to the power asymmetry of the relationship (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2023), whereas interaction with peers draws on a more informal register; research on messaging has shown that status-differential and solidary relationships indeed call for distinct phatic strategies (Aull, 2019; Toma, 2025). Yet pragmatics instruction in EFL tends to emphasize formal accuracy and high-status framing, although the social, contact-maintaining dimensions of interaction receive comparatively little attention (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2023). How EFL learners manage this modulation in their own phatic production, and whether their appropriateness varies across the phases of an interaction and the status of their interlocutor, remains underexplored. While existing research heavily documents how learners execute isolated speech acts directed at institutional authorities, such as formal email requests (Ren & Liu, 2021), it remains unclear how they navigate the continuous phase-by-phase progression of a single digital interaction. As emphasized by Taguchi (2022), traditional L2 pragmatics has predominantly relied on isolated speech acts, leaving a gap regarding how learners manage sequential discourse. Furthermore, González-Lloret (2022) notes that synchronous and asynchronous instant messaging tools require dynamic moves that cannot be captured by analyzing individual turns. Consequently, we still do not know how learners systematically modulate their phatic choices across interactional phases (opening, maintenance and closing) when shifting between status conditions.

Accordingly, adopting a cross-sectional, comparative and interpretative design, this study examines:

1. Whether appropriateness differs according to interlocutor status across three interaction phases: opening, maintenance, and closing.
2. What the resulting patterns imply for pragmatic instruction.

Literature review

Phatic communion

The notion of phatic language originates with Malinowski (1923), who coined the term phatic communion for utterances whose purpose is not to transmit information but to create and sustain social bonds between interlocutors; that is to say, its value lies in the contact they establish, not in their propositional content. Jakobson (1960) later incorporated this insight into his model of language functions as the phatic function, defining it by its orientation toward the channel of communication, both the verbal and nonverbal means through which speakers confirm that contact has been opened, is being maintained, and can be closed. Together, these descriptions frame phatic language as relationally motivated and as inherently bound to the management of contact across an interaction.

Later, Laver (1975) gave this management an explicit structure. Examining the marginal phases of conversation, he showed that the tokens exchanged when opening and closing an encounter perform delicate interactional work rather than being meaningless or interchangeable. Laver further classified phatic tokens as neutral, self-oriented, or other-oriented with their selection being sensitive to the relationship between interlocutors. Thus, solidarity and status differential relationships favor different token types, an important point for the present research, since it locates interlocutor status at the heart of phatic production from the framework's foundation. More recently, House and Kádár (2022) have approached phatic interaction through the lens of speech acts, treating phatic moves as describable, conventionalized actions rather than as contentless categories.

This structure gains new relevance in digitally mediated communication. Miller (2008) describes an online phatic culture in which sustaining connection often takes priority over substantive content, and instant messaging is in this respect a markedly phatic medium. Because the prosodic and gestural resources that carry phatic meaning in speech are unavailable in text, phatic production is instead accomplished through formulaic expressions, punctuation, and emojis. For instance, studies of WhatsApp show that emoji function as phatic tokens whose distribution varies with the status of the relationship (Aull, 2019; Toma, 2025).

Phatic production and appropriateness

Producing phatic communion appropriately is not a matter of grammatical accuracy but of pragmatic competence, the ability to use language in ways that suit the social context. Within interlanguage pragmatics, this competence is conventionally divided into a pragmalinguistic dimension, the linguistic resources available for performing communicative acts, and a sociopragmatic dimension, the social judgments that govern when and toward whom those resources are appropriate (Leech, 1983; Thomas, 1983; Wang et al., 2024). Pragmatic appropriateness relates primarily to the latter as it concerns whether a learner's production fits the relationship, the setting, and the act being performed, rather than whether it is well structured.

A consistent finding across this literature is that pragmatic appropriateness develops slowly and unevenly, and that even advanced learners may command the relevant forms while misjudging

their social fit. In the academic register specifically, Economidou-Kogetsidis (2023) found that when advanced EFL learners evaluated student emails, they focused mainly on formality and structure, but ignored the relational signals that professors themselves consider important. This matters for phatic production, because phatic acts work to manage the relationship and maintain contact, and formality alone cannot accomplish that.

Research addressing phatic production in a second language directly remains scarce, and what exists has concentrated on email. Ren and Liu (2021), examining Chinese students' English gratitude emails to professors, showed that learners' phatic production is shaped by first-language preferences and that its sociopragmatic development is particularly difficult to achieve in foreign-language settings, where exposure to target-language norms is limited. Such findings establish phatic production as a genuine difficulty for EFL learners, yet they leave open how appropriately they manage it in asynchronous, informal digital media, and how that management shifts with interlocutor status.

To capture this dynamic, pragmatic appropriateness is operationally defined in the present study as a multidimensional construct since it encompasses both the sociopragmatic awareness needed to read contextual status hierarchies and the pragmalinguistic resources required to linguistically execute those choices.

Interlocutor status and register modulation

Interlocutor status is among the social variables most consistently shown to govern pragmatic choice. In the politeness tradition, the relative power between speaker and hearer, together with social distance and the imposition of the act, shapes how a message is appropriately framed (Brown & Gilman, 1972; Brown & Levinson, 1987). Addressing a higher-status interlocutor such as a professor ordinarily calls for greater indirectness, mitigation, and formality than addressing a peer, and competent users modulate their register as they move between such relationships.

For second-language learners, this modulation is demanding. Examining requests produced by Cypriot Greek learners of English across conditions defined by power and social distance, Karpava (2025) found that learners' sensitivity to these variables was real but uneven, with appropriate strategies surfacing in some configurations and not in others. The academic setting sharpens the difficulty, since learners must produce an institutionally appropriate register toward faculty while drawing on a markedly different one with classmates; as noted above, the formal, high-status end of this range appears more readily acquired than the relational flexibility the full range demands (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2023).

These tendencies bear directly on phatic production, which Laver (1975) already showed to be status-sensitive. If learners manage formality more comfortably than relational nuance, their phatic production may prove appropriate toward professors yet fail with peers. Whether this asymmetry holds in digitally mediated interaction, where status is negotiated through a narrower set of resources, is the concern of the following section.

WhatsApp in academic EFL interaction

WhatsApp has become a common out-of-class channel in foreign language education, and a growing body of research documents its use for English learning, reporting that it extends participation beyond the classroom and is valued by learners as an accessible, low-pressure channel (Andújar & Salaberri-Ramiro, 2021; Mackay et al., 2021; Tragant et al., 2022). This work,

however, has concentrated largely on engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes rather than on what learners do pragmatically within the interaction channel. The gap is notable because the platform's features such as informality, quasi-synchronicity, and reliance on emoji and formulaic expressions place phatic production at the center of the interaction, yet how appropriately EFL learners manage that production toward different interlocutors has rarely been examined. The present study treats academic WhatsApp exchanges not as a learning aid but as a site of pragmatic performance.

Pragmatics instruction and the present gap

Despite broad evidence that pragmatic competence underpins communicative success, pragmatics instruction remains comparatively minimal in EFL classrooms, which continue to prioritize grammar and vocabulary (González-Lloret, 2022). Where it is addressed, instruction tends to center on formal accuracy and high-status framing, reinforcing the tendency to equate appropriateness with formality (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2023), while the social and maintenance dimensions of interaction and the modulation of register toward less formal interlocutors receive far less attention.

Taken together, the literature establishes phatic communion as structured and status-sensitive, identifies phatic production as a recognized difficulty for EFL learners, and confirms WhatsApp as a primary academic site for it, while showing that instruction underserves precisely its relational dimension. What seems to remain unexamined is whether the pragmatic appropriateness of EFL learners' phatic production differs by interlocutor status across the opening, maintenance, and closing phases of academic WhatsApp interaction, the question this study addresses.

Research methodology

This research adopts an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. Within this approach, the quantitative component establishes whether and where the pragmatic appropriateness of learners' phatic production differs by interlocutor status, while the qualitative component explains how those differences appear in the learners' actual production. The two components are complementary rather than parallel because the qualitative analysis elaborates the quantitative result, concentrating on the phatic functions in which significant differences emerge and examining how learners realize them. Consequently, the quantitative phase is based on a non-experimental, cross-sectional and comparative approach. It is non-experimental because the study elicited and observed learners' production without administering any instructional treatment or manipulating conditions; cross-sectional because the data were collected at a single point in time; comparative because its core analysis is a within-subjects comparison of two interlocutor conditions, student-professor (S-Professor) and student-peer (S-Peer), produced by the same participants. Finally, the qualitative component reconstructs the features underlying the differences observed.

The data analyzed here derive from the author's unpublished doctoral thesis. Importantly, the original data collection instrument, sampling procedures, and evaluation rubric were originally designed to capture interlocutor status variations, making them fully suitable for addressing the current inquiry. The original tasks prompted participants to interact with both an S-Professor and an S-Peer across 24 situations, and the evaluation rubric used to score these responses was developed during the doctoral thesis research. No modifications were made to the sample, data collection instruments, or scoring criteria for the present study; rather, this article introduces a new analytical plan. While the thesis examined the broader relationship between recognition

and production, this study compares pragmatic appropriateness scores across the interlocutor status variable.

The data consist of learners’ written responses to a digital Discourse Completion Task (DCT), administered via Google Forms. The instrument comprised 24 scenarios situated entirely in an academic context. These scenarios were specifically designed to elicit phatic production across three phases: openings, maintenance, and closings. The situations simulated everyday university tasks, such as requesting assignment deadline extensions, inquiring about grades, notifying professors of absences, and coordinating collaborative group work. Though the contexts were varied to reflect authentic academic communication, the core operational variable remained the interlocutor status, requiring participants to imagine themselves interacting with either a professor or a peer under parallel conditions (see Table 1).

Table 1
Example of a DCT Scenario Layout and Sample Participant Response

Phatic function	Interlocutor status	Situation	Response
opening	S-Professor	1. It is Tuesday morning. You need to ask for a deadline extension from a professor you have never messaged before; however, the class was given the teacher’s number for urgent matters. The relationship is strictly formal. Your message:	“Good morning teacher, sorry to bother you. I consider that I will not have enough time to end the assignment, it is possible to get a deadline extension? I wait for your answer, thank you.” (P19)
opening	S-Peer	4. You missed yesterday’s class. You message a classmate whom you have never spoken to face-to-face to ask for the notes, as you know this person is very responsible and always takes them. Your message:	“Hey dude, can I have yesterdays notes? Kinda missed class yesterday due to an issue, and it would help me out.” (P18)

Note. P19 = Participant 19, P18 = Participant 18. The participants’ responses are reproduced exactly as typed in the digital collection form.

For the quantitative analysis, the pragmatic productions were scored using a holistic Pragmatic Production Rubric, which summarizes each response on an ordinal scale. Each production was rated from 0 to 3 (see Table 2) with one score integrating pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic appropriateness (Leech, 1983; Thomas, 1983), according to the models of communicative competence (Bachman, 1990) and recent research on L2 pragmatics (Taguchi, 2019). A holistic approach was adopted since both components are realized simultaneously in a single production, and the interlocutor reacts to the message as a whole. The criteria were adapted to the hybrid genre of academic WhatsApp (Pérez-Sabater, 2019; Tagg & Hu, 2017) and to politeness norms in asymmetrical (S-Professor) and symmetrical (S-Peer) relationships (Locher & Watts, 2005; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2013).

Table 2

Rubric for Closing Sequences in Digital Pragmatic Production

3rd Dimension: Closings

Score	Level	Evaluation criteria	Sample
3	Pragmatically appropriate	<p>Pragmalinguistic appropriateness: complete idiomatic closing sequence: expression of gratitude + confirmation of next step or an appropriate farewell; no abbreviations in a formal (S-Professor) context.</p> <p>Sociopragmatic appropriateness: register calibrated to the channel and the relationship; acknowledgement of the interlocutor's previous message when relevant; a closing that appropriately signals the end of the interaction.</p>	<p>"Thank you for your understanding, Professor. I will make sure to check the platform for the homework and upload the activity before Friday. Best regards." (P20, S-Professor)</p> <p>"Thank you so much! I'll go now. Talk to you later!" (P16, S-Peer)</p>
2	Partially appropriate	<p>Pragmalinguistic appropriateness: expression of gratitude is present, though in a slightly informal register for a S-Professor context; functional closing, but without the expected confirmation of next steps; incomplete closing sequence (missing name or farewell).</p> <p>Sociopragmatic appropriateness: recognizable intention to close; slight mismatch in acknowledging the interlocutor's status in S-Professor; minimal pragmatic transfer.</p>	<p>"Thanks a lot." (P33, S-Professor)</p> <p>"Ok, thank you" (P35, S-Peer)</p>
1	Minimum appropriate	<p>Pragmalinguistic appropriateness: use of abbreviations in a formal context; excessively colloquial expression in S-Professor; moderate pragmatic transfer from Spanish; partially recognizable intention to close.</p> <p>Sociopragmatic appropriateness: performance fails in core aspects of appropriateness for the context; register inappropriate for the relationship and the channel</p>	<p>"Sure, teacher, thx!" (P15, S-Professor)</p> <p>"Okas bye!!!" (P49, S-Peer)</p>
0	Inappropriate / No answer	<p>Pragmalinguistic appropriateness: complete absence of a closing signal; exclusive use of emojis or single-word tokens in a formal S-Professor context; blank response.</p> <p>Sociopragmatic appropriateness: response is pragmatically inappropriate in its entirety; message does not signal any intention to close the interaction.</p>	<p>"👍" (P21, S-Professor)</p> <p>"bye." (P17, S-Peer)</p>

Note. S-Professor=Student-Professor, S-Peer=Student-Peer, P49=Participant 49, P35=Participant 35, P33=Participant 33, P21=Participant 21, P20=Participant 20, P17=Participant 17, P16=Participant 16, P15=Participant 15.

The DCT and the Pragmatic Production Rubric were submitted to expert review. Three experts took part: university professors and researchers with doctoral training in applied linguistics and pragmatics and experience in EFL teaching. They evaluated the clarity and authenticity of the scenarios, the correspondence of each scenario to its target phatic function and interlocutor status, as well as the clarity and discriminability of the score criteria. Following their evaluation, the syntax and semantics of some scenarios were refined, as well as the suitability of the scenarios and the descriptors of the scoring criteria.

The study was conducted in Puebla, Mexico, at the Facultad de Lenguas of the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, within the Licenciatura en la Enseñanza del Inglés. The communicative context under investigation is academic WhatsApp interaction (BA in English Language Teaching), specifically learners' exchanges with two types of interlocutors: their professors and their peers. Fifty participants were recruited through non-probabilistic convenience sampling. This strategy and sample size are appropriate for an exploratory comparative study of this kind; the implications for generalizability are addressed in the limitations section. The participants were 50 students in the fifth of eight semesters and their English proficiency ranged from A1 to C2. All participants provided informed consent, and their data were anonymized and coded P1–P50 to protect their confidentiality. Language proficiency is reported here strictly as a descriptive characteristic of the group and was not included as an inferential variable in the analysis. This decision aligns with the study's main objective, which focuses explicitly on evaluating structural variations driven by interlocutor status rather than tracking proficiency development. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that this proficiency heterogeneity introduces considerable pragmalinguistic variability in the data obtained. Lower proficiency learners may possess the sociopragmatic awareness to differentiate status but lack the grammatical resources to realize it appropriately; meanwhile, higher proficiency learners command a wider repertoire of mitigation strategies. Consequently, this proficiency spread may expand the variance within the observed scores and represents a limitation in the generalization of the results that is further addressed in the limitations section.

The study followed an explanatory sequential logic, in which the quantitative component identified where the pragmatic appropriateness of learners' phatic production differed by interlocutor status, and the qualitative component interpreted how those differences were realized in the responses themselves (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

For the quantitative component, each response was scored from 0 to 3 and grouped into subscores by phatic function (opening, maintenance, closing) and interlocutor condition (student-professor, student-peer). A Shapiro-Wilk test indicated that the score distributions deviated from normality, thus justifying a nonparametric approach. Three Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were therefore conducted, comparing student-professor and student-peer subscores within each function, with a Holm correction applied across the three comparisons and effect sizes calculated as $r = z/\sqrt{N}$, where N is the number of paired observations, that is, the 50 participants, each contributing one pair of scores (S-Professor and S-Peer). Given the nonparametric design, medians and interquartile ranges are reported as well. All quantitative analyses were carried out in IBM SPSS Statistics, Version 21.

Building on these results, the qualitative component focused on the functions in which appropriateness differed significantly by interlocutor status (openings and closings). That is, rather than quantifying the frequency of features, the analysis was interpretive and illustrative:

representative responses from student-professor and student-peer were selected and examined to characterize how learners modulated their phatic production across the two interlocutors. The codebook categories (greetings, address and titles, mitigation, anticipatory apology, status acknowledgment, gratitude, farewells, emoji, informal spelling, and L1 transfer) served as an analytic lens for this interpretation.

To ensure reliability, the coding scheme was defined a priori in a detailed codebook with definitions, inclusion and exclusion rules, and examples, while keeping a clear audit trail of analytical decisions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, as cited in Nowell et al., 2017). Because this study required interpretative and exploratory analysis, a human researcher conducted the evaluation. Software was employed strictly for data preparation and initial surface feature recognition, followed by an in-depth researcher review (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

In addition, because the rubric criteria refer explicitly to the interlocutor status, the rater could not be blind to the condition in which each response was produced. This is acknowledged as a limitation: the scores, and therefore the reported differences, may reflect rater judgments or an expectancy effect favoring the professor condition and should be interpreted with this in mind.

Main findings

This section presents the findings in two complementary approaches. The first establishes statistically where the pragmatic appropriateness of learners’ phatic production differs by interlocutor status, comparing student-professor and student-peer scores within each phatic function. The second turns from whether and where such differences occur to how learners realize them, examining their own production in the functions where the comparison proved significant. Taken together, the two parts trace a single pattern: a sociopragmatic sensitivity unevenly distributed across the phases of an interaction and the status of the interlocutor.

Quantitative findings

To address the quantitative phase of this explanatory sequential mixed-methods research, a Wilcoxon signed rank test was conducted. The purpose was to compare appropriateness variation according to the interlocutor status. Descriptive statistics and the Wilcoxon signed-rank results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics and Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Comparison of Appropriateness by Interlocutor Status

Phatic function	Student-professor Mdn (IQR)	Student-peer	z	p	r
Opening	9 (8-10)	8 (7-8)	-5.14	< .001	.73
Maintenance	8 (7-8)	8 (8-8)	-1.23	.220	.17
Closing	8 (8-10.75)	8 (7-8)	-4.75	< .001	.67

Note. N = 50. Scores are summed appropriateness ratings per function and condition (range 0–12). Mdn = median; IQR = interquartile range. p values are two-tailed with Holm correction across the three comparisons. Effect size $r = z/\sqrt{N}$, where N = 50 is the number of paired observations.

Wilcoxon signed-rank tests showed that appropriateness ratings were significantly higher

toward professors than toward peers in both opening and closing moves. In openings, scores were higher in the S-Professor interaction (Mdn = 9, IQR = 8-10) than in the S-Peer interaction (Mdn = 8, IQR = 7-8), $z = -5.14$, $p < .001$, $r = .73$. In closings, although the medians were identical across both interactions (Mdn = 8), the S-Professor interaction (IQR = 8-10.75) showed a higher overall distribution than the S-Peer condition (IQR = 7-8). Furthermore, the within-participant comparison clearly favored the professor interaction with 30 of 50 participants scored higher toward professors and only 2 toward peers, $z = -4.75$, $p < .001$, $r = .67$. Maintenance moves, by contrast, showed no significant difference between interactions (S-Professor Mdn = 8, IQR = 7-8; S-Peer Mdn = 8, IQR = 8-8), $z = -1.23$, $p = .220$, $r = .17$.

Qualitative findings

The quantitative results showed that appropriateness was higher toward professors than peers in openings and closings, but not in maintenance. The following interpretation examines how this pattern took shape in the learners' own production, focusing only on those two functions (representative excerpts are presented in Table 4).

Toward professors, learners consistently produced elaborated, conventionalized phatic openings that combined a formal greeting, a status-marking address term, self-identification, and a mitigated request, frequently in the register of a formal email. P32 opened, "Good morning, Professor. This is Tania. Due to an urgent matter, would it be possible..." and P8 wrote, "Hello, Mr Smith: I hope this email finds you well...." Anticipatory apologies and deference recurred ("I apologize for messaging you here," P49; "I'm so sorry for interrupting your day," P35), along with well-wishes ("I hope you are having a good day," P41). These examples closely align with the formal academic register typically emphasized in the EFL classroom instruction, which may account for the high appropriateness observed toward professor interaction (Zhang et al., 2026).

Toward peers, the same learners markedly modulated their register.. Peer openings favored informal greetings with expressive lengthening (e.g., "Helloooo... pleaseeeee," P17; "Ethaaannnn!", P7), emoji, terms of solidarity and endearment ("bro," P13; "babe," P7; "baby," P8), and non-standard spelling ("thx," "plz,"). In most cases, this shift was successful, showing that learners draw a clear status-based distinction.

The lower appropriateness of the peer condition arose not from an absence of modulation but from its inconsistency. Some learners failed to modulate their pragmatic register, carrying a flat or abrupt register into peer exchanges that deviated from expected target norms for informal interaction and without the relational framing that sustains peer rapport (e.g., "UPLOAD YOUR PART or you r out" P31; "Hurry up 🙄" P50). According to the coding criteria detailed in the methodology, these tokens were classified as pragmatically non-target-like due to a lack of mitigating markers. Thus, where the professor register is conventionalized and, according to the literature, commonly emphasized in instruction, the peer register appeared improvised and variable, consistent with the finding that the formal, high-status end of the range is produced more reliably.

Closings showed the same asymmetry. Toward professors, learners closed with gratitude and a conventional farewell ("Thank you very much for the clarification, Professor. ... See you in class on Monday," P20; "Thank you so much, teacher... have a nice day," P34). Toward peers, closings were briefer and more informal, often reduced to an abbreviation or an emoji ("Cu," P31; "Bye see yaaa 🙌," P49; "Later bro!," P19). While usually appropriate, some peer closings were so minimal that they omitted the relational closure a peer exchange invites.

Table 4

Representative Excerpts of Phatic Production by Function and Interlocutor Status

Function	Interlocutor	Representative excerpt	Features
Opening	Professor	"Good morning, Professor. My name is Ethan from your seminary class. I am writing to respectfully request..." (P1)	Formal greeting; address/title; self-identification; mitigation
Opening	Professor	"Hello, Mr Smith: I hope this email finds you well..." (P8)	Title; well-wishing; email register
Opening	Peer	"Hiii... Pleaseee" (P2); "Heyyyy kwennn!" (P8)	Informal greeting; expressive lengthening; slang
Opening	Peer	"Hi there, I need to ask you something" (P9)	Under-modulation; abrupt; minimal rapport
Closing	Professor	"Thank you very much, Professor. ... See you in class on Monday." (P1)	Gratitude; conventional farewell
Closing	Professor	"Thank you, Teacher. Have a wonderful weekend!" (P2)	Gratitude; well-wishing farewell
Closing	Peer	"See u later!" (P2); "Later then 🙋" (P5)	Abbreviation; emoji; minimal closing
Closing	Peer	"Bye bye baby" (P8)	Term of endearment; informal register

Note. Excerpts are reproduced verbatim and identified by participant code (P1–P50). Emoji appeared predominantly in the peer condition; traces of L1 Spanish transfer (e.g., "familiar troubles," P14; "see you on class," P3) surfaced across conditions.

Two patterns cut across both functions. First, emoji operated as a status-sensitive phatic token, clustering in the peer condition and appearing only occasionally toward professors (P7, P16), consistent with Aull (2019) and Toma (2025). Second, traces of L1 Spanish transfer surfaced in both conditions, for instance, "familiar troubles" (P14; cf. *problemas familiares*), "could you say me?" (P15; cf. *¿me podrías decir?*), "see you on class" (P3; cf. *te veo en clase*), "you're recognizing your errors" (P23; cf. *tú estás reconociendo tus errores*) and "thanks profe!" (P38), indicating that pragmalinguistic resources remained limited.

Taken together, the analysis suggests that learners' sociopragmatic sensitivity is found in the ritualized and explicit moves of opening and closing toward higher-status interlocutors, while their phatic production toward peers, though clearly differentiated, is less consistently appropriate, pointing to a register characterized by higher pragmatic variability and L1 influence.

Conclusions

This study set out to determine whether the pragmatic appropriateness of EFL learners' phatic production in academic WhatsApp interaction differs by interlocutor status, and what such a pattern implies for instruction. The results indicate that it does, but unevenly: appropriateness was significantly higher toward professors than toward peers in the opening and closing of interactions, while no significant difference emerged in maintenance. Learners' sociopragmatic sensitivity, in other words, is concentrated in the ritualized boundary moves that frame an exchange, while showing less differentiation by interlocutor in ongoing maintenance of contact.

The qualitative analysis clarified how this asymmetry arises. Toward professors, learners produced elaborated, conventionalized phatic moves (formal greetings, status-marking address terms, mitigation, gratitude, and conventional farewells) that closely mirror the academic register featured in instruction. Toward peers, they modulated their register markedly, drawing on informal greetings, emoji, and solidarity markers; yet this peer-directed production was less consistently appropriate, at times under-modulated and at times improvised. The picture that emerges is not one of learners who cannot modulate to their interlocutor, but of learners whose phatic production toward peers was less consistently appropriate than toward professors. Because the design is cross-sectional, this pattern describes performance at a single point in time and should not be read as evidence of developmental change

Main limitations of the study

Several limitations bound these conclusions. The data come from a non-probabilistic convenience sample of 50 students in a single teaching-degree program at one institution, so the findings are exploratory and not statistically generalizable beyond this context. Because production was elicited through a Discourse Completion Task, the responses represent what learners judge appropriate to write in simulated scenarios rather than their spontaneous behavior in authentic WhatsApp exchanges, which constrains ecological validity. The design is cross-sectional, so it captures a single moment and supports no developmental or causal claims; proficiency, which ranged widely across the sample, was treated as a descriptive characteristic rather than analyzed as a variable. Finally, the qualitative analysis was conducted by a single researcher working from an expert-validated codebook with a documented audit trail; while appropriate for an exploratory, interpretive study, the absence of an independent second coder means its findings should be read as interpretive rather than definitive. The same caution applies to the 0–3 scores used in the quantitative analysis: they were assigned by a single rater who could not be blind to interlocutor status, and no inter-rater reliability was estimated, so rater effects on the observed differences cannot be ruled out. The expert review of the instruments described above addressed content validity but not scoring reliability.

Main implications and impact of the research

The findings carry a clear pedagogical implication. If learners reliably produce the formal register expected toward authority but struggle to manage relational, peer-appropriate phatic production, then these findings suggest that EFL instruction could incorporate explicit attention to the relational dimension of interaction: how to open, sustain, and close exchanges appropriately across different interlocutors, including peers, and how digital resources such as emoji and informal markers operate as phatic tokens. Treating digitally mediated academic interaction, and WhatsApp in particular, as a legitimate site for pragmatic instruction would help close the gap between the register learners are taught and the range they need.

The study also contributes to research on second-language pragmatics. It extends work on phatic communion, until now concentrated on email, into asynchronous instant messaging, and it demonstrates the analytic value of distinguishing the opening, maintenance, and closing phases when examining appropriateness. By documenting status-sensitive phatic production in a Mexican higher-education EFL context, it adds evidence from a setting underrepresented in the literature. Future research could build on these results with naturalistic WhatsApp data, larger and more varied samples, developmental designs that track change over time, and independent second-coder validation and formal inter-rater reliability estimates for the 0–3 scores, along with closer attention to the maintenance phase that this study found least differentiated.

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