

“DEVELOPING PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE IN ESP LEARNERS: A CONTEXT-BASED INSTRUCTIONAL MODEL FOR NON-PHILOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS”

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Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of a context-based instructional model for developing pragmatic competence among non-philological university students in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) contexts. The research is based on a quasi-experimental design involving 483 students from three higher education institutions, divided into control and experimental groups. The study was conducted in three stages: diagnostic analysis, instructional intervention, and final evaluation. The proposed methodology integrates contextualization, scaffolding, communicative-cognitive strategies, and task-based learning, supported by digital tools and AI-based feedback systems. Data were collected through diagnostic tests, discourse completion tasks, role-play simulations, questionnaires, and classroom observations.

The results demonstrate significant improvements in the experimental group across pragmalinguistic, sociopragmatic, and strategic-communicative competencies, while the control group showed minimal progress. Statistical analysis using Student's t-test confirmed the significance of the observed differences. The findings suggest that pragmatic competence develops most effectively through contextualized, interactive, and reflective learning environments.

The study contributes to the field by proposing an integrative methodological framework that bridges the gap between linguistic knowledge and real-world communication. It also highlights the role of digital technologies in enhancing metapragmatic awareness and supporting learner autonomy.

Keywords: Pragmatic competence; English for Specific Purposes (ESP); context-based instruction; communicative competence; task-based learning; pragmalinguistic competence; sociopragmatic competence; AI in language learning; higher education; non-philological students

Introduction

In recent decades, the growing processes of globalization, digital transformation, and international academic and professional mobility have significantly increased the demand for effective foreign language communication skills. In this context, the ability to use a foreign language appropriately in real-life communicative situations has become a central objective of modern language education. Contemporary frameworks such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages emphasize not only grammatical accuracy but also the pragmatic appropriateness of language use, including sensitivity to context, interlocutor roles, and socio-cultural norms. As a result, the focus of foreign language teaching has gradually

shifted from form-oriented instruction toward communicative and context-based approaches that prioritize meaningful interaction.

Despite this shift, a persistent gap remains between learners' formal linguistic knowledge and their ability to apply this knowledge effectively in authentic communication. Numerous studies in the field of second language acquisition have demonstrated that learners often possess sufficient grammatical competence but experience difficulties in selecting contextually appropriate expressions, managing interpersonal relations, and interpreting communicative intentions (e.g., Gabriele Kasper & Kenneth Rose, 2002; Naoko Taguchi, 2011). This discrepancy highlights the crucial role of pragmatic competence as an essential component of communicative competence.

Pragmatic competence refers to the ability to use language appropriately in social contexts by considering factors such as the speaker's intention, the relationship between interlocutors, and the cultural norms governing communication. According to Geoffrey Leech (1983), effective communication requires not only what is said but also how it is said, to whom, and under what circumstances. Similarly, Dell Hymes (1972) conceptualized communicative competence as including sociolinguistic and pragmatic dimensions that go beyond grammatical knowledge. These perspectives underline that successful communication depends on the integration of linguistic, sociocultural, and strategic components.

The development of pragmatic competence is particularly challenging in non-philological higher education contexts, where foreign language learning is not the primary focus but rather a supportive tool for professional development. Students in fields such as economics, business, engineering, and technology often have limited exposure to authentic communicative environments and insufficient opportunities to practice contextually appropriate language use. Consequently, their ability to engage in professional communication—such as negotiations, business correspondence, presentations, and intercultural interactions—remains underdeveloped.

In response to these challenges, contemporary research emphasizes the importance of context-based, task-oriented, and interactive teaching approaches in fostering pragmatic competence. Approaches such as task-based language teaching (TBLT), role-play simulations, discourse completion tasks (DCTs), and reflective practices have been shown to enhance learners' awareness of pragmatic norms and improve their communicative performance. Moreover, the integration of digital technologies and artificial intelligence tools into language education has opened new possibilities for creating authentic, adaptive, and interactive learning environments. These tools provide learners with real-time feedback, opportunities for repeated practice, and exposure to diverse communicative scenarios, thereby supporting the development of metapragmatic awareness.

However, despite the growing body of research, there remains a lack of comprehensive methodological models specifically designed to develop pragmatic competence among non-philological university students in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) contexts. Existing studies often focus on isolated aspects of pragmatics or limited instructional interventions, without offering a systematic, integrative framework that combines theoretical foundations, pedagogical strategies, and assessment mechanisms.

Therefore, the present study aims to address this gap by developing and empirically validating a context-based instructional model for enhancing pragmatic competence in ESP learners. The study focuses on non-philological university students and proposes a multi-stage methodological system that integrates contextualization, scaffolding, communicative-cognitive strategies, and reflective learning. The effectiveness of the proposed model is examined through a quasi-experimental design involving control and experimental groups, with particular attention to the development of pragmalinguistic, sociopragmatic, and strategic-communicative competencies.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to both theory and practice. Theoretically, it reconceptualizes pragmatic competence as an integrative, dynamic system shaped by cognitive, social, and technological factors. Practically, it offers a structured and adaptable teaching model that can be implemented in higher education institutions to improve students' communicative readiness for professional and intercultural contexts. By bridging the gap between linguistic knowledge and real-world communication, this research responds to the evolving demands of global education and workforce development.

Literature Review

The concept of pragmatic competence has become a central focus in the field of applied linguistics, particularly within the broader framework of communicative competence. The foundations of this concept can be traced back to Dell Hymes (1972), who challenged the purely grammatical view of language proposed by Noam Chomsky and introduced the notion of communicative competence. Hymes emphasized that effective language use requires not only knowledge of linguistic forms but also the ability to use these forms appropriately in different social contexts. This perspective laid the groundwork for later models that incorporated pragmatic and sociolinguistic dimensions into language competence.

Building on Hymes' work, Michael Canale and Merrill Swain (1980) proposed a model of communicative competence that included grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic components. Within this framework, pragmatic competence is closely associated with sociolinguistic and discourse competence, as it involves the ability to interpret and produce language that is appropriate to the communicative context. Later, Geoffrey Leech (1983) further elaborated on this concept by introducing the principles of politeness and the importance of context in shaping meaning. According to Leech, effective communication depends on the speaker's ability to balance clarity with politeness, often through indirectness, hedging, and other pragmatic strategies.

The development of pragmatic competence in second language acquisition (SLA) has been extensively explored by researchers such as Gabriele Kasper and Kenneth Rose (2002), who defined it as the ability to understand and perform communicative acts appropriately in a target language. Their work highlighted the distinction between pragmalinguistic knowledge (linguistic resources used to convey communicative acts) and sociopragmatic knowledge (social norms and contextual factors influencing language use). This distinction has become fundamental in understanding how learners acquire and use pragmatic skills.

Further research by Naoko Taguchi (2011) emphasized the role of instruction in developing pragmatic competence. Taguchi demonstrated that explicit teaching of pragmatic features, combined with opportunities for practice and feedback, significantly improves learners' performance in real-life communication. Similarly, Kathleen Bardovi-Harlig (2001) argued that pragmatic competence does not develop automatically alongside grammatical competence and requires targeted pedagogical intervention. These findings underscore the importance of integrating pragmatics into language teaching curricula rather than treating it as an implicit by-product of language learning.

In addition to cognitive and linguistic factors, sociocultural theory has also contributed to understanding pragmatic development. Lev Vygotsky (1978) proposed that learning is a socially mediated process, where interaction with more knowledgeable others plays a crucial role in cognitive development. This perspective has been applied to language learning through the concept of scaffolding, where teachers and peers provide support that enables learners to perform beyond their current level of competence. In the context of pragmatics, scaffolding helps learners gradually acquire the ability to manage complex communicative situations and adapt their language use to different contexts.

Recent studies have also highlighted the effectiveness of task-based language teaching (TBLT) and communicative approaches in fostering pragmatic competence. Task-based instruction, which focuses on meaningful language use through real-world tasks, provides learners with opportunities to practice pragmatic strategies in context. Activities such as role-plays, simulations, and discourse completion tasks (DCTs) have been widely used to develop learners' awareness of speech acts, politeness strategies, and discourse conventions. These methods encourage active participation and promote the integration of linguistic and pragmatic knowledge.

The integration of digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) into language education has further expanded the possibilities for pragmatic development. AI-powered tools, such as chatbots and automated feedback systems, allow learners to engage in interactive communication and receive immediate feedback on their performance. These technologies support the development of metapragmatic awareness by enabling learners to reflect on their language use and identify areas for improvement. Moreover, online platforms and multimedia resources provide access to authentic language input, exposing learners to diverse communicative contexts and cultural norms.

Despite these advancements, the development of pragmatic competence remains a challenge, particularly in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) contexts. ESP learners are required to use language in specialized professional domains, where communication is shaped by specific conventions, genres, and expectations. However, many ESP programs still prioritize technical vocabulary and grammatical accuracy over pragmatic appropriateness. This imbalance can lead to situations where learners are able to produce grammatically correct sentences but fail to communicate effectively in professional settings.

Furthermore, research indicates that non-philological students often lack sufficient exposure to authentic communicative environments, which limits their opportunities to develop pragmatic skills. In many educational contexts, classroom interaction is dominated by teacher-centered

instruction, leaving little room for meaningful communication and pragmatic practice. As a result, learners may struggle to interpret implicit meanings, manage interpersonal relationships, and adapt their language to different contexts.

Given these challenges, there is a clear need for a comprehensive methodological framework that integrates theoretical insights, pedagogical strategies, and assessment tools to support the development of pragmatic competence in ESP learners. Such a framework should emphasize contextualization, interaction, reflection, and the use of innovative technologies to create authentic and engaging learning environments.

The present study seeks to contribute to this area by proposing an integrative, context-based instructional model for developing pragmatic competence among non-philological university students. By combining elements of communicative, cognitive, and sociocultural approaches, the study aims to provide a systematic solution to the problem of pragmatic development in higher education. In doing so, it responds to the growing demand for professionals who can communicate effectively in global and intercultural contexts.

Methodology

The present study employed a quasi-experimental research design to investigate the effectiveness of a context-based instructional model for developing pragmatic competence among English for Specific Purposes (ESP) learners. The design included both control and experimental groups and was structured across three main stages: diagnostic analysis, instructional intervention, and final evaluation. This approach enabled the researcher to examine not only the initial level of learners' pragmatic competence but also the developmental changes resulting from the implementation of the proposed methodology.

The quasi-experimental design was selected due to its suitability for educational settings, where random assignment of participants is often not feasible. By comparing pre-test and post-test results across groups, the study ensured a reliable assessment of the instructional impact.

Participants and Context

The study was conducted between 2023 and 2025 in three higher education institutions: Urganch State University, the International School of Finance, Technology and Service, and Samarkand Institute of Economics and Service. A total of 483 undergraduate students participated in the research. The participants were enrolled in non-philological programs, primarily in economics-related fields, where English is taught as a supplementary subject within ESP courses.

The sample was divided into control and experimental groups. Both groups were comparable in terms of their initial language proficiency levels, which ranged from B1 to B2 according to CEFR standards. Statistical analysis of the pre-test results confirmed the absence of significant differences between the groups at the initial stage, ensuring the validity of subsequent comparisons.

Instruments and Data Collection

To assess learners' pragmatic competence, a combination of quantitative and qualitative instruments was employed:

Diagnostic tests, designed to measure pragmalinguistic, sociopragmatic, and strategic-communicative competencies

Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs), used to evaluate learners' ability to produce contextually appropriate responses

Role-play simulations, aimed at observing real-time communicative performance

Questionnaires, administered to gather learners' self-assessment and perceptions

Classroom observations and expert evaluations, used to monitor the instructional process and learners' progress

The use of multiple instruments ensured triangulation of data, thereby increasing the reliability and validity of the findings.

Procedure

Stage 1: Diagnostic Analysis

At the initial stage, a comprehensive analysis of the existing teaching practices, учеб materials, and methodological approaches was conducted. Pre-tests were administered to determine the baseline level of students' pragmatic competence. The results indicated that while students possessed basic grammatical knowledge, they demonstrated limited ability to use language appropriately in real communicative situations, particularly in terms of adapting speech to context, interpreting communicative intentions, and considering sociocultural norms.

Stage 2: Instructional Intervention

During the intervention phase, the proposed context-based instructional model was implemented in the experimental groups. The model integrated several key pedagogical approaches:

Contextualization, linking language use to real-life and professional situations

Scaffolding, gradually guiding learners from simple to complex communicative tasks

Communicative-cognitive strategies, promoting active meaning-making and reflection

Task-based learning, involving authentic tasks such as role-plays, simulations, and case studies

Instructional activities included discourse-based reading, business writing tasks, interactive discussions, and role-play scenarios focused on professional communication. Particular emphasis was placed on pragmatic strategies such as politeness, hedging, indirectness, and diplomatic expression.

In addition, digital tools and AI-based feedback systems were incorporated to provide learners with immediate and personalized feedback. These tools enabled students to analyze their own language use and improve their pragmatic performance through continuous reflection.

The control groups, in contrast, followed traditional teaching methods, which primarily focused on grammar and vocabulary without explicit attention to pragmatic aspects of communication.

Stage 3: Final Evaluation

At the final stage, post-tests were administered to both control and experimental groups. The collected data were analyzed using statistical methods to determine the effectiveness of the

intervention. Particular attention was given to changes in pragmalinguistic, sociopragmatic, and strategic-communicative competencies.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Mean scores, percentages, and growth rates were calculated to compare pre-test and post-test results. To determine the statistical significance of differences between groups, Student's t-test was applied.

The results confirmed that there was no significant difference between the control and experimental groups at the initial stage (H0 hypothesis accepted). However, at the final stage, statistically significant differences were observed in favor of the experimental group (H1 hypothesis accepted), indicating the effectiveness of the implemented methodology.

Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their voluntary participation was ensured. Data confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process.

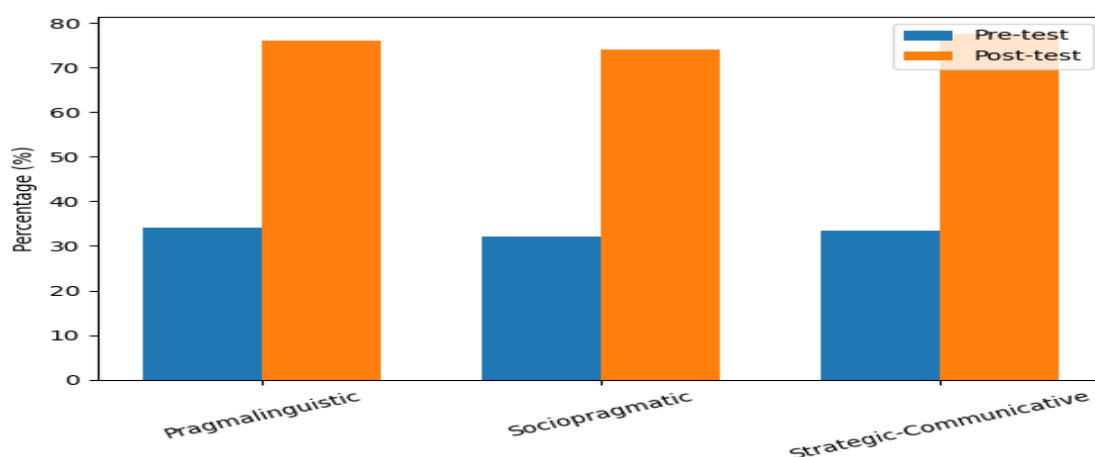
Results And Discussion

The analysis of the experimental data revealed significant improvements in learners' pragmatic competence following the implementation of the context-based instructional model. The results were evaluated across three main components: pragmalinguistic, sociopragmatic, and strategic-communicative competencies.

At the initial stage (pre-test), both control and experimental groups demonstrated relatively low and comparable levels of pragmatic competence. However, after the instructional intervention, the post-test results indicated a substantial improvement in the experimental group across all measured components.

To provide a clearer visual representation of these changes, the comparative results are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Improvement in learners' pragmatic competence (pre-test vs post-test results)



As illustrated in Figure 1, all components show a substantial increase after the intervention. Pragmalinguistic competence improved from 34% to 76%, sociopragmatic competence from

32% to 74%, and strategic-communicative competence from 33.5% to 77.5%. These results indicate that the proposed instructional model had a significant positive impact on learners' ability to use language appropriately in real communicative situations. In addition to overall improvement, a notable increase was observed in the proportion of students achieving high-level performance. This trend is presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Increase in the proportion of students at high proficiency level

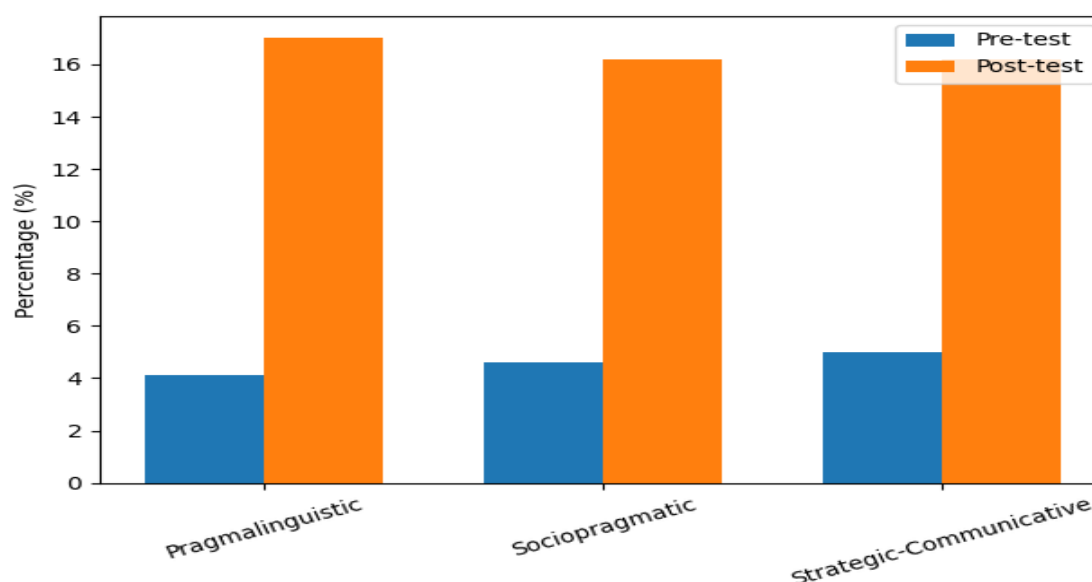


Figure 2 demonstrates that the percentage of students at the high proficiency level increased significantly across all components. Pragmalinguistic competence rose from 4.1% to 17.0%, sociopragmatic competence from 4.6% to 16.2%, and strategic-communicative competence from 5.0% to 16.2%. This shift reflects not only quantitative growth but also qualitative advancement in learners' communicative abilities.

However, after the instructional intervention, the post-test results indicated a substantial improvement in the experimental group across all measured components. Specifically, the proportion of students demonstrating high-level performance increased significantly:

Pragmalinguistic competence improved from approximately 30–38% to 70–82%

Sociopragmatic competence increased from 30–34% to 69–80%

Strategic-communicative competence rose from 31–36% to 73–82%

In contrast, the control group showed only minimal improvement, with increases ranging between 3–6%, which can be attributed to general language exposure rather than targeted pragmatic instruction.

Furthermore, analysis of performance levels revealed that the percentage of students at the high proficiency level increased notably in the experimental group. For example, high-level pragmalinguistic performance rose from 4.1% to 17.0%, sociopragmatic performance from 4.6% to 16.2%, and strategic-communicative performance from 5.0% to 16.2%. At the same time, the proportion of students at lower proficiency levels decreased, indicating a shift toward more advanced communicative competence.

The effectiveness of the instructional model was also confirmed by the calculated efficiency coefficient, which ranged between 1.14 and 1.15, demonstrating a positive and meaningful impact of the intervention.

Statistical Analysis

To determine the statistical significance of the observed differences, Student's t-test was applied. The results indicated that:

At the pre-test stage, the calculated t-value did not exceed the critical value, confirming the absence of statistically significant differences between groups (H0 accepted).

At the post-test stage, the calculated t-value exceeded the critical threshold, indicating statistically significant differences in favor of the experimental group (H1 accepted).

These findings confirm that the observed improvements were not due to random variation but were the direct result of the implemented instructional methodology.

Qualitative Observations

In addition to quantitative data, qualitative observations provided further insight into learners' development. During role-play activities, discussions, and task-based interactions, students in the experimental group demonstrated noticeable improvements in:

- Selecting appropriate speech acts in context
- Using politeness strategies such as hedging and indirectness
- Managing turn-taking and maintaining interaction
- Adapting language according to social roles and professional settings

Students also exhibited increased confidence and autonomy in communication, particularly in simulated professional scenarios such as business negotiations and formal correspondence.

Discussion

The results of the study clearly indicate that pragmatic competence develops most effectively when instruction is explicitly focused on contextualized and interactive language use. The significant gains observed in the experimental group can be attributed to several key factors embedded in the proposed methodology.

First, the use of contextualization allowed learners to connect linguistic forms with real communicative situations, thereby enhancing their ability to select appropriate expressions. This finding aligns with previous research emphasizing the importance of situational relevance in language learning.

Second, the incorporation of scaffolding techniques facilitated gradual progression from simple to complex communicative tasks. By providing structured support, learners were able to internalize pragmatic norms and apply them independently.

Third, task-based and interactive methods, including role-plays and simulations, created opportunities for meaningful communication, enabling learners to practice pragmatic strategies in a safe and supportive environment. These activities promoted not only language use but also strategic thinking and adaptability.

Moreover, the integration of digital tools and AI-based feedback systems contributed to the development of metapragmatic awareness. Immediate feedback allowed learners to identify and correct their errors, leading to more conscious and reflective language use.

Importantly, the findings also demonstrate that pragmatic competence is not a set of isolated skills but an integrated system involving linguistic, social, and strategic dimensions. The simultaneous improvement across pragmalinguistic, sociopragmatic, and strategic-communicative components supports this view and highlights the necessity of holistic instructional approaches.

Summary of Findings

Overall, the results confirm that the proposed instructional model significantly enhances learners' pragmatic competence in ESP contexts. The combination of contextualized input, interactive practice, and reflective learning creates a powerful framework for bridging the gap between linguistic knowledge and real-world communication.

Conclusion

The present study set out to investigate the effectiveness of a context-based instructional model for developing pragmatic competence among non-philological university students in ESP contexts. The findings clearly demonstrate that pragmatic competence is not an automatically acquired skill but rather a complex, multidimensional construct that requires systematic and explicit pedagogical intervention.

The results of the study confirm that the proposed methodology significantly enhances learners' ability to use language appropriately in real communicative situations. By integrating contextualization, scaffolding, communicative-cognitive strategies, and task-based instruction, the model provides a structured pathway for the gradual development of pragmalinguistic, sociopragmatic, and strategic-communicative competencies.

One of the key contributions of this study lies in reconceptualizing pragmatic competence as an integrative system shaped by linguistic, social, cognitive, and technological factors. The simultaneous improvement observed across all components of pragmatic competence highlights the importance of adopting a holistic approach to language teaching, particularly in non-philological educational settings where opportunities for authentic communication are limited.

Furthermore, the incorporation of digital tools and AI-based feedback mechanisms proved to be an effective means of enhancing learners' metapragmatic awareness. These tools enabled students to engage in reflective learning, identify communicative mismatches, and adjust their language use accordingly. As a result, learners demonstrated increased confidence, autonomy, and adaptability in professional communication contexts.

The study also provides important pedagogical implications. It suggests that foreign language instruction in higher education should move beyond traditional grammar-focused approaches and prioritize communicative relevance, contextual appropriateness, and intercultural sensitivity. The use of authentic materials, interactive tasks, and reflective practices should be considered essential components of effective language teaching.

Despite its contributions, the study has certain limitations. The research was conducted within a specific educational context and focused on a limited sample of ESP learners. Future research could explore the applicability of the proposed model across different disciplines, proficiency levels, and cultural settings. In addition, further studies could examine the long-term impact of pragmatic instruction and the role of emerging technologies in supporting sustainable language development.

In conclusion, the study confirms that a context-based, integrative approach to language teaching can effectively bridge the gap between linguistic knowledge and real-world communication. By equipping learners with the skills necessary to navigate complex communicative situations, the proposed model contributes to the development of globally competent and professionally prepared graduates.

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