



Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure in the English Language: Misunderstanding and Mitigation Strategies

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Abstract

The research conducted deep probing into cross-cultural pragmatics and speech act analysis yet failed to establish complete pragmatic failure patterns which emerge across diverse cultural contexts in English as a lingua franca (ELF) communication. Linguists study speech acts through two approaches which include their examination as separate entities and their study with particular cultural groups while overlooking the connection between shared miscommunication behavior and educational needs. The research examines the existing gap by presenting a systematic narrative review which evaluates empirical studies from 2000 to 2025 about pragmatic failure in English communication between different cultures.

The study analyzes request and refusal and disagreement and compliment and turn-taking interaction patterns observed in East Asian and Arab and European and Latin American cultural contexts to identify common breakdown sources which include L1 sociopragmatic transfer and culturally embedded politeness norms and indirectness levels and face-management strategies and contextual misalignment. The research introduces a three-level framework which outlines three types of pragmatic failure marking (1) which involves pragma-linguistic misselection and (2) which entails divergence from socio-pragmatic norms and (3) which describes interactional mis-coordination in ELF environments.

The analysis assesses mitigation techniques documented in research through cross-regional evidence which includes assessment of explicit speech-act instruction and metapragmatic awareness training and role-play simulation and reflective digital communication tasks among other methods. The findings demonstrate that to achieve pragmatic competence students must develop intercultural tolerance skills which should be taught through structured learning methods instead of assessing their ability to use native speaker language.

The study developed an analytical framework for understanding pragmatic failure through ELF studies and cross-cultural pragmatics research while providing educational recommendations for language teaching and communication skill development and intercultural competence training in global English-speaking environments.

Keywords:

Pragmatic failure; Cross-cultural pragmatics; EFL; Intercultural communication; metapragmatic awareness; sociopragmatics.

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الفشل التداولي عبر الثقافات في اللغة الإنجليزية: سوء الفهم واستراتيجيات التخفيف

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المستخلص

أجرى البحث دراسة معمقة في البراغماتية عبر الثقافات وتحليل أفعال الكلام، إلا أنه لم ينجح في تحديد أنماط الفشل البراغماتية الكاملة التي تظهر في سياقات ثقافية متنوعة عند استخدام اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة مشتركة. يدرس اللغويون أفعال الكلام من خلال منهجين: الأول هو دراستها ككيانات منفصلة، والثاني هو دراستها ضمن مجموعات ثقافية محددة، مع إغفال العلاقة بين سلوكيات سوء الفهم المشتركة والاحتياجات التعليمية. يتناول هذا البحث هذه الفجوة القائمة من خلال تقديم مراجعة سردية منهجية تقيم الدراسات التجريبية المنشورة بين عامي ٢٠٠٠ و٢٠٢٥ حول الفشل البراغماتية في التواصل باللغة الإنجليزية بين ثقافات مختلفة.

تحل الدراسة أنماط التفاعل المتعلقة بالطلب والرفض والاختلاف والمجاملة وتبادل الأدوار، والتي لوحظت في سياقات ثقافية شرق آسيوية وعربية وأوروبية وأمريكية لاتينية، لتحديد مصادر الفشل المشتركة، والتي تشمل النقل الاجتماعي البراغماتي في اللغة الأم، ومعايير الأدب المتأصلة ثقافياً، ومستويات التلميح، واستراتيجيات إدارة الوجه، وعدم التوافق السياقي. يقدم هذا البحث إطاراً ثلاثي المستويات يُحدد ثلاثة أنواع من علامات الفشل التداولي: (١) سوء اختيار اللغة التداولية، (٢) الخروج عن المعايير الاجتماعية التداولية، و(٣) سوء التنسيق التفاعلي في بيئات اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة تواصل دولي.

يُقيم التحليل أساليب التخفيف الموثقة في الأبحاث من خلال أدلة من مختلف المناطق، بما في ذلك تقييم التدريس الصريح لأفعال الكلام، والتدريب على الوعي ما وراء التداولي، ومحاكاة لعب الأدوار، ومهام التواصل الرقمي التأملية، وغيرها من الأساليب. تُظهر النتائج أنه لتحقيق الكفاءة التداولية، يجب على الطلاب تطوير مهارات التسامح بين الثقافات، والتي ينبغي تدريسها من خلال أساليب تعليمية منظمة بدلاً من تقييم قدرتهم على استخدام لغة المتحدث الأصلي.

طورت الدراسة إطاراً تحليلياً لفهم الفشل التداولي من خلال دراسات اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة تواصل دولي وأبحاث التداولية عبر الثقافات، مع تقديم توصيات تعليمية لتدريس اللغة وتنمية مهارات التواصل والتدريب على الكفاءة بين الثقافات في بيئات اللغة الإنجليزية العالمية.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

الفشل التداولي؛ التداولية عبر الثقافات؛ اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية؛ الوعي ما وراء التداولي؛ التداولية الاجتماعية.

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1. Introduction

In modern English, it is evident that pragmatic competence is a major constituent, specifically if the context is related to more than one language or culture. Communication requires more than grammatical and lexical competence; it requires the understanding of how meanings are negotiated and interpreted in social and cultural contexts. Cross-cultural pragmatic failures occur when language-users misinterpret or mismanage these social nuances not for lack of proficiency in the language in the sense of saying or meaning but because of the existence of different cultures with their own norms and expectations concerning certain speech acts. These issues have been raised by numerous scholars, including Thomas (1983), Blumikula. et al. (1989), and House (2000), all of whom consistently emphasize the importance of sociopragmatic competence in avoiding the breakdown of communication across culture boundaries.

The phenomenon of pragmatics failures is becoming even more relevant in a world that is being globalized with widespread use of English as a lingua franca. The way English is exchanged has become the predominant mode of communication for multinational corporations, international academia, online platforms, and international collaboration settings. In such situations, speakers from diverse linguistic backgrounds are often subjected to different politeness norms, indirectness, and cultural expectations, and by this time, miscommunication has become all the more likely. Relational tension, professional inefficiency, and unintentional offense may happen to arise from misunderstandings, thus clearly illustrating the applied relevance of cross-cultural pragmatics.

According to research, the situations of request, refusal, disagreements, compliments, and turn-taking can be the source of pragmatic failures. A direct request may be considered rude by a direct culture while indirect refusals may be perceived as evasive and noncommittal by cultures where this behavior is very direct in communication. There are also cultural differences related to responding to compliments and managing turn-taking that could lead to a communicative misfire in dealing with such culturally embedded expectations that would likely go unrecognized.

However, it is acknowledged in the literature that the role of L1 interference and culturally conditioned speech act norms can contribute to pragmatic failure. People frequently transfer behaviours related to the way speakers use politeness strategies or display interactional norms from one language to their English that may not be consistent with sociocultural conventions in the target language. For instance, among Arabic speakers, requests are verb phrases with politeness markers added; indirect honorification forms are preferred among Japanese speakers; and Chinese speakers



often rely on hedging to soften imposition. Such differences can put comprehension in peril, causing unintended misunderstanding in multicultural situations.

Personal meetings and written correspondence, emails, letters, etc., are the two communication situations where it would be susceptible to pragmatic failure. Differences in greeting, closing, hedges, and explicitness will affect the professionalism, politeness perceived in communication, and effectiveness. That understanding matters for the English language learner, professional, and educator to achieve intercultural competence with communicative success.

Results came from prior studies are summarized, combining noteworthy points regarding pragmatic failure manifestations as well as what causes them, and every strategy utilized for having them mitigated. Besides, cultures are transcended for submitting a significant view for every scholar, practitioner and tutor who is curious about developing the cross-cultural communication. Including the utilization of every exercise concerning role-play, every observational mechanism, and DCTs for identifying all cultural patterns and for offering practical recommendations to decrease miscommunication throughout interacting in English all over the world.

2. Objectives

The review investigates cross-cultural pragmatic failure in English communication through existing research findings from both pragmatics and intercultural communication studies. The review investigates how cultural differences affect language usage between different linguistic and cultural groups because these differences create potential for misunderstandings. The research study identifies common patterns of documented pragmatic failure in literature while showing existing solutions that reduce communication difficulties.

To this end, the following research questions guide this review:

1. What are the major cross-cultural differences in pragmatics recognized previously in studies about English communication?
2. What cultural norms and sociolinguistic differences create barriers which prevent speakers from different language backgrounds from understanding each other?
3. What interpersonal breakdowns in the global world of intercultural communication has the author outlined?
4. Which strategies were being proposed to decrease pragmatic breakdown and to enhance intercultural communicative competence on previous research studies?
5. How do observations in former studies contribute to the effectiveness of pragmatics in English language teaching?



3. Literature Review of Previous Studies

3.1 Methodology

The researchers used a narrative literature review approach to study cross-cultural pragmatic failure which occurs during English communication (Snyder, 2019). The study team selected a review-based approach to achieve their research goal of synthesizing and analyzing existing research findings which had been published before. Applied linguistics uses narrative literature reviews to discover existing study patterns and theoretical perspectives and main research debates according to Creswell and Creswell 2018.

The research study uses its chosen method to study how researchers in pragmatics and intercultural communication and second language acquisition have studied the phenomenon of pragmatic failure. The review identifies common themes that describe miscommunication and the differences between cultures which affect speech act performance and the use of politeness strategies and mitigation techniques in English communication. The review combines findings from various studies to create a complete picture of how people from different cultures experience pragmatic misunderstandings and the methods which can help reduce these misunderstandings during intercultural interactions.

3.2 Data Collection

The study uses secondary data from peer-reviewed journal articles and academic books (Booth Sutton & Papaioannou 2016) and conference papers that discuss cross-cultural pragmatics and pragmatic failure. The research team found these sources by searching Google Scholar and linguistic journals and through their investigation of common pragmatics sources.

Many criteria guided to select the literature. The studies required researchers to investigate English communication for practical purposes in cross-cultural environments. The sources had to discuss speech acts and politeness strategies and pragmatic transfer and intercultural miscommunication as their main subjects. Researchers preferred to use highly cited works which had a major impact on pragmatic research because they wanted to study fundamental theoretical developments from the field. Researchers preferred to use highly cited works which had a major impact on pragmatic research because they wanted to study fundamental theoretical developments from the field. The researchers wanted to study interlanguage pragmatics through the research works of Thomas (1983) and Brown and Levinson (1987) and other scholars in the field.

The research team conducted a total study of relevant studies to discover their common results and theoretical findings which explain how people from different cultures experience pragmatic failure and communication breakdowns during their interactions.



3.3 Analytical Model

The examined literature required theoretical frameworks from pragmatics and intercultural communication to direct its analysis. The research specifically uses the distinction between pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure which Thomas established in 1983. Pragmalinguistic failure occurs when speakers use linguistic forms incorrectly to express their intended meaning while sociopragmatic failure results from speakers failing to recognize the social and cultural language use norms which exist in their environment.

The research examines how Brown and Levinson's 1987 politeness theory explains speakers' use of language to protect social harmony while facing potential face-threatening situations. The theoretical frameworks established in this study function as effective tools for researchers to analyze miscommunication patterns in their reviewed studies while discovering how cultural differences affect pragmatic communication (Crotty, 1998)

3.4 Data Analysis

The data analysis process used thematic synthesis to analyze selected literature according to Braun and Clarke 2006. The researchers conducted two reading sessions to extract essential information about English communication pragmatic failure. The researchers organized the essential information into main categories which included types of pragmatic failure and causes of miscommunication and cultural influences on speech acts and strategies for misunderstanding resolution.

The researchers first organized the data, which they used to analyze the common elements and distinct features of the different studies across various cultural contexts. The researchers combined multiple sources of evidence which they used to create a unified understanding of the studied phenomenon. The analytical process enabled the research study to identify the critical discoveries from earlier studies while showing how these findings could be used in language education and intercultural communication.



4. Key Results from Prior Researches

4.1 Requests

As individuals who do not speak English request, they often utilize the conventions of the 1st language which occasionally occur in ambiguity perceptions, Blum-Kulka et al. (1989). Politeness marker imperatives can usually be utilized with every speaker of Arabic origins, by who, English imperative is not utilized, as the Japanese ones have big indirection with keeping this goal since harmony is important to them. Chinese speakers use hedges and mitigators ("I was wondering if...") instead of direct requests in order to minimize imposition. By the example, Thomas (1983) lays emphasis on misunderstanding with regard to how native speakers expect direct or conventionally polite forms as against indirect forms conditioned by their cultures.

4.2 Refusals

Refusal strategies exhibit wide variance across cultures. In this respect, Thomas (1983) found German speakers often to refuse directly, which may be considered very harsh by those from cultures high on indirectness, like those in East Asia. The Chinese and Japanese would use layered refusals, excuses or even non-verbal cues leading Western interlocutors to see them as evasive or ambiguous. In point, Blum-Kulka and House (2000) observe that pragmatic failure arises when interlocutors do not interpret these strategies as nuanced by culture.

4.3 Disagreement

Disagreement is particularly sensitive to pragmatic failure. Direct disagreement in Germanic and other European contexts tends to be perceived as confrontational by speakers from indirect cultures; in contrast, indirect disagreement, often found in East Asian cultures, finds ways of causing an apparent agreement and subtle correction, which tends to be interpreted as passive or non-committal by Western speakers (Gumperz, 1982; House, 2000). Thus, cross-cultural awareness on these norms becomes the most important at academic and professional workplaces.

4.4 Compliments and Responses

In fact, responses to compliments vary from culture to culture. According to Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), it has been observed that East Asian speakers downplay or deflect compliments, whereas speakers from the West are inclined to accept them directly. This can lead to misunderstanding in terms of insincerity, or over-modesty. Pragmatics, pragmatically, should put its students along these lines: directing them to the cultural norms behind the responding strategies in order to lessen incidences of misunderstandings.



4.5 Turn-Taking and Conversational Management

Even minor differences in what turns, overlapping speech, interruptions, etc. mean in various cultures may end up triggering major goof-ups on the pragmatic front. Gumperz (1982) gave specific examples of silence durations, overlapping speech, and backchanneling cues that were interpreted differently in different cultures. Professional misreading may be extensive beyond the setting of a meeting and can very much influence decision-making.

4.6 Email and Written Communication

According to House (2000) and Spencer-Oatey (2008), written communication (email, report, memo) is vulnerable in pragmatic misalignment. Elimination of greetings, hedges or closings may sound abrupt for recipients from high-context cultures (Japan, China), but, on the contrary, too many politeness markers may come across to a native English reader as verbose or formulaic. Therefore, very clear guidelines and modeling of appropriate conventions is critical in an organization.

4.7 Cross-Cultural Comparisons

Studying (Arab, Chinese, Japanese, German, Spanish) cultures shows more than systematic characteristic, for instance:

- Direct versus Indirect: Group harmony-oriented cultures prefer indirectness; directness is its hallmark in low-context cultures.
- Save Face: Mitigation strategies like hedges, downtoners, and excuses are ways to save face in collectivist contexts (Brown and Levinson, 1987).
- Contextualization Cues: Intonation, gestures, and pragmatic markers which differ across cultures will change interpretation.



4.8 Discussion

It is demonstrated that pragmatic competing can be mediated in the cultural aspect. Besides, miscommunicating among cultures usually come from misaligned expectations as well as pragmatic transferring. The key insights are:

- L1 influence significantly affects speech act realization in English.
- Politeness norms differ; Western directness can clash with Eastern indirectness.
- Written communication requires awareness of genre-specific norms.
- ELF interactions demand **mutual accommodation** rather than adherence to native norms (Seidlhofer, 2004).
- Theoretical perspectives serve the purpose of analyzing:
 - Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), concentrating on strategies face-saving strategies.
 - Pragmatic Failure Framework (Thomas, 1983), identifying pragma linguistic from the failure that is sociopragmatic.
 - Semantic Approach (Wierzbicka, 2003): In speaking, it refers to conceptual mismatches.

Since big researches debate about this, the most superior language programs combine role-playing, factual substances, activities of reflecting, and direct instructing, for developing learners' awareness in the cultural aspect.

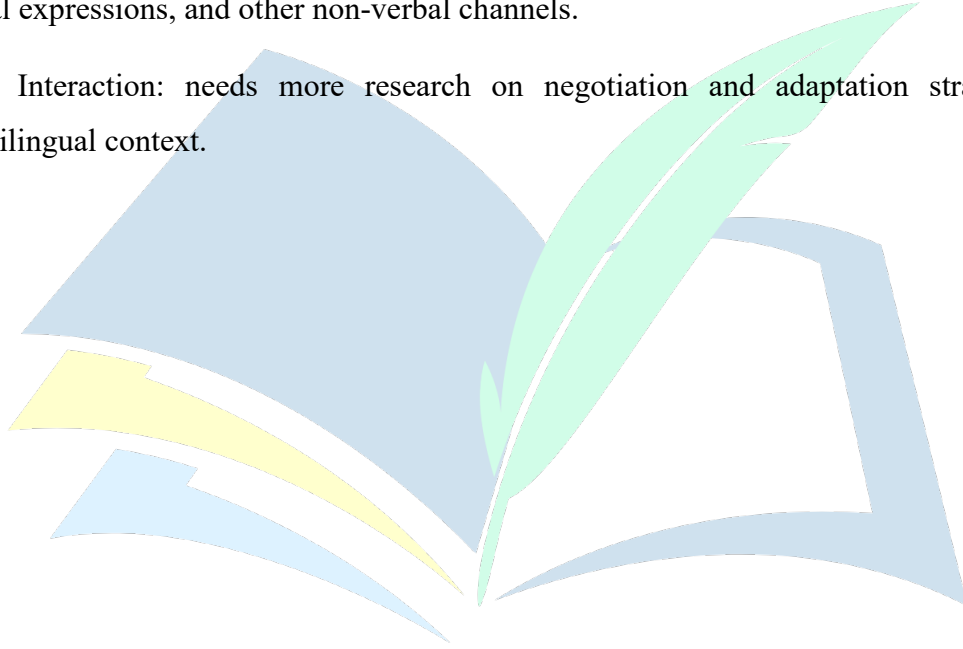
4.9 Practical Resources

- From previous studies, practical interventions include the following:
 - Role-Play Exercises: specific scenarios of requests, refusals, disagreements, are utilized for invoking factual problems' simulating.
 - Contrastive Analysis: contrast and compare the native as well as target culture form strategies for being indirect and polite.
 - Email Templates: involve making suitable phrases concerning cultural, saluting, closing aspects.
 - Journals on Reflection: make students' work easier in analyzing every pragmatic choice they have got.
 - Workshops: concentrate on every miscommunication throughout cultures in negotiating, presentations, and meetings.
 - Integration in Assessment: pragmatic ability is evaluated via speaking tasks, portfolios, and tests.



4.10 Limitations and Future Work

- Cultural Factors Not Accounted For: there are studies done basically on European and East Asian students as Middle Eastern, Latin American, and African contexts are not approached.
- Almost Exclusively Methodological Limitations: depending on a DCT can be a tendency for more longitudinal as well as naturalistic researches.
- Technology-Mediated Communication: every pragmatic failure in the communicating which is AI-mediated is not explored sufficiently.
- Multimodal Pragmatics: more studies should be devoted to the study of gestures, intonation, facial expressions, and other non-verbal channels.
- ELF Interaction: needs more research on negotiation and adaptation strategies in a multilingual context.





Conclusion

Very complicated complications concerning intercultural communication can be pragmatic failures through cultures, in which English acts as a lingua franca wider context, those difficulties are of big intricacy. This literature has reinforced the premise of pragmatic failure as arising not so much from the grammatical incompetence of the speaker but rather resulting from a mismatch in sociocultural expectations that guide the use of language. The fact that interlocutors are derived from different cultural frameworks might lead to misunderstanding the intended meaning, tone, or level of politeness behind such utterances, in turn leading to unintended offense, confusion, or breakdown of communication.

They have always suggested in their studies that in present day, communication involves so much more than grammar and vocabulary. This would be awareness of and comprehension about sociopragmatic norms, speech acts, politeness strategies, and above all, sensitivity to contexts. Examples in reviewed literature still show that even native speakers of English commit failures in communication-pragmatically, with their local pragmatic norms instead of adapting to the norms of the target culture. For instance, directness, compliments, refusals, or apologies without cultural awareness can easily lead to misunderstanding.

The other major conclusion of this review is that miscommunication can be considerably minimized through pragmatic instruction and training on intercultural competence. Actual materials, case studies, and discussions on cultural differences should be part of the materials in language schooling for the students to internalize the culturally based premises of English communication. Teachers or trainers should go beyond the mere linguistic forms to get metapragmatic awareness into the students that is to evaluate how language choices are appropriate in view of the situation consciously.

Furthermore, being exposed to various kinds of English (like British, American, Australian, and global English) will educate learners in how pragmatics operates across cultures and allow them to become flexible in communicative competence. And that is more decisive at work and university because professional individuals do the working internationally and encounter various professional and polite standards.

As far as I can see, having this research read clarify the role which cultural humility and empathy play in reducing the rate of pragmatic failures. Communicating is not a technique; it is very human concerning the change of identity as well as intention. The speaking people who attempt and maintain things open are going to have chances for mutual comprehension in spite of unlikeness.

Because of the same reason, pragmatic failure throughout cultures in English needs constant study, pedagogical innovation, and intercultural dialogue. As futuristic study proceeds concentrating on pragmatic phenomenon studying throughout different linguistic settings, it ought to develop with researching the way English globalizes. Via adapting communicative adaptability as a part of linguistic and educational operations unfolding with students, they could move to a more practical model of English communicating, a model respecting cultural diversity though promoting being clear, respected, and mutually understood.



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