

Cross-Cultural Pragmatics and EFL Learners' Pragmatic Competence: A Review of Speech Acts, Politeness Strategies, and Pragmatic Transfer

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Abstract: Pragmatic competence is an important aspect of successful communication in English. Successful communication is not only about knowing grammar and vocabulary, but also about being able to use language appropriately in social and cultural contexts. Cross-cultural pragmatics is of particular importance when people of different cultures interact. Different cultures may have different styles of requesting, refusing, apologizing, politeness, and different levels of directness. This paper reviews the literature on the cross-cultural pragmatic differences in English communication, and their implications for English learners as a foreign language. It also reviews a number of previous studies which have dealt with pragmatic competence. The paper deals with the transfer of pragmatic patterns (speech acts and politeness strategies) from the first language, especially in the contexts of requests and refusals. It accounts for the learners' difficulties arising from the discrepancies between the pragmatic norms of their first language and those of English communication situations. But it does not reduce other societies and cultures to a monolithic cultural pattern, but rather recognizes the diversity in them. In addition, the review points out the need to develop pragmatic competence and awareness of cultural differences in teaching English, advocating for explicit instruction in pragmatics, use of authentic materials and situation-based communicative activities. The article ends with a discussion of research gaps and directions for future research in pragmatics. Cross-cultural dimensions of English learners.

Key words: Cross-Cultural Pragmatics, Pragmatic Competence, EFL Learners, Intercultural Communication, Speech Acts, Politeness Strategies, Pragmatic Transfer, Second Language Acquisition

1. Introduction

Language is the fundamental means of communication between the individual and society. It not only communicates information and ideas, but it also creates social relationships, expresses attitudes and emotions and shares experiences. English is widely used in education, work, travel, technology, modern communication, etc. It crosses the borders of language and culture, acting as a means of communication between people with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In such cases, the success of communication depends not only on the knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, but also on the speaker's ability to choose expressions suitable for the particular situation and context. This underscores the significance of the pragmatic aspect of language use, since linguistic communication is always embedded in a specific context. It is affected by a number of things such as the relationship between the speaker and the listener, the nature of the situation, the level of formality and the purpose of the conversation. There can be many linguistic ways to express the same meaning, but not all of them are appropriate depending on both the context and the addressee. For example, a request could be made directly or in a more polite, indirect way, the choice of these forms may depend on the conversational context and the social relationship between the interlocutors. Such usages of language

are closely related to culture, as culture determines how an individual interprets social relationships, respect, politeness, privacy, directness, social distance and other aspects that are clearly manifested in everyday communication. A linguistic expression that is natural and appropriate in one culture may have no similar meaning in another. A language learner might construct a grammatically correct sentence yet choose a style unsuited to the social context in which the language is being used. This demonstrates that language learning extends beyond the purely linguistic realm to encompass knowing how to use the language appropriately in various situations. This issue becomes particularly evident in intercultural communication, where individuals with differing perceptions regarding the appropriate ways to express meanings and navigate social situations interact. Speech acts such as making requests, refusing, apologizing, expressing gratitude, and offering compliments—clearly reveal these differences, as do the ways in which politeness, agreement, and disagreement are expressed. A speaker may choose a direct or indirect style, or employ expressions to soften the tone or avoid embarrassing the other party, such choices cannot be understood in isolation from the social and cultural context in which communication takes place.

2. Methodology

Theoretical foundations and conceptual Framework

According to Haberland and Mey[1] linguistic pragmatics is commonly referred to as the science of language use. However, pragmatics, as a theory of meaning that focuses on language use in social contexts, has a considerably older history than is typically recognized, dating back to the Enlightenment of the 17th century. Specifically, English empiricist philosophy has a long history of reflecting on what we now refer to as speech acts. In the framework of his political philosophy, Hume[2] examines speech act types and evaluates their promise.[3].

The study of meaning as conveyed by a speaker (or writer) and understood by a listener (or reader) is the focus of pragmatics. As a result, it is more concerned with analyzing the meaning of people's words and phrases than it is with what those words or phrases might signify on their own. The study of speaker meaning is known as pragmatics.

Interpreting what individuals mean in a given situation and how the context affects what is said is a necessary component of this kind of research. It necessitates taking into account how speakers arrange their thoughts according to the person they are speaking to, the location, the time, and the situation. The study of contextual meaning is called pragmatics.[4]

Language proficiency is divided into two categories by Bachman[5]: organizational and pragmatic competence. The formal structure of language for producing grammatically accurate phrases and texts is the main emphasis of organizational competence. Relationships between signs and referents, language users, and communication context are all covered by pragmatic competence. This is divided into two categories: sociolinguistic competence, which deals with the proper use of language in context, and illocutionary competence, which deals with pragmatic rules for language functions. According to Rose[6] this division is similar to Leech's division of sociopragmatics and pragmalinguistics, which deal with social appropriateness and linguistic resources, respectively.[7].

Understanding sociocultural norms and how they influence the choice of suitable language to communicate a message is known as pragmatic competence. It allows speakers to take into account elements including the subject, setting, and goal of an exchange, as well as the participants' positions and status[8].

Cross-cultural pragmatics

Anyone who has lived in two different nations for an extended period of time is aware that individuals in various countries communicate differently not just because they employ distinct linguistic codes, which include diverse lexicons and grammars, but also because they employ the codes in different ways. Some of these distinctions are so consistent that it is not always possible to distinguish between various codes and their various applications, or between various "grammars" and various "ethnographies" of speech.

According to Brown and Levinson, the two most crucial principles in human connection are "avoidance of imposition" (also known as "negative face") and "approval of the other person," which they illustrate with the English complement "What lovely roses!" (also known as "positive face"). However, the writers' culture-specific (anglocentric) viewpoint is evident in their own selection of these specific characteristics. Several additional purportedly universal "maxims" and rules of human conversational conduct and interaction that have been put forth in the literature can also be accused of anglocentrism, like [9] "modesty" and "approbation" maxims, for instance:

Approbation maxim

- a) Minimise dispraise of others,
- b) Maximize praise of others.

Modesty maxim

- (a) Minimise praise of self:
- [(b) Maximize dispraise of self.]

Wierzbicka A.

The study of how people use language in many languages and cultures is referred to as cross-cultural pragmatics. From the perspective of a cross-cultural pragmatist, comparing even seemingly straightforward conventionalized utterances is full of hidden nuances. Naturally, to make such a claim, we also need to ensure that our two utterances are indeed similar.[10].

The term speech act is derived from the work of the philosopher J. L. Austin (1911 –and is now used widely in linguistics to refer to a theory which analyses the role of utterances in relation to the behavior of speaker and hearer in interpersonal communication. It is not an 'act of speech' (in the sense of parole), but a communicative activity (a locutionary act), defined with reference to the intentions of speakers while speaking (the illocutionary force of their utterances) and the effects they achieve on listeners (the perlocutionary effect of their utterances). Directives (speakers attempt to persuade their listeners to do something, such as begging, commanding, or requesting), commissives (speakers commit themselves to a future course of action, such as promising, guaranteeing), expressives (speakers express their feelings, such as apologizing, welcoming, or sympathizing), declarations (the speaker's utterance creates a new external situation, such as christening, marriage, or resignation), and representatives (speakers express their belief about the truth of a proposition, such as asserting or hypothesizing). Performative verbs are verbs that are used to express the speech act that the speaker intends. Felicity conditions are the requirements that must be met for a speech act to be successful.[11]

The act of the speech opponent understanding the speaker's meaning is known as a speech act. In terms of simplifying transactional and task-oriented communication, expressive speech acts purport to fulfil a communicative purpose to compensate for the face-to-face lack of resources. According to linguistic activity, the use of tools is as much a part of an organism's growing characteristics as its developmental system, much like nucleotides.[12].

A term used in pragmatics and sociolinguistics to refer to linguistic features that mediate the social norms of behavior regarding concepts such as civility, distance, rapport, and deference. These characteristics include the use of certain discourse markers (please), appropriate voice tones, and appropriate forms of address (e.g., choice of intimate v. distant pronouns or choice of first v. last names). Linguistic politeness is realized by the use of certain linguistic forms and expressions, by the way it is realized in different speech acts and by the effect of social and cultural variables. In addition to these issues, it is also relevant to investigate the incentives and motivations that lead people to use polite language in conversation. This will be discussed here in relation to Brown and Levinson's Theory of Politeness and their concept of politeness as face work.[13][14][15]

A classic and influential framework in the study of politeness is the 1987 Brown and Levinson model. It connects particular communicative acts with possible threats to the participants' "face". So a speaker can choose among various strategies to perform such acts, from direct expression and softening devices to indirect strategies.

The study of cross-cultural pragmatic differences is a central component in the review of the existing literature as it permits proceeding from the presentation of theoretical concepts to the understanding of how the concepts are realized in language use and communication. Research in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics has concentrated on phenomena that clearly illustrate the relationship between language, context and culture, namely speech acts (e.g. requests, apologies, refusals), politeness, degrees of directness versus indirectness and the influence of the first language on target language use. These areas are particularly important for the foreign language learner, who may understand grammar and vocabulary well, but who still needs more information about how to use these language resources effectively in different social contexts. Therefore, the review of previous studies is not limited to the identification of the differences in linguistic forms, but it also aims to explain the relationship between linguistic choice and the socio-cultural context and to identify aspects that can influence the development of the learners' pragmatic competence.

3. Results and Discussion

Comparative Analysis

A. Speech Acts in Intercultural Communication. Speech acts are one of the most prominent topics in pragmatics, which illustrate how people use language to achieve certain communicative and social purposes. Such acts as requesting, apologizing, refusing, thanking, agreeing and disagreeing are not only linguistic structures but also speakers' actions through language to achieve a certain purpose in a certain context. In the cross-cultural pragmatics literature, it has been demonstrated that speakers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds may use different strategies to perform the same speech act. More specifically, Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper focused on requests and apologies, providing a significant framework for the comparison of pragmatic patterns across languages and cultures. Studies in this field show that the variation involved is not limited to the linguistic form used, it is not limited to the degree of directness, choice of strategy, use of mitigating expressions, amount of information given and the way in which the social relationship between participants is taken into account. This observation is especially important in the case of learning English as a foreign language, where a learner may know how to construct a grammatically correct sentence, but may not have the pragmatic knowledge necessary to select the forms most appropriate to the situation. Thus, the success of a learner in performing a particular speech act depends on his/her capacity to connect the linguistic form with the social function.

From this point of view, the performance of a learner should not be assessed based on grammaticality alone, because a sentence may be grammatically correct, but not completely appropriate to the relationship between the speaker and the addressee or the level of formality required. Hence, the pragmatics literature stresses the importance of acquiring knowledge that allows the learner to comprehend the connection between language and context.

B. Directness Choices and Requests Cross-cultural pragmatics considers requests to be an important area to study because they involve the speaker's need to achieve a specific goal while taking into account the social relationship with the listener. There are many different ways to make requests, direct and indirect. The speaker may make the request directly, or may use a question or hint that allows the listener to infer the intended meaning from context. It is impossible to choose the most appropriate approach without reference to the situation. The choice is determined by such factors as the relationship between the speaker and the listener, the level of authority, social distance and the degree of the obligation or cost involved in the request. A 1989 study by Blum-Kulka et al. added to a deeper understanding of request strategies by focusing on degrees of directness. Regarding the strategies a speaker uses to modify a request, this perspective suggests that speakers do not choose sentences randomly, they balance between a communicative goal and social relationships. Pedagogically, this means that the teaching of requests to English learners should not be limited to

the presentation of linguistic forms to be memorized. Learning a structure like “Could you...” does not mean that the learner is capable of using it appropriately in all situations. The learner has to understand the conditions that make the form appropriate and how to adapt it depending on the relationship between the participants, the level of formality, and the nature of the request. Thus, the capacity to make requests comprises two interconnected aspects: the knowledge of the linguistic means available for making a request and the capacity to choose the most appropriate means for the context. This distinction represents one of the fundamental aspects that differentiate pragmatic competence from purely grammatical knowledge.

C. Apologies and refusals are pragmatically sensitive situations. Apologies and refusals are important speech acts in the study of cross-cultural communication, along with requests, since they are directly related to managing social relationships. An apology is usually given after an action that is likely to hurt the other party. A refusal is a denial of a request, invitation, suggestion, or offer. Apologies are not limited to one word like “I’m sorry.” They can be composed of several elements: an admission of the act, an expression of regret, an explanation, an assumption of responsibility, a restitution, or a promise not to repeat the act. The choice of these elements is determined by the situation, the social relation and the degree of responsibility. Blum-Kulka studied apologies within the framework of cross-cultural pragmatic comparison. This underscores the significance of focusing on the components of a speech act rather than on the words used to perform it, differences between speakers may be in the amount of information that is given, in the order in which the apology elements are presented or in the degree to which responsibility and regret are expressed. Conversely, refusals tend to be more socially sensitive, since the speaker attempts to achieve two goals at once: expressing non-acceptance and maintaining the relationship with the interlocutor. A refusal may thus be accompanied by giving a reason, apologizing, mitigating the refusal or suggesting an alternative. For learners of English as a foreign language, these speech acts may be more complex when there is a difference between the social norms and pragmatic expectations of the learner’s first language and the target second language, English.

A learner may be linguistically capable of expressing refusal or offering an apology, yet may not know the appropriate level of explanation or mitigation required for a specific situation. This highlights the importance of distinguishing between a linguistic error and a pragmatic difference. A learner’s deviation from the norms of English speakers does not necessarily imply a linguistic error, rather, they may have chosen a different strategy based on their linguistic or social background or prior experience.

D. Linguistic Politeness and the Importance of Social Context. Politeness is a fundamental aspect of understanding variations in language use, as it relates to how a speaker manages relationships with others during communication. The framework established by Brown and Levinson indicates that certain speech acts can impact the participants’ “face.” Consequently, speakers employ a range of strategies to mitigate the potential social impact of these actions.

The strategies are revealed in the choice of directness, the use of mitigating expressions, the display of respect, the provision of justifications and the use of linguistic forms appropriate to the nature of the social relationship. However, the importance of this framework does not mean that all cultures use strategies of politeness in the same way. Cultural and social contexts can influence the way in which something is considered appropriate or inappropriate. When making comparisons between languages and cultures, the concept of politeness should be treated with caution, as directness does not equal lack of politeness, and indirectness does not equal greater politeness.

The direct formulation may well be suitable in a specific situation depending on the nature of the relationship or the communicative goal. ...while an indirect approach might be suitable in another situation. Thomas notes that context is needed for understanding pragmatic meaning, that the purpose of a speaker cannot be derived from linguistic form alone, and therefore politeness must be analyzed by integrating linguistic structure with the context in which communication is taking place. This is especially important for learners of English as a second language. Although learners may start by focusing on the correctness of linguistic structures, real language use involves decisions about the

level of formality, directness and social distance. Thus, the development of pragmatic competence involves training the learners to connect the linguistic choices with different social contexts.

E. Interlanguage Pragmatics and Variability in the Performance of Language Learners. To study the use of the language under learning by learners of a second/foreign language in interactive contexts, the concept of interlanguage pragmatics was proposed. This field was developed by Kasper and Blum-Kulka who focused on learners' pragmatic performance and on the acquisition of the ability to use speech acts and social strategies in the target language. Interlanguage pragmatics reveals that the language learning process is not only about learning grammar and vocabulary, but also includes the ability to use language in ways that are appropriate to social goals and contexts. For example, a learner may know several linguistic ways of making a request or offering an apology but be unable to choose the most appropriate one when the relationship between the participants in a conversation changes, or the level of formality, or the type of situation. Thus pragmatic competence is acquired gradually and is influenced by, among other things, proficiency in the language, exposure to English, educational and communicative experience.

F. The Influence of First Language and Pragmatic Transfer. The concept of interlanguage pragmatics is related to the idea of "pragmatic transfer", i.e. the possible influence of patterns of use and pragmatic expectations of the first language on the use of the target language. This influence can be observed in the choice of directness levels, politeness strategies, or in the performance of specific speech acts. Source: Kasper & Blum-Kulka. However, the first language/culture should not be the only explanation for the differences in learner performance. Pragmatic competence can be affected by language proficiency, experience, exposure to the target language and the communicative context. Therefore, one should avoid generalizations that attribute specific pragmatic behavior to culture alone, but rather to its nature, the context in which it appears, and the factors that might explain it.

G. Pragmatic Variation or Error Pragmatic variation has to be differentiated from pragmatic error. In assessing the performance of English learners, a learner may use strategies that are different from those of native speakers, but this does not mean that the learner necessarily fails to communicate or commits a linguistic error. The appropriateness of judgments depends on the context, the communicative purpose and the relationship between participants. It may be that one form would be suitable for one situation but not another, such as an academic or formal one. Thus, pragmatic competence should be evaluated in terms of the whole situation, rather than by comparing the learner's output to one form that is considered the only correct, model form.

H. The literature shows that there has been a lot of advancement in understanding the link between language, context and culture, but there is a need for more research which looks at pragmatic competence as a whole rather than looking at speech acts or pragmatic phenomena in isolation. There is also a need for studies that combine several speech acts and relate them to politeness, degrees of directness and social context. In future research, data collection methods should be diversified and should not be generalized based on one culture but should consider the different linguistic, educational and social backgrounds of the learners. Therefore, there is a wide research gap in the pragmatic competence of English learners as a dynamic competence that is influenced by language, culture, experience, and context simultaneously.

4. Conclusions

The literature indicates that knowledge of grammar and vocabulary is not a guarantee that the language can be used appropriately in all situations. Pragmatic differences and speech acts are important, and the article shows clearly the differences in speech acts, especially in requests, apologies, and refusals. Different strategies can be used, and the degree of directness and the amount of mitigation or explanation may differ. Thus, the performance of a speech act requires pragmatic knowledge, not just linguistic forms. The review shows that the appropriateness of a linguistic expression depends strongly on the context. The choice of a direct or indirect strategy, as well as the use of politeness strategies, is influenced by factors such as social relationships, level of formality and distance between the speakers. The literature shows that some aspects of pragmatic performance are affected by the first language, a phenomenon related to the concept of pragmatic transfer. The

review emphasizes the necessity of differentiating between pragmatic variation and pragmatic error. The results in general emphasize the necessity of paying more attention to pragmatic competence in teaching English as a foreign language, because learners need to understand the use of speech acts, politeness, and direct versus indirect strategies in different communicative contexts, in addition to grammar and vocabulary.

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