

Pragmatic Failures in English Among Graduate International EFL Students

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Abstrak: Penelitian ini meneliti jenis dan penyebab kegagalan pragmatis dalam komunikasi berbahasa Inggris di kalangan mahasiswa pascasarjana internasional EFL di Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta (UMS). Dengan menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif, data diperoleh melalui observasi kelas dan wawancara semi-terstruktur terhadap lima peserta dengan latar budaya yang beragam. Hasil analisis tematik menunjukkan enam kategori utama dalam kegagalan pragmatis: permintaan langsung yang tidak sopan, penolakan yang terlalu tegas, permintaan maaf yang tidak tepat, kesalahan dalam menafsirkan tuturan yang tidak langsung, penerapan norma kesopanan yang tidak sesuai, dan kesadaran pembelajar yang terbatas. Faktor-faktor ini umumnya dipengaruhi oleh transfer budaya, kesadaran pragmatis yang kurang sesuai, dan kurangnya pengalaman berbahasa secara autentik. Penelitian ini tidak hanya mengidentifikasi masalah-masalah pragmatis yang berulang, tetapi juga menelusuri akar penyebabnya serta menawarkan implikasi bagi pengajaran. Temuan ini menyarankan pentingnya integrasi kesadaran pragmatis dalam pengajaran EFL untuk meningkatkan kompetensi komunikasi mahasiswa, baik dalam konteks akademik maupun lintas budaya. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pengembangan strategi komunikasi yang efektif dalam konteks akademik multikultural.

Kata kunci: Kegagalan Pragmatik, Kompetensi Pragmatik, Mahasiswa Internasional, Tindak Tutur, EFL

Abstract: This study investigates the types and causes of pragmatic failure in English communication among postgraduate international EFL students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta (UMS). Using a qualitative descriptive method, data were gathered through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with five culturally diverse participants. Thematic analysis revealed six main categories of pragmatic failure: impolite direct requests, blunt refusals, inadequate apologies, misinterpretation of indirect speech, inappropriate politeness norms, and limited learner awareness. These failures were often shaped by cultural transfer, insufficient pragmatic awareness, and lack of exposure to authentic language use. The study not only identifies recurrent pragmatic issues but also examines their underlying causes and offers implications for explicit instruction. The findings suggest the importance of integrating pragmatic awareness into EFL teaching to enhance students' communicative competence in both academic and intercultural contexts. The study contributes to the development of effective communication strategies in multicultural academic contexts.

Keywords: Pragmatic Failure, Pragmatic Competence, International Students, Speech Acts, EFL

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INTRODUCTION

When it comes to English as a Foreign Language (EFL), to have effective communication requires not only a solid knowledge of grammar and vocabulary but also the ability to use language appropriately in a variety of social and cultural situations. This

ability is known as pragmatic competence, which helps learners express their intentions more clearly, interpret indirect meanings, and respond appropriately to different communication contexts ((Bardovi-Harlig, 2020; Taguchi, 2019) English also serves as a medium of instruction and global interaction, especially in educational settings (Jenkins, 2013) The importance of pragmatic competence provides essential support for international learners who must adapt to culturally diverse environments (Ishihara & Cohen, 2014)

This research uses pragmatic competence as the theoretical basis for identifying pragmatic errors from postgraduate international EFL students from Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta (UMS). Pragmatics explores how meaning is constructed in language apart from the actual spoken words, affected by speaker intention, listener interpretation, and context (Yusrina et al., 2025). For EFL learners, this is not only about acquiring the linguistic forms but applying them in social and cultural contexts appropriately. (Canale, 2014; Spolsky & Bachman, 1991) defined pragmatic competence as consisting of pragmalinguistic knowledge (the correct linguistic forms) and sociopragmatic knowledge (understanding social and cultural standards). As this study shows, deficiencies in either area result in pragmatic errors, including direct requests, rude refusals, or misinterpreted indirect discourse. (Thomas, 1983) The idea of pragmatic failure, which appears when the intended meaning is not achieved despite grammatical accuracy. She offers a distinction between pragmalinguistic failure (inappropriate language forms) and sociopragmatic failure (misunderstanding cultural standards); both types of failures are found in the speakers' errors. Moreover, Speech Act Theory, as discussed by Austin et al. (1975) and Searle (2011) helps to explain how utterances can act as actions, e.g., requesting, apologizing, and refusing. The literal expression (locutionary act), intended purpose (illocutionary act), and listener's interpretation (perlocutionary act) are all components of speech acts. Intentional and listener responses mismatches frequently led to miscommunication. Collectively, these theories provide a thorough framework for understanding the types of pragmatic errors identified in this research, as well as their mentioned factors, like cultural transfer and the lack of pragmatic awareness in EFL settings.

Prior studies have regularly demonstrated that pragmatic competence is often not fully developed among EFL learners, even those with good grammatical skills. The study of (Ahmed & Hasan, 2020; Al-Hozali, 2023) explained that the students often fail to perceive implied meaning like irony and indirect requests. Highlighting the significance of certain pragmatic instructions. Other studies, such as (Bataineh, 2014), which investigated how teaching strategies can enhance pragmatic competence, showed that using authentic resources, such as literary works, could give the students contextualized language clarity and enhance their communication ability.

In the current literature, scholars have shifted their focus to common pragmatic errors and their factors. The findings of (ALTameemy et al., 2024) studies described that Saudi EFL students often relied on their first language's cultural norms in making a request statement. In contrast (Humayrah et al., 2024) emphasized the usefulness of systemic guidance in enhancing pragmatic awareness and cross-cultural language

abilities. Likewise, (Xu & Williams, 2017) research established that pragmatic development does not necessarily coincide with grammatical development, further reinforcing the need for explicit instruction in this context.

Despite the importance of these studies, a noticeable gap remains in how international postgraduate EFL students handle pragmatic difficulties in spoken English, especially those admitted to multilingual academic institutions like UMS, encounter and address pragmatic difficulties in spoken English. A significant number of previous studies have concentrated on undergraduate students or those studying in monolingual contexts, resulting in limited exploration of the experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse postgraduate students.

Thus, this research aims to identify the pragmatic errors made by postgraduate international EFL students at UMS and the contributing factors to errors in spoken communication. The objective is to acquire a full view of the way these learners participate with pragmatic norms in English and to determine approaches that facilitate effective communication in both academic and intercultural settings.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative descriptive method was used for this research in order to highlight errors in English communication among postgraduate international EFL students at UMS. Through purposive sampling, five participants were selected according to their cultural background and being an EFL postgraduate international student at UMS. As they represent different cultural and linguistic perspectives, this provided relatable insights into how learners navigate English communication in a study context.

The data collection tools that were used for this study are: observation and semi-structured interviews, in a two-week timeframe. As observations took place during classroom interactions, group discussions, and casual conversations, in order to make sure that any pragmatic errors that occurred are real and natural. To do so, field notes were taken to document these observations, while taking notice of the language used, the context, and the clear intent behind the statement. After taking the observational notes, each participant sat to be interviewed for 20-30 minutes, in order to provoke reflections on communication habits, cultural norms, and personal experiences with the use of English. Open-ended questions were used to offer more flexibility for the students to respond in depth. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed for analysis.

The thematic data analysis method that was conducted by Braun & Clarke (2006) was used for this study. The process included becoming familiar with the data, creating initial codes, recognizing emerging patterns, and grouping the findings into broad themes. Key themes emerged around different types of pragmatic errors (such as inappropriate requests or direct refusals), cultural influences on language choice, and learners' awareness—or lack thereof—regarding pragmatic norms in English. These findings shed light on how learners navigated English pragmatics, with their approaches frequently shaped by their native language and cultural background.

Member checking was applied in order to ensure the credibility of this study. As the participants were able to recheck their interview transcripts and observation notes to clarify any misunderstood information and confirm the accuracy of the data. Moreover, ethical considerations were taken upon this research, as confirmations were taken constantly from all participants, their identities were kept confidential by not using their real names, and they were given the right to withdraw from the process at any time. These measures upheld the integrity of the research and ensured the safety of all participants.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses observation and semi-structured interview data gathered from postgraduate international EFL students at UMS. The results demonstrate the factors of pragmatic errors—including inappropriate requests, refusal, apologies, misunderstandings of indirect speech, and cultural influences—manifested in the students' communication in the English language. These findings are explained in each subsection concerning the failure of pragmatic competence, in line with pragmatics theory, pragmatic failure (Thomas, 1983), and Speech Act Theory.

Inappropriate Request Strategies

Observation data revealed that during informal settings and peer discussion, a lot of students used to direct request form like when student 1 stated that "I talked to my friend without using an appropriate/polite way for example, "Give me your notes" instead of saying "Could you" or "would you mind" because in my language, we used it directly to our close friends like this and I did not think that it will be rude. Likewise, student 3 also acknowledged having trouble with polite request forms. Stating, *"Sometimes I just translate from my language to English and forget about polite words."*

These findings demonstrate a definitive illustration of pragmalinguistic failure, in which the social context was not suitable for the linguistic form used (direct imperative). Based on speech act theory, there is a difference between the speaker's intention and the listener's understanding, as the intended force behind the utterance (a polite request) fails to be properly conveyed. This corresponds with (Thomas, 1983) notion of pragmatic failure, in which the use of an inappropriate linguistic form leads to unintended impoliteness.

Misuse of Refusals

When the students declined offers or suggestions, they often made pragmatic errors. For example, in one classroom setting, student 2 said, "No, I don't want," without using any mitigating words in response to a peer's offer of assistance. During the interview, student 2 responded, *"In my culture, when I said 'no,' directly it doesn't mean impolite. I wasn't aware that in English, if I need to refuse, it should be expressed more gently."*

These incidents illustrate sociopragmatic failure, in which students' cultural norms impact their understanding of appropriate behavior in refusal settings. According to

Speech Act Theory, refusals are actions that are considered as face-threatening acts and require tactful language use. Similar to the findings of (AlTameemy et al., 2024), the absence of such techniques in these refusals indicates a lack of pragmatic competence.

Errors in Apologizing

It was observed that participant 4 expressed regret by expressing *"I'm sorry for that," which is a literal translation from their native tongue*. Participant 4 stated in the interview that *"I think it's enough to just say sorry because in my language, we don't need to explain much when we apologize."* Participant 5 said, *"Don't worry, it's not a big mistake,"* and refused to take responsibility instead of apologizing.

These examples demonstrate pragmatolinguistic errors in formulaic statements, as well as sociopragmatic misunderstandings of apologies function in English-speaking cultures. According to Speech Act Theory, an apology requires both acknowledgment of offense and face-saving, which were absent in these cases, as mentioned also in (Ahmed & Hasan, 2020; Taguchi, 2019) research.

Lack of Awareness in Indirect Speech Acts

Many participants found it difficult to comprehend or use indirect discourse. The teacher's indirect comment, "You might want to check this part again," was misunderstood by participant 3, *who believed it to be a recommendation rather than a normal correction*. Participant 3 stated, *"I didn't realize it was a polite way to say I was wrong. I thought it was just advice."* Likewise, Participant 2 also mentioned that it was difficult to make indirect requests as they often defaulted to direct statements.

This exhibits both pragmatic failure and sociopragmatic failure as Thomas (1983) , defined it. The inability to recognize indirect speech acts indicates a lack of sociopragmatic competence. These students are still acquiring the shared cultural and contextual knowledge that indirect communication necessitates, according to the Communication Act Theory. These findings align with (Xu & Williams, 2017) highlighting the discrepancy between pragmatic failure and grammatical development.

Cultural Influence on Politeness Norms

The observations clarified cases of either over-formality between participants or too much informality. For instance, Participant 5 consistently referred to peers as "Sir" or "Ma'am" during informal group discussions. In contrast, Participant 2 employed repeated expressions such as "What's up?" when addressing an academic instructor. Throughout the interviews, both participants admitted not being sure of the correct level of formality in English to use in communications.

Such pragmatic errors represent typical aspects of sociopragmatic failure due to L1 transfer of cultural norms. This is supported by (Sadeghghli & Niroomand, 2016) in their politeness theory, they assert that the intensity of formality or informality differs widely among cultures. These findings emphasize the importance of clear instruction aligned with social norms and actual practices, as stated by (Humayrah et al., 2024)

Learner Awareness and Self-Reflection

The interview results reveal the participants' level of awareness, showing various types of pragmatic errors that differ according to their practices. Participant 1 stated, "*I didn't know my way of speaking sounded rude until someone told me.*" Participant 4 shared, "*I learn from seeing how my friends speak to teachers, then I try to copy that.*" Most of the participants received additional feedback regarding their use of English more practically and purposefully."

This underscores the importance of pragmatic awareness as a crucial component of communicative competence. In some cases, errors emerge because the learners lack essential background knowledge, and errors arise due to insufficient responsiveness and receptiveness to contextual cues. The findings point to the need for focused pragmatic instructions, aligning with insights from Bardovi-Harlig (2020) and Al-Hozali (2023).

CONCLUSION

This research illustrates how pragmatic competence offers a crucial perspective for comprehending the communication difficulties encountered by postgraduate international EFL students at UMS. Using the framework of pragmatics theory. Thomas's pragmatic failure and Speech Act Theory. The study reveals common mistakes like direct requests, blunt refusals, inadequate apologies, and misinterpretations of indirect speech, which are frequently connected to pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failures. These challenges arose due to cultural transfer, limited pragmatic awareness, and lack of exposure to the language in authentic contexts, suggesting there was a disconnect between grammatical knowledge and a proper use of the language. The finding illustrates not only the importance of explicit pragmatic teaching but also situated practice in EFL teaching in order for learners to develop communicative competence in academic and intercultural contexts. Together, these two facets of practice could further be explored, including methods of intervention, such as role-play and computer-assisted learning, which would support the pragmatic development of EFL learners.

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