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PRAGMATIC FAILURE AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract. In today's increasingly interconnected world, successful communication requires more than grammatical accuracy and vocabulary knowledge. Language users must also understand how to use language appropriately in different social and cultural contexts. Pragmatic failure occurs when speakers misunderstand or misuse language due to insufficient knowledge of sociocultural norms and communicative conventions. Such failures can lead to misunderstandings, communication breakdowns, and even negative interpersonal judgments. In language education, pragmatic failure represents a significant challenge because learners often transfer pragmatic norms from their native language to the target language. This article examines the concept of pragmatic failure and its relationship with intercultural communication in language teaching.

Keywords: pragmatic failure, intercultural communication, pragmatics, language teaching, communicative competence, intercultural competence

INTRODUCTION. The primary goal of language learning is effective communication. However, communication involves more than the accurate use of grammar and vocabulary. Speakers must also understand how language functions within specific social and cultural contexts. This ability is referred to as pragmatic competence and forms an essential component of communicative competence.

Despite possessing strong linguistic knowledge, language learners frequently encounter difficulties in real-life communication because they lack pragmatic competence. These difficulties often result in pragmatic failure, a phenomenon that occurs when the intended meaning of a message is misunderstood due to inappropriate language use or incorrect interpretation of communicative intentions. Pragmatic failure may arise even when the grammatical structure of an utterance is correct.

In intercultural communication, pragmatic failure becomes particularly significant because speakers from different cultural backgrounds often possess different expectations regarding politeness, directness, turn-taking, and social interaction. Consequently, misunderstandings may occur even when all participants share a common language.

Teachers play a crucial role in helping learners overcome pragmatic difficulties by developing both pragmatic competence and intercultural awareness. This article examines the causes and consequences of pragmatic failure and explores strategies for addressing it in language teaching.

METHODS

This study used a qualitative literature review approach. Data were collected from scholarly books, journal articles, and previous studies related to pragmatic failure and intercultural communication in language teaching. The selected literature was analyzed thematically to identify key concepts, causes of pragmatic failure, and classroom strategies for developing learners' pragmatic and intercultural competence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pragmatic Competence and Communicative Competence. The concept of communicative competence was introduced by Dell Hymes as a response to purely grammatical views of language proficiency. Communicative competence involves not only knowing linguistic rules but also understanding how language should be used appropriately in social contexts.

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Later, Michael Canale and Merrill Swain identified pragmatic and sociolinguistic competence as essential components of successful communication. Pragmatic competence enables speakers to interpret intentions, perform speech acts, and select appropriate linguistic forms according to contextual factors.

Defining Pragmatic Failure. The concept of pragmatic failure was extensively discussed by Jenny Thomas (1983), who described it as the inability to understand or convey intended meaning in accordance with contextual expectations.

Thomas distinguished two major types of pragmatic failure:

1. **Pragmalinguistic Failure:** Pragmalinguistic failure occurs when learners incorrectly use linguistic forms to express communicative intentions.

For example, a learner might say: *"Give me your book."*

Although grammatically correct, the expression may sound impolite in situations where a more indirect request is expected: *"Could I borrow your book, please?"*

2. **Sociopragmatic Failure.** Sociopragmatic failure occurs when learners misunderstand cultural norms governing communication.

For example, levels of directness that are acceptable in one culture may be considered rude in another. A learner may unintentionally violate social expectations because they apply the norms of their first language to interactions in the target language.

There a number of causes of pragmatic failure in intercultural communication:

1. Cultural Differences. One of the most common causes of pragmatic failure is cultural variation. Different cultures have different expectations regarding politeness, formality, personal space, and conversational behavior.

For example, some cultures value direct communication, while others prefer indirectness and mitigation. Learners who transfer communication styles from their native culture may unintentionally create misunderstandings.

2. Transfer from the First Language. Pragmatic transfer occurs when learners apply pragmatic rules from their first language to the target language.

For instance, expressions of gratitude, apology, or refusal may differ significantly across cultures. Direct translations of native-language expressions may therefore sound unnatural or inappropriate.

3. Limited Exposure to Authentic Language. Many learners acquire language primarily through textbooks and classroom instruction. While textbooks provide valuable linguistic knowledge, they often fail to represent authentic communication.

As a result, learners may possess grammatical competence without understanding how native speakers perform speech acts in real situations.

4. Insufficient Pragmatic Instruction. In many educational settings, language instruction focuses heavily on grammar and vocabulary. Pragmatics receives less attention despite its importance for successful communication.

Without explicit instruction, learners may struggle to recognize cultural nuances and contextual meanings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research indicates that pragmatic failure can have serious consequences for interpersonal communication. Unlike grammatical errors, which are often tolerated by native speakers, pragmatic errors may be interpreted as impoliteness, arrogance, or lack of respect. Table 1 presents common examples of pragmatic failure and their potential consequences.

Table 1. Examples of Pragmatic Failure in Intercultural Communication

Situation	Learner	Pragmatic Issue	Possible

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	Utterance		**Interpretation**
Request to a professor	*"Give me the assignment."*	Excessive directness	Impolite or disrespectful
Refusing an invitation	*"No, I don't want to come."*	Lack of mitigation	Rude or unfriendly
Greeting a superior	Using informal greeting	Inappropriate formality level	Lack of professionalism
Giving feedback	Overly direct criticism	Cultural mismatch	Offensive behavior
Expressing disagreement	Strong direct contradiction	Face-threatening act	Aggressive communication

The table illustrates how pragmatically inappropriate language can negatively affect interpersonal relationships despite grammatical correctness.

Intercultural competence refers to the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from different cultural backgrounds. It involves:

- Cultural awareness
- Empathy
- Tolerance of ambiguity
- Perspective-taking
- Adaptability

Learners who develop intercultural competence are better able to interpret communicative behavior and avoid misunderstandings.

Teachers play a central role in helping learners develop both pragmatic competence and intercultural communicative competence. Effective language teachers do more than teach grammatical structures; they guide students in understanding how language is used appropriately in different social and cultural contexts. This involves explicitly teaching speech acts such as requests, apologies, compliments, and refusals, while also explaining the social meanings and cultural expectations associated with them. In addition, teachers introduce learners to various communication styles and cultural norms that influence interaction across different communities. The use of authentic language materials, including films, podcasts, interviews, and social media content, provides students with exposure to naturally occurring language and real-life communicative situations. Teachers also encourage learners to reflect on their intercultural experiences and examine differences between their native culture and the target culture. Furthermore, classroom interaction through role-plays, simulations, and collaborative activities allows students to practice language in meaningful contexts and develop greater sensitivity to pragmatic conventions. Through these instructional practices, learners become more aware of contextual factors influencing communication and are better prepared to engage successfully in intercultural interactions.

Several classroom strategies can be employed to reduce pragmatic failure and improve learners' communicative effectiveness. One of the most effective approaches is the use of role-play activities, which enable students to practice speech acts such as requests, apologies, invitations, and refusals in realistic situations. Role-playing provides opportunities for learners to experiment with different levels of formality, politeness, and indirectness while receiving feedback from teachers and peers. Another valuable strategy is the incorporation of authentic materials into classroom instruction. Resources such as films, podcasts, interviews, television programs, and online interactions expose learners to natural language use and demonstrate how pragmatic norms operate in real communication. By observing

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authentic examples of language in context, students can better understand the relationship between linguistic choices and social meaning, thereby reducing the likelihood of pragmatic misunderstandings in intercultural communication.

Conclusion. Pragmatic failure represents one of the most significant challenges in intercultural communication. Even learners with strong grammatical competence may experience communication breakdowns if they lack awareness of sociocultural norms and pragmatic conventions. This article has demonstrated that pragmatic failure often results from cultural differences, first-language transfer, limited exposure to authentic language, and insufficient pragmatic instruction. Such failures can negatively affect interpersonal relationships and create barriers to successful communication. Language teachers play a vital role in addressing these challenges. By integrating pragmatic instruction and intercultural communication into classroom practice, educators can help learners develop the skills necessary for effective interaction in diverse cultural contexts. As globalization continues to increase intercultural contact, the importance of pragmatic competence in language education will continue to grow. Therefore, language teaching should move beyond grammatical accuracy and place greater emphasis on the development of pragmatic and intercultural communicative competence.

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