

CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON COMMUNICATION: PRAGMATIC ASPECTS OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Abstract: This article explores the relationship between culture and pragmatics in the use of English as a second or global language. Pragmatics, the study of meaning in context, plays a central role in shaping how speakers perform communicative acts such as requests, apologies, greetings, and expressions of politeness. The paper discusses how cultural influences affect these interactions, highlighting differences in directness, indirectness, and speech acts across various English-speaking societies, including the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. It also examines English as a lingua franca, where diverse pragmatic norms often converge. Common misunderstandings—such as misinterpretation of politeness, overuse or underuse of expressions, and transfer of native cultural norms—are identified as major challenges for learners. To address these issues, the article emphasizes the importance of teaching pragmatic competence through authentic materials, role plays, simulations, and cultural awareness activities. The conclusion stresses that cultural sensitivity is a key factor in successful English communication, enabling learners to adapt to different contexts and avoid pragmatic failure. Ultimately, developing pragmatic competence enhances not only linguistic ability but also intercultural understanding and communicative confidence.

Introduction. Pragmatics, as a branch of linguistics, focuses on how meaning is shaped by context, going beyond the literal interpretation of words. It studies how speakers use language to perform actions such as requesting,

apologizing, or greeting. In this sense, language is not only a system of grammar and vocabulary but also a tool for interaction. Culture plays a vital role in shaping these interactions because norms of politeness, indirectness, or humor vary across societies. Understanding the pragmatic aspects of English requires sensitivity to cultural influences, especially in intercultural communication where misunderstandings often occur.

Pragmatic aspects of English communication. Pragmatics in English is strongly shaped by the way politeness is expressed in daily interactions. Politeness strategies appear in requests, apologies, and greetings. For example, English speakers often soften requests with modal verbs (“Could you...?” or “Would you mind...?”) to avoid sounding too direct. Apologies usually include expressions of responsibility (“I’m sorry,” “I apologize”) and sometimes compensation, reflecting the cultural value of maintaining social harmony. Greetings, such as “How are you?” function less as literal questions and more as conventional social routines. Another key dimension is the contrast between direct and indirect communication styles. In English, especially in formal or professional settings, indirectness is often preferred as a way to maintain politeness. For instance, instead of saying “Close the window,” one might say, “It’s a bit cold in here, isn’t it?” Such indirect speech helps mitigate face-threatening acts and reflects cultural emphasis on respect. Speech acts—such as promising, inviting, or refusing—are central to English pragmatics. Each act carries expectations about appropriateness depending on context, relationship, and formality. Misunderstanding these acts may lead to pragmatic failure in communication.

Cultural variations in using English. Although English is widely spoken, its pragmatic norms vary across English-speaking countries. In the United States, communication tends to be more direct and informal, with emphasis on efficiency and clarity. In the United Kingdom, however, understatement, irony, and indirectness are common features of politeness. In Australia, casual forms of address and humor play a significant role in everyday interaction, reflecting a culture of egalitarianism. Furthermore, English serves as a lingua franca in

intercultural communication, used by speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In such contexts, pragmatic norms are often adapted or simplified to ensure mutual understanding. This highlights the importance of cultural awareness, as successful communication in English depends not only on grammar and vocabulary but also on the ability to interpret and adapt to varying cultural expectations.

Pragmatic misunderstandings are common when learners of English communicate across cultures. One frequent issue is the misinterpretation of politeness or humor. For instance, English speakers often use indirect requests or self-deprecating humor, which may be misunderstood as insincerity or even rudeness by those from cultures with more direct communication styles. Another difficulty is the overuse or underuse of certain expressions. Learners may use phrases like “please” or “sorry” too frequently, making interactions sound unnatural, or too rarely, which may seem impolite. Similarly, greetings such as “How are you?” may be taken literally rather than understood as a conventional politeness formula. Finally, the influence of cultural norms from the native language can lead to pragmatic transfer. Learners may apply politeness rules or conversational patterns from their own culture, which sometimes clash with English norms. For example, silence may signal respect in one culture but appear awkward or impolite in English-speaking contexts.

To reduce such misunderstandings, explicit teaching of pragmatics is essential in language education. The use of authentic materials—such as films, TV shows, podcasts, and real-life dialogues—allows learners to observe how native speakers manage politeness, humor, or speech acts in context. Exposure to authentic communication helps learners notice subtleties that textbooks often overlook. In addition, classroom activities like role plays, simulations, and dialogue reconstruction can provide safe practice for learners. These activities encourage experimentation with different levels of formality, indirectness, and politeness strategies, building confidence in real-life interactions. Another key component is raising learners’ cultural awareness. Teachers should highlight cross-

cultural differences and explain why certain expressions are used in particular contexts. Discussions, reflective tasks, and comparisons between learners' native cultures and English norms can deepen understanding and foster flexibility in communication.

Conclusion. Pragmatics plays a vital role in effective communication in English, as it ensures that meaning is not only transmitted but also interpreted in a culturally appropriate way. Misunderstandings often arise when learners fail to grasp the pragmatic functions of requests, apologies, humor, or politeness markers, leading to confusion or unintended offense. Recognizing these challenges emphasizes the need for explicit attention to pragmatic competence in English language education. Cultural sensitivity is therefore essential for learners and teachers alike. It enables individuals to adjust their language use depending on context, audience, and cultural expectations, reducing the risk of miscommunication. Teachers can support this development by incorporating authentic materials, designing interactive activities, and guiding learners to reflect on cultural differences. Learners, on the other hand, must remain open-minded, observant, and willing to adapt their communication strategies.

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