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Pragmatic Failure among EFL Students in Speech Act Performance: The Case of 1st Year Master Students at Ahmed Salhi University Centre of Naama

النقص البراغماتي لدى طلاب اللغة الانجليزية في أداء الأفعال الخطابية: طلبة
السنة الأولى ماستر بالمركز الجامعي أحمد صالح بالنعامة أنموذجا

Nabila El Hadj Said

Lecturer B, Ahmed Salhi University Centre, Naama, el-hadj-said@cuniv-naama.dz

نبيلة الحاج سعيد

أستاذ محاضر ب، المركز الجامعي بالنعامة أحمد صالح، كلية الآداب واللغات الأجنبية، قسم اللغة الانجليزية،

el-hadj-said@cuniv-naama.dz

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Abstract:

As a communication means, English plays a vital role in cross-cultural communication but linguistic knowledge is not sufficient for successful linguistic communication. Therefore, pragmatic competence is an essential part of communicative competence due to the fact that lack of pragmatic knowledge sets up barriers to the success of interactions. The present study aims to explore pragmatic failure among 1st year Master students of English while performing speech acts in their oral communication, and to provide useful suggestions to develop their pragmatic competence. For more valid results, the data are gathered and analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively by means of a multiple choice questionnaire and an interview. The findings of this study revealed that the majority of participants committed pragmatic failure in the suggested situations. As a result, subjects' responses attested that Master students are pragmatically deficient and this may lead to breakdowns and misunderstanding in communication. It was also noticed that a significant number of students confused between formal and informal speech.

Keywords: communication, pragmatic failure, speech acts, pragmatic knowledge.

الملخص باللغة العربية:

نظرا لاعتبار اللغة وسيلة للاتصال، تلعب اللغة الإنجليزية دورا حيويا في التواصل بين الثقافات ولكن المعرفة اللغوية ليست كافية للتواصل اللغوي الناجح. لذلك تعد الكفاءة البراغماتية جزءا أساسيا من الكفاءة التواصلية، نظرا لحقيقة أن الافتقار إلى المعرفة البراغماتية يضع حواجز أمام نجاح التواصل. تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى اكتشاف النقص البراغماتي الموجود بين طلاب السنة الأولى ماستر في اللغة الإنجليزية أثناء أداء الأفعال الخطابية، وتقديم اقتراحات مفيدة لتطوير كفاءتهم البراغماتية. للحصول على نتائج صحيحة وأكثر دقة تم جمع البيانات وتحليلها كميا ونوعيا عن طريق استبيان متعدد الخيارات ومقابلة شفوية. حيث كشفت نتائج هذه الدراسة أن غالبية المشاركين لوحظ لديهم نقصا براغماتيا في الحالات المقترحة. ونتيجة لذلك، أثبتت إجابات العينة المختارة أن طلاب الماستر يعانون من نقص براغماتي وقد يؤدي ذلك إلى حدوث خلل وسوء فهم في الاتصال. كما لوحظ أيضا أن عددا كبيرا من الطلاب يخلطون في التمييز بين الخطاب الرسمي والخطاب غير الرسمي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التواصل – النقص البراغماتي – الأفعال الخطابية – المعرفة البراغماتية

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication is a vital component of any social life in which individuals are in need to interact with each other to achieve goals. It is through language that people can communicate in different contexts and settings. Nevertheless, while interacting, it is necessary to follow some conventions and norms so that the interaction will be appropriate, and not only holding meaning. However, many language users do not succeed to use a language effectively because of the poor linguistic and pragmatic knowledge. Therefore, to achieve a successful communication, learners are required to be aware of the target language and its pragmatic knowledge.

In this study, the researcher explores pragmatic knowledge in the English language teaching in an Algerian university, Naama University Centre, where pragmatic instruction does not receive enough attention when compared to linguistic structures and rules. Accordingly, it is indispensable to focus on pragmatic knowledge in second language teaching and learning.

Neglecting pragmatic knowledge may lead to pragmatic failure among EFL students which may also cause some violations in intercultural communication. In this vein, Thomas (1983:92) claims that "pragmatic competence is the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context". Otherwise she stated that deficiency in pragmatic ability would lead to failure in interaction and thus affecting learning negatively. Foreign language

learners have to use language properly to realize their communicative purposes and avoid conflicts and misunderstandings.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Pragmatics

As reported by Crystal (1985:240), pragmatics is defined as "the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication." It is the study of how context and environment contribute to meaning. For second language learners, teaching pragmatics offers them the opportunity to gain knowledge of how native speakers of the foreign language behave in different settings and thus to avoid breakdowns in interaction. In this respect, Bardovi-Harlig (2010) asserts that the study of linguistic acts within the context they are produced in helps learners to be aware of the suitable language in the appropriate situations. As a result, it is crucial to learn about the use of speech acts in foreign culture to evade any pragmatic failure.

2.2. Pragmatic Competence

The ability of establishing and maintaining effective communication and being aware of norms and conventions of a particular society is called pragmatic competence. Pragmatic competence has been defined as the knowledge of contextually proper language use; it was recognized as sociolinguistic competence. According to Canale in Kasper (1997), pragmatic competence entails "illocutionary

competence or the knowledge of the sociolinguistic conventions for performing language functions appropriately in a given context.”

Following Bachman’s model (in Kasper, 1997), language competence is comprised of organizational competence and pragmatic competence. Organizational competence includes understanding linguistic units, and pragmatic competence involves “illocutionary competence” (which means knowledge of communicative acts) and “sociolinguistic competence” (which means how to use language appropriately to achieve effective interactions

2.3. Definition of Pragmatic Failure

Pragmatic failure is defined by J.Thomas (1983) in her article *Cross-cultural Pragmatic Failure* as “the inability to understand what is meant by what is said”.

To illustrate this definition, Thomas provided the following examples:

“a. H perceives the force of S’s utterance stronger or weaker than S intended s/he should perceive it;

b. H perceives as an order an utterance that S intended s/he should perceive as a request;

c. H perceives S’s utterance as ambivalent where S intended no ambivalence;

d. S expects H to be able to infer the force of his/her utterance, but is relying on the system of knowledge or beliefs that S and H do not share.” (1983: 94).

2.4. Thomas’s Classification of Pragmatic Failure

In the opinion of Thomas, pragmatic failure is classified into two categories: Pragmalinguistic Failure and Sociopragmatic Failure. She states that:

“pragmalinguistic failure occurs when the pragmatic force mapped by the speaker onto a given utterance is systematically different from most frequently assigned to it by native speakers of the target language, or when conversational strategies are inappropriately transferred from the speaker’s mother tongue to the target language.”(Thomas: 1983).

As regards sociopragmatic failure, it is concerned with the inappropriate use of linguistic behaviours which leads to breakdowns in communication.

2.5. Speech Acts

Speech acts appropriate use is crucial for successful communication. Language users need to be aware of the different speech acts and how to perform them in different contexts and settings. Speech Act theory was introduced by Austin (1962) in *How to Do Things with Words*. Austin (1962) explains that utterances are used to do things. Speech act theory is a subfield of pragmatics which is concerned with the way utterances can be used to carry out functions.

A speech act is an utterance that serves a function in interaction. It may be composed of one word like “thanks” to express gratitude. Speech acts are produced when people offer greetings, requests, invitations, apologies ...

Five categories of speech acts can be differentiated, according to Searle in Levinson (1983: 240), these classifications are representatives, directives, commissives, expressive, and declarations:

a) Representatives

Representatives are the utterances that the speaker produces after observing certain things. For example, speakers may give his /her opinion about a person saying: "he is kind".

Representatives can be performed using verbs such as: tell, state, remind, guess, report, assure, conclude claim, describe, predict, inform, agree, deny.

b) Directives

Directives are utterances that are used to get someone to do something. This category of speech acts include: questioning, requesting, orders, commands and suggestions. For example, when someone says "Could you pass me salt, please?", the utterance refers to a request from the speaker to do something which is passing him salt.

c) Commissives:

Commissives are acts that commit speakers to do something in the future. This category involves promising, offering, threatening, and refusals. For example, when someone tells: "I will visit you" means that the speaker promised the addressee that he/she will visit him.

d) Expressives:

Expressives are speech acts that represent a psychological state. They include

welcoming congratulating, apologizing, and thanking. For example, when someone says: "congratulations, well done", the utterances mean that the speaker congratulated the addressee for his/her success.

e) Declarations

Declarations are the utterances that cause immediate changes. These include declaring marriage war etc... For example, in the pronouncement of marriage; the priest says: "I declare you husband and wife". This utterances represent declaring marriage. As far as the field of teaching is concerned, this classification has been regarded as the appropriate one to be adopted. EFL learners must be aware of the utterances they produce and the context of these words.

3. Methodology

3.1. Instruments

In order to boost the validity and the reliability of the study findings, the current study involves a multi-method approach that is a quantitative investigation which includes a multiple choice questionnaire, and a qualitative study involving an interview. The questionnaire comprises five situations; each situation involves a real life communicative setting. The participants are asked to select the appropriate expression in each situation. In addition to the questionnaire, the interview was adopted to investigate whether students have suggestions to improve pragmatic instruction in EFL classrooms.

3.2. Participants:

The questionnaires were handed out at Naama University Centre to 80 English Master students. The researcher did not

consider the age and gender of the participants while carrying out the study. As far as the interview is concerned, there was a random selection of subjects.

The research was conducted in classrooms. The students had been informed that the study aimed to test their pragmatic ability. The researcher explained to them that they should write down the appropriate statement in each situation. The interviewees were very cooperative and the needed information were provided and their answers were noted.

4. Multiple Choice Questionnaire Results:

4.1. Situation 1: Greeting

In this situation, EFL learners are requested to select the appropriate statement from the options proposed to greet a British friend they have seen for the first time. It is noticed that both the social distance and the level of formality are increased because the greeting is directed to a foreigner.

Table1. Percentage of EFL Students Responses in Situation 1

Options	Percentage of Responses
Good morning/afternoon/evening/day,	20% (16 out of 80)
How's it going?	1.25% (1 out of 80)
Pleased to meet you	3.75% (3 out of 80)
Hi , how are you?	75% (60

responses)

As it is revealed in the table, the majority of the participants (75%) adopted option “d” (Hi, how are you?). The choice of this option seems to be a pragmatic failure because this option can be employed among close friends and people we know very well but not to a foreigner. Participants confuse between formal and informal statements and between formal and informal contexts. Nevertheless, it is appropriate to say “Good morning/afternoon/evening/day” to greet someone for the first time and when the social distance is high. It is then important to note that in this situation, the use of formal greetings is necessary in order to avoid misunderstanding and conflicts.

According to table 1 results, Algerian university EFL students commit pragmatic failure when greeting foreign people. They have a pragmatic failure in this situation, only (20%) of them were pragmatically successful. Thus, it is necessary for EFL learners to be aware of the different effective expressions used for greeting to evade any pragmatic failure.

4.2. Situation 2: Thanking

In this situation, participants were asked to thank their teacher who provided them with some useful books they needed. There was a tendency towards the use of the options “a”, “b”, and “d”. The option “a” (33.75%), option “b” (36.25%), and option “d” (28.75%).

Table2. Percentage of EFL Students

Responses in Situation 2

Options	Percentage of Responses
I appreciate your help!	33.75% (27)
Thank you very much indeed.	36.25% (29)
Thanks a million	1.25% (1)
Thanks for your help	28.75% (23)

Another pragmatic failure appears in situation 2 since participants opted for options “b”, “c”, and “d”. Thanking a teacher requires to be formal, whereas these options “b”, “c”, and “d” are to be used in less formal situations with relatives and close friends. In order to avoid pragmatic failure in this situation, it would be preferable to employ the option “I appreciate your help!” because it is more formal. Thus, participants commit pragmatic failure while thanking since only (33.75%) of them were pragmatically successful. They did not distinguish between formal and informal thanking expressions.

4.3. Situation 3: Requests:

In this situation, students are supposed to select the suitable expression used for asking their teacher for some references in Pragmatics. Table 3 displays the results of students' answers about expressing requests. It represents the participants' percentage distribution in the second situation.

Table 3. Percentage of EFL Students Responses in Situation 3

Options	Percentage of Responses
Would you mind providing me with some references in Pragmatics?	25% (20)
I was wondering if it would be possible to provide me with some references in Pragmatics ?.	23.75% (19)
Will you provide me with some references in Pragmatics?	36.25% (29)
Can you provide me with some references in Pragmatics?	15% (12)

As it is shown in table 3, participants' choice varied between options “a” with the percentage of (25%), option “b” with (23.75%), option “c” with (36.25%), and option “d” with (15%). Their choice was unsuccessful since the expression “Will you provide me with some references in Pragmatics?” was used by most participants, this option is less formal and since the social distance between teacher and students is high, speech formality is needed.

4.4. Situation 4: Congratulating

In this situation, subjects are asked to choose the appropriate option for

congratulating their teacher for his promotion. According to the results of table 4, the choice of the congratulating expressions was inappropriate; there was a tendency towards the three options “b”, “c”, and “d” which call for informality.

Table4. Percentage of EFL Students Responses in Situation 4

Options	Percentage of Responses
Congratulations on your achievement.	37.5 % (30)
Congrats! That's fantastic.	25 % (20)
Well done, teacher!	21.25 % (17)
Bravo, you did it teacher!	16.25% (13)

The dominant options in this situation cause breakdowns in communication. In reverse, the most courteous and suitable expression is option “a” (Congratulations on your achievement) given that the social distance between addressee and the addresser is high.

Accordingly, the participants are assumed to adopt formal ways to congratulate keeping the social distance that exists to avoid misunderstanding. It is then clear that students ignore about the norms and etiquettes of other cultures mainly politeness.

4.5. Situation 5: Compliments:

In this situation, the participants are

asked to choose the appropriate expression used for complimenting the friend's mother cooking. Based on the subjects' responses, the table shows the distribution of percentage as follows:

Table5. Percentage of EFL Students Responses in Situation 5

Options	Percentage of Responses
I admire your ability to cook such delicious dishes.	30 % (24)
What a delicious dish you cooked!	40 % (32)
The chicken was delicious!	15 % (12)
I wish I could cook as well as you	15 % (12)

According to data presented in this table, to compliment the friend's mother for the dishes she prepared, participants preferred to use option “b” with the percentage of (40 %), option “c” with the percentage of (15 %), and option “d” with (15 %). In this case, EFL learners are not aware enough of the appropriate expressions used for complimenting. In order to avoid pragmatic failure, it would be preferable to use option “a” which is “I admire your ability to cook such delicious dishes”, because the addressee (friend's mother) requires more formality and respect.

5. Results of the Participants' Interview:

The interviewees were asked to

answer the questions according to their knowledge and opinion. The majority of respondents claimed that they have difficulty while communicating with foreign friends which sometimes leads to misunderstanding in their interaction. They said that they can not avoid pragmatic failure.

Concerning the main causes of this failure, respondents mentioned that cultural differences between their country and other countries cause such failure in communication. They also mentioned that there is a lack of knowledge about the target culture in their learning which is responsible for their pragmatic deficiency.

A variety of propositions were provided by the interviewees on what they can suggest to enhance the teaching of pragmatic pedagogy in the Algerian EFL classrooms.

Some mentioned that cultural pedagogy and culture should be integrated as an indispensable part of English teaching. They suggested that textbooks should be improved by inserting more authentic cultural materials.

Others advocated that teachers should take on the responsibility of integrating pragmatic knowledge and cultural background into EFL classrooms.

6. Discussion:

Based on the questionnaire's overall results, it is noticed that EFL Master students in Naama University Centre were pragmatically unsuccessful when using speech acts. As regards the five given situations, a significant number of

participants selected unsuitable expressions. Hence, students have to be aware of formal and informal speech. There was confusion in determining formal and informal settings. It is acknowledged that in interaction, formal language is used in formal contexts where the social distance and the social status are high. Whereas, informal language is employed among close people and those we know well.

Additionally, in this study, it is observed that EFL students have a pragmatic deficiency performing speech acts. This is due to the inability in the target language. In this vein, Li (2011) and Shen (2013) claim that there is an incompetence in foreign language learning. EFL students need to communicate effectively in a second language and not only linguistic knowledge. They are required to master pragmatic competence and to be able to communicate successfully in the target language. And as it was suggested by the respondents in the interview, students' pragmatic competence should be developed in classroom.

As reported by to Fernández (2008), deficiency in pragmatic competence causes breakdowns and conflicts in communication. Any successful interaction needs pragmatic competence Li (2011). Due to pragmatic incompetence, EFL students fail to utter different expressions while speaking to foreigners, such as requesting expressions, thanking and greeting. Thus, teachers are supposed to employ various techniques and strategies to improve their students' pragmatic knowledge and avoid failure. Teachers may suggest topics to discuss in classroom to create a cultural environment of English language speaking countries. In this respect, Fernández (2008:20) points out that "role playing is an excellent exercise in

which a student can carry out similar situations to daily communication”.

The teachers and professors should integrate pragmatic knowledge in classroom by for example, asking them to play roles in different situations. Concerning textbooks, they should be loaded with materials that include cultural norms and conventions of the target language.

7. CONCLUSION

The current paper explored pragmatic failure among Naama Univesrity Centre EFL students while communicating and using speech acts such as thanking, greeting, complimenting, congratulating, and requesting.

Students’ pragmatic breakdown prevents them from establishing good relationships, and from expressing their feelings, attitudes, opinions and needs. It is then necessary to differentiate between formal and informal language, and formal and informal settings to avoid “pragmatic failure”.

Through this study, the researcher attempted to validate that EFL university students commit pragmatic failure when they interact with people. As it was displayed in the results, the majority of students are pragmatically incompetent. Thus, it is of great importance to develop pragmatic competence by stressing on cultural and pragmatic pedagogy in EFL classrooms.

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