

DEVELOPING EFL LEARNERS' CROSS-CULTURAL PRAGMATIC UNDERSTANDING THROUGH THE  
TEACHING OF LISTENING COMPREHENSION:  
A SUCCESSFUL PERSONAL TEACHING EXPERIENCE

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**Abstract**

This paper is prompted by the fact that despite the numerous researches and guidelines that have been produced in order to help foreign language teachers to integrate components of intercultural communication in the English classroom, especially the pragmatic ones, they remain insufficient for untrained novice teachers. Practical strategies on how to exactly guide teachers to include some aspects of pragmatics are very limited. Teachers with lack of experience and appropriate teaching strategies might find difficulties in building a rigid framework for setting instructive strategies around pragmatic themes. Therefore, as a contribution to previous researches, the main aim of this paper is to share some specific personal teaching practices and showing concrete teaching models for teaching EFL learners' pragmatic skills through the program of listening comprehension.

**Key Words:** Cross-cultural Communication, Pragmatics Failure, English Language, Listening Comprehension Program.

**تحسين المهارات البراغمية لتعلمي اللغة الانجليزية  
من خلال برنامج الاستيعاب السماعي**

**ملخص**

كما هو جرد معروف، للتمكن من اللغة الثانية، ليس على الطلبة الإلمام بالنحو والقواعد والنطق الصحيح و فقط، وانما معرفة طرق استماعهم ايضا. فعلى سبيل المثال، العديد من طلبة اللغة الانجليزية لدينا وحتى المتميزون منهم يقدرون على تكوين جمل صحيحة وتفسير المراد منها لكنهم يعجزون عن الفهم الدقيق للجمل او تكوين محاوره صحيحة، لهذا يهدف هذا البحث الى مشاركة بعض الطرق والناهج التعليمية لتحسين المهارات البراغمية لتعلمي اللغة الانجليزية وذلك من خلال برنامج الاستيعاب السماعي.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الاختلاف الثقافي اللغة الانجليزية المهارات البراغمية برنامج الاستيعاب السماعي

**Introduction**

In the light of the globalization demand, helping English language learners to communicate effectively in cross-cultural context has become crucial. This is based on the fact that when learners, who used to have only knowledge of vocabulary, pronunciation, syntax often fail to recognize the setting, place and time of the interaction, are put in real life situation in which understanding the social factors governing the interaction, especially the pragmatics ones, are required, they demonstrate a failure in their intercultural communication causing a cross-cultural misunderstandings. This failure is

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called by Thompson (1983) 'cross-cultural pragmatic', which is the result of learners' lack of cross-cultural pragmatic differences awareness. The lack of thereof, according to Thomas (1983, p. 109), "may potentially threaten or disrupt collaborative interaction between native and non-native interlocutors".

This is simply because teachers, including myself, tend to put intensive focus on the language skills (e.g., learning grammar rules, how to write, and how to read) rather than attempting to raise our learners' pragmatic awareness and competence in order to help them use the target language, to borrow Hymes (1972)' term, *appropriately*.

In respect to this problem, a number of comparative studies involving the native and non-native speakers of English have been carried (to refer to the Arabic context, Al-Issa, 2003; Al-Eryani, 2007; Linde, 2009; Qadoury, 2011, among others) in order to raise teachers and learners' awareness thereupon. These studies have primarily focused on cross-cultural differences, i.e., requesting and refusal strategies, politeness strategies differences, and the like. Other researches offer foreign language teachers a number of guidelines with a set of cultural topics on how to promote intercultural communicative skills. The Common European Framework of References (CEFR) (2001), for instance, besides the importance of knowing the target community daily life, viz., beliefs, values and behaviors, body language, *savoir-vivre* (or knowing how to behave), and social habits, recommends the importance of knowing the social norms such as politeness, greetings, requesting are expressed through special use of language. Others suggest materials to teach the pragmatics of English for intercultural communication effectively. Dash (2004), for instance, proposes the use of dramas, and McConachy (2015) recommends for utilizing conversational transcripts, role-plays and other performance activities to help learners be able to "analyze language use in relation to context, to consider the role of intention and co-construction in interaction, and to explore the ways that cultural assumptions affect how individuals cognitively and affectively make sense of interactions"

(*ibid*, p. 26).

However, as it is observed, despite all these recommendations and guidelines, they remain insufficient for untrained and novice teachers. Practical strategies on how to exactly guide teachers to include some aspects of pragmatics are very limited. Teachers with lack of adequate knowledge, teaching experience, appropriate training on how to integrate dimensions of culture, and appropriate teaching strategies might find serious difficulties in building a rigid framework for setting instructive strategies around pragmatic themes. Teachers whose roles have always been didactical – instructor - will find themselves swinging between two opposing skills – language skills versus cultural skills. Ultimately, they will be more inclined to focus on the teaching of grammar and vocabulary rather than dealing with unfamiliar everyday languages and cultures.

(Kramsch, 2013).

Therefore, as a contribution to the previous researches, in this paper, I allow myself to provide a simple, but a concrete, model on how to develop EFL learners' cross-cultural pragmatic skills through the listening comprehension program. That is to say, teachers will hit two birds with one stone, as the proverb says. In one hand, they can focus on the development of the target language skill (listening), while targeting the pragmatic one, on the other hand. Thus, this practical guidance is provided to encourage teachers to integrate the necessary pragmatic and cultural aspects of the English language into their lessons in a confident way.

Yet, before this, it is necessary first to briefly provide an overview about the nature of cross-cultural pragmatic in order for things to be made explicit.

**Cross Cultural Pragmatic**

Sometimes when people from different cultures have to interact with one another, they find it very difficult and sometimes impossible to share ideas, feeling and experiences with their interactional partners. This situation often gives rise to misunderstandings and misinterpretations and turns the interaction into failure. A branch that attempts to explain such issues related to intercultural communicative failure is called ‘cross-cultural pragmatics’, which has emerged in recent times as an important area of linguistic research. Cross-cultural pragmatics does not intend only to show how the lack of some cultural aspects may lead to misunderstanding and communication failure, but it further to illustrate that language is more than communicating words, ‘when it is used in contexts of communication, it is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways’ (Kramsch, 1998, p. 3). To understand the exact implications of this branch, it is essential to first to understand pragmatics.

To begin with, as it has become well known that when we talk we normally think of “context” as the situation in which something happens. That is to say, to consider ‘who is speaks, what language, to whom, when, and where’ (Fishman, 1972, p. 244), because language choice is generally influenced by one or more of these components. For any specific language, its native speaker inherently knows the uses and the rules of many types of expressions. These rules are understood only by native speakers are often hidden from language learners because in most cases the meanings of everyday language are implied, not explicitly stated. The field that focuses on how language is used and interpreted in social contexts is called *pragmatics* (Livingston 1983; Yule, 1996). More specifically, influenced by some linguistic theories, pragmatics studies attempts o explain:

- ✓ How speakers use language to accomplish intended actions and how listeners determine the intended meaning from what is said (speech Acts, Austen 1962; Searle 1969).
- ✓ What a speaker intends to mean with his/her utterances instead of what speakers say, (Conversation Implicature, Grice 1975).
- ✓ Why people choose to express an illocutionary act indirectly rather than directly (Politeness, Brown and Levinson 1987; Leech 2014).

Pragmatics is thus embraces many subfield of linguistics that emphasizes the importance of understanding the situation in which language happens, the societal factors governing its use, and the meaning of words in context, which involves “interpreting how linguistic choices index the socio-cultural context, including the relationship between the two speakers” (McConachy, 2015, p.18). To state differently, the speaker implies a meaning and the hearer interprets and infers the meaning like the following example:

<p><b>Eg 1:</b></p> <p>A: See you later B: Ok, bye</p>	<p><b>Eg 2:</b></p> <p>A: See you later C: yes at what time?</p>
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In the most English context, ‘See you later’ means “I will see you again, sometime”. In example (1), B interprets A’s utterance successfully. B understands the meaning because s/he understands the cultural context. So s/he responds equally ‘Ok, bye’. However, in example (2), C does not respond appropriately. C misunderstands the message, thinking in a specific time.

Therefore, in the context of foreign language teaching and learning, this example shows a 'pragmatic failure' (Jackson, 2014) or 'cross cultural pragmatic failure' (Thomas, 1995). This failure is resulted from a person or a language learner':

- ✓ Inability of understanding what is meant by what is said (;Thomas, 1995; Yule, 1996)
- ✓ Inability to produce and understand situationally appropriate language behavior (LoCastro 2003, p. 229)
- ✓ Inability of realizing the illocutionary force of speech acts, (Barron, 2003)
- ✓ Inability to understand language use in social context (Kramsch, 1998; Naresh, 2017)

In the lieu of this, incompetence in pragmatics often leads to miscommunication and thus misunderstanding. Therefore, the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand a language in context (Kramsch, 1998), and the ability to understand the implied meaning (Kasper, 1984, 1997) is referred as pragmatic competence, and ergo learners with intercultural pragmatic competence possess the ability to produce and comprehend utterances that is adequate to the socio-cultural context in which communication takes place (Alcón, 2012 and Kecskes, 2015).

Educationally speaking, this in return requires English language learners to learn how to understand the pragmatic meaning of the sentence in order to avoid miscommunications - Not only to know how people produce and comprehend meanings through language, but also to learn how to use them, to borrow Hymes (1972)'s term, appropriately.

#### **Cross Cultural Pragmatic Failure**

Miller (1974, quoted in Thomas, 1983, p. 1) states that most of our misunderstanding is not due to our failure in hearing or understanding words, but it is by large due to our failure in understanding the speaker's intention.

Thomas (1983) introduces the concept of pragmatic failure to explain thereupon. According to him, pragmatic failure refers to "the inability to understand what is meant by what is said" (p. 91). Thomas has further distinguished between two kinds of pragmatic failure: 'pragmalinguistic failure' and 'sociopragmatic failure'.

a) Pragmalinguistic failure: It occurs "when speech act strategies are inappropriately transferred from L1 to L2... caused by differences in the linguistic encoding of pragmatic force" (ibid, p. 99). That is to say, pragmalinguistic failure has to do with the language problem. It usually happens because learners respond to what speakers say rather than to what they mean (Kasper, 1984, p. 3).

The following example presented by Thomas (1983, pp. 101-102) displays how a pragmalinguistic failure can be occurred as a result of teaching-induced errors: a Russian speaker of English responding to a native speaker of English:

#### **Example 1:**

- Native speaker of English: Is it a good restaurant?
- Russian speaker of English: Of course.

#### **Example 2:**

- Native speaker of English: Is it open on Sundays?
- Russian speaker of English: Of course

Based on the above situations, according to Thomas (1983), the Russian speaker responds only to what the English speaker said rather than what he meant, making a

complete sentence like classroom discourse. The Russian intends to agree by using 'of course' meaning 'yes', which is acceptable in Russian, but in this context 'of course' means 'What a stupid question!' to the English native speakers, which may likely to be regarded impolite or insulting. This happens because the pragmalinguistic failure caused the teaching-induced errors that Thomas referred to.

Admittedly, a similar situation can be found in the Algerian context, when the Algerian speakers might not apply the English expressive ways and apply their communicative strategies to the target language like the following examples:

**Example 1:**

- Native speaker of English: John seems a kind person.
- Algerian speaker of English: Of course.

In this situation, like the Russian speaker, the Algerian speaker responds only to what the English speaker said rather than what he meant. The Algerians tend to agree by using intensifier like 'sure', which is acceptable in Algerians context; however in this context 'of course' can be regarded as sarcasm of what the English speaker said, like 'how stupid what you say!'.

**Example 2:** An English speaker thanking an Algerian for his help (Speech Act of Thanks)

- English speaker: Thanks a lot. That's a great help.
- Algerian speaker: Never mind

Algerians speakers usually respond to others' thanks by saying 'never mind or no problem', but it can be expressed in English by the natives as 'It doesn't matter.' In English, these expressions are not always appropriate. This means that the Algerian learner did not respond to the compliment appropriately.

b) Socio-pragmatic failure: According to Thomas (1983, p. 99), socio-pragmatic failure arises from "cross-culturally different perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behaviour". Riley (1989, p. 234) reports that this failure can occur when a participant tries to impose the social rules of their culture on his communicative behavior in a situation where the social rules of another culture would be more appropriate, as the following example illustrates:

A: I really like your T-shirt

B: Thanks

A: Where did you buy it?

B: I bought it at (shop) in (town/city)

A: How much does it cost?

Grammatically, everything in the situation is correct. A foreign language learner who used to study from grammar books and textbooks finds the phrase 'how much does it cost?' totally fine. However, unlike some cultures, where it is considered totally fine and even polite to ask how much something costs, in most English-speaking countries like the UK, Australia and America, this is likely to be considered as an intrusion of privacy.

Another aspect of cross cultural pragmatic failure, as I would like to mention herein, can also be attributed to phonetic and phonological deficiency. Let's consider the following example, which is an example of cultural differences resulting in miss-communication in the setting of a British bank:

*Customer:* Excuse me.

*Cashier:* Yes, sir.

*Customer:* I want to deposit some MONEY.

*Cashier:* Oh. I see. OK. You'll need a deposit form then.

*Customer:* Yes. NO, NO. This is the WRONG one.

*Cashier:* Sorry?

*Customer:* I got my account in WEMBLEY.

*Cashier:* Oh you need a Giro form then.

*Customer:* Yes, Giro form.

*Cashier:* Why didn't you say so the first time?

*Customer:* Sorry, Didn't KNOW.

*Cashier:* All right?

*Customer:* Thank you.

(Gumperz et al., 1979, pp. 21–24, quoted in Kramsch, 1998, pp. 30-31).

The items that the customer emphasizes are in ITALIC. Kramsch (1998) attributes the misunderstanding in this exchange to the lack of pragmatic coherence. As the tone of the Asian-English speaker's voice rises and falls on 'MONEY', the British-English speaker might think that the Asian-English speaker is being pushy and rude; if the cashier is an Asian, he/she would probably not take this sentence as either rude or pushy. Similarly, the cashier emphasis on the 'GIRO' and on 'All RIGHT?' might be heard by the Asian as indication of an over-emotional or an irritated reaction from the cashier. The result is that neither participant is very happy. According to Riley (1989), this kind of mismatch can lead to problem in:

- Intention and interpretation
- Limited mutual understanding
- Culture biases

This is, unfortunately, because our English textbooks are not generally designed for the purpose of improving the learners' grammatical and reading skills, without attempting to raise their pragmatic competence. As a result, many of our English students, even the fairly advanced learners, may have clear understanding of words, but they do not have enough understanding that they sometimes unconsciously break the norms of certain social rules that govern language use. When they are in a real situation of the target language community, their use of English language can easily cause pragmatic failure and cross-cultural misunderstandings, i.e., performing requests or other speech acts of apologies, refusals, complements, etc, inappropriately or simply differently to native speakers.

This is simply because learners who tend to learn how to ask and answer common questions in English from schools textbooks may not realize the problem in such following situation: In English textbooks, it is typically to find too direct questions like the following:

- What is your occupation?
- What is your hobby?"
- How much does it cost?

Though such phrases are grammatically correct, they are too direct to be appropriate, and thus they are not likely to be interpreted correctly by the English native listeners. In real life, phrases like 'What do you do? What do you do for fun? Or what do you do in your spare time?' are commonly used and therefore more appropriate. This is

because in most native English speaking countries it is important not to ask things too directly.

Therefore, from a pragmatic point of view, one can say that our English textbooks are not authentic enough, because using too direct questions in this way is likely to be regarded as an intrusion of privacy. Such examples are good examples to teach students practice language skills, but learners should be informed right from the beginning that English-speaking people rarely use them in such way. Therefore, an English learners may not understand the meaning of statement like this, 'have you got any cash on you', which can mean 'can you lend me some money, I do not have much on me'. In this vein, Wolfson (1983, p. 62) points out that "In interacting with foreigners, native speakers tend to be rather tolerant of errors in pronunciation or syntax. In contrast, violations of rules of speaking are often interpreted as bad manners since the native speaker is unlikely to be aware of sociolinguistic relativity".

Finally, from an analytical view, the above discussion suggests that cultivating learners' pragmatic competence in English classrooms should be a central objective of language learning in order to help learners to "become attuned to the ways in which discourse unfolds and how individuals consider and interpret particular aspects of context when making interactional choices" (McConachy, 2015, p. 22). Without this understanding, there would be a kind of linguistic deficiency when producing grammatical sentences that are irrelevant to the situation in which they occur.

#### **Procedure of Teaching Cross-Cultural Pragmatic**

First, believing in the eclectic way of teaching, the following strategy is not meant to be rigidly applied; teachers can adapt them to fit their students' needs, and classroom conditions; each teacher has a way in planning, selecting, and setting what is appropriate to their classes.

The following 6: 41 minutes' video clip called 'Pragmatic Failure in Intercultural Communication', taken from

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4b-ACqKkAMQ> can be used by English teachers to teach listening and pragmatic skills. The video segment contains instances of pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure. In this study, I use instance of sociopragmatic failure (see appendix A) (Preferably, converting the video segment into audio).

Objectives: This lesson aims:

- To develop the learners' listening skills;
- To make the learners understand that communicative language is not only what is worded;
- To deepen their understanding about pragmatics communication;
- To make them understand that misunderstanding can arise due to ignorance of some communicative style;
- To help them avoid their ignorance some communicative style.

#### **Step One: The Pre-listening phase**

*Raising Awareness:* In this phase the instructor raises his/her students' awareness about the cultural differences in communicative style, and how conflict may arise in the case of the lack of thereof.

#### **Step Two: The While listening Phase**

*Listen to the Interaction:* In this phase, the students listen to the audio segment for three times, while trying to complete the conversation.

The English native speaker: oh hi, nice to meet you?

The non-native Speaker: .....

The English native speaker: .....

The non-native Speaker: .....

The English native speaker: .....

The non-native Speaker: .....

The English native speaker: .....

**Step Three: The After-listening Phase**

**Checking the Learners' Understanding:** In this phase, the instructor shows the conversation to his/her students, and let them complete the task.

- What do you think is the cultural background of the speakers?

.....

.....

.....What do you think does the English native speaker mean when he says 'Anyway, nice to meet you'?

- a. He is not interested in continuing the conversation with an Asian speaker
- b. He finishes the conversation
- What do you think does the non-native speaker do when the English speaker says 'anyway, nice to meet you'?
- a. He leaves the conversation
- b. He continues the conversation
- What do you think does the English native speaker really mean when he says 'oh, sorry I have to go'?
- a. He remembers something has to be done urgently
- b. He feels the non-native speaker does not respect his time and space.

**Step Four: The Analysis Phase**

*Analyzing the problem:* In this step, the instructor asks the learners a set of questions in order to identify and analyze the communicative problem while stimulate them to speak.

- How do you think the English speaker may feel towards the non-native speaker?
- How do you think the non native speaker may feel towards the English speaker?
- How should the conflict be resolved?

*Reflection:* Finally, the students should be familiar with the fact that there are some communicative situations they need to be familiar with in order to avoid future misunderstandings.

**Conclusion and Recommendation**

By way of conclusion, mastering language is not only a matter of having a command over its verbs, nouns and grammatical rules, but it also requires spontaneous ability of understanding certain social rules that govern language use. In many cases, as it is found, our learners may be able to produce accurate grammatically correct sentences and explain what one *should say*, but they, including even the fairly advanced ones, are unlikely to have an accurate understanding to *the intended meaning*. This lack of thereof can always lead to confusion and misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication.



In order to surmount this, it therefore is highly important “for teachers to find creative ways to prompt learners to reflect on the cultural assumptions that underlie the construction and interpretation of pragmatic meanings when English is used for intercultural communication” (McConachy, 2015, p. 18). Teachers should always remember that the goal of teaching English language is to develop their learners’ intercultural communication. Faced with this new educational goal, they are highly recommended to critically develop pedagogical strategies to meet the requirements of this new educational goal. They have to choose proper teaching strategies that do not focus just on the target language, but also on how it is used by its people in particular situations. In other words, it becomes crucial for teachers to provide successful learning strategies to help their learners understand the pragmatic meaning of the sentence in order to avoid miscommunications.

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