

Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure Among Nigerian ESL Learners: A Speech Act Perspective

Thankgod Ogba Igiri, PhD

Department Of English Language And Literature, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki

Prof. Martin Chukwuemeka Ogayi, PhD

Department Of English Language And Literature, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki

Oziomachukwu Akunna Ajemba, PhD

Department Of English Language, Faculty Of Arts, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Abstract

Pragmatic competence is a crucial component of communicative competence in second language use, yet it remains underdeveloped among many English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. This study examines cross-cultural pragmatic failure among Nigerian ESL learners, focusing on how sociocultural norms from indigenous Nigerian languages influence learners' use of English in intercultural communication. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected from 60 undergraduate ESL learners through discourse completion tasks (DCTs), classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews. The analysis, grounded in speech act theory and cross-cultural pragmatics, reveals recurrent pragmatic failure in requests, apologies, and refusals, particularly in terms of directness, politeness strategies, and mitigation. The findings underscore the role of negative pragmatic transfer and limited pragmatic instruction in ESL classrooms. The study recommends the systematic integration of pragmatic and intercultural competence into English language pedagogy in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Pragmatic failure, cross-cultural pragmatics, Nigerian English, ESL learners, speech acts, pragmatic competence*

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I. Introduction

Effective communication in a second language extends beyond grammatical accuracy to include the ability to use language appropriately in context. This ability, commonly referred to as pragmatic competence, enables speakers to interpret intended meanings and to select linguistically and socially appropriate forms in interaction (Leech, 1983; Savignon, 2002). Despite years of exposure to English, many Nigerian ESL learners experience communicative breakdowns in intercultural settings due to cross-cultural pragmatic failure.

Nigeria's multilingual and multicultural environment presents a unique context for studying pragmatic failure. English functions as the official language and primary medium of education, coexisting with over 500 indigenous languages. As a result, English usage in Nigeria is often shaped by local sociocultural norms, which may not align with pragmatic expectations in international English communication (Adegbija, 2004). This study investigates how such cultural influences manifest as pragmatic failure in Nigerian ESL learners' use of English.

Theoretical Framework

Speech Act Theory

This study is anchored in speech act theory, as proposed by Austin (1962) and further developed by Searle (1969). Speech acts emphasize that utterances perform actions such as requesting, apologizing, or refusing. The success of a speech act depends not only on linguistic form but also on sociocultural conventions governing its use.

Pragmatic Competence

Pragmatic competence involves both pragmalinguistic knowledge (linguistic resources for conveying meaning) and sociopragmatic knowledge (understanding social norms and expectations) (Leech, 1983; Thomas, 1983). Failure in either domain can lead to pragmatic failure.

Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure

Thomas (1983) distinguishes between pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure. While the former involves inappropriate linguistic choices, the latter stems from mismatched cultural assumptions. Nigerian ESL learners frequently experience sociopragmatic failure due to differences in politeness norms, hierarchy, and communal values.

II. Literature Review

Pragmatic Development in Second Language Acquisition

Research in second language acquisition has consistently shown that pragmatic competence does not develop automatically with grammatical proficiency (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999). Learners may produce grammatically correct utterances that are pragmatically inappropriate, particularly in speech acts that require sensitivity to social variables such as power, distance, and imposition (Kasper, 1997).

Cross-Cultural Studies on Pragmatic Failure

Cross-cultural pragmatic studies have demonstrated that pragmatic norms vary significantly across cultures (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). Learners often transfer L1 pragmatic strategies into L2 communication, resulting in over-directness or under-politeness (House, 2003).

Pragmatic Studies in the Nigerian ESL Context

Studies on Nigerian English suggest that cultural values such as respect for elders, social hierarchy, and communal solidarity shape language use (Adegbija, 2004). While these norms function effectively within local contexts, they may cause pragmatic misalignment in international communication.

III. Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative descriptive design to allow for in-depth analysis of learners' pragmatic behavior.

Participants

Sixty (60) undergraduate students enrolled in English language-related courses at a Nigerian university participated in the study. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 25 and represented diverse linguistic backgrounds, including Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa.

Instruments

Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs)

DCTs were designed to elicit responses to situations involving requests, apologies, and refusals across varying social contexts.

Classroom Observations

Naturally occurring classroom interactions were observed and recorded to capture authentic pragmatic usage.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews explored learners' perceptions of politeness, appropriateness, and cultural norms in English communication.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data were coded and analyzed thematically using the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) framework (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). Reliability was ensured through repeated coding and peer debriefing.

IV. Results And Discussion

Pragmatic Failure in Requests

Learners predominantly used direct request strategies regardless of social distance or power relations.

Table 1

Types of request strategies used by Nigerian ESL Learners.

| Request Strategy | Frequency | Percentage |
|-------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Direct Request | 32 | 53.3% |
| Conventionally indirect | 18 | 30.0% |

Non-conventionally indirect 10 16.7%

Note: Adapted from Blum-Kula et al (1989)

This preference reflects pragmatic transfer from indigenous languages where directness is often associated with sincerity and solidarity.

Pragmatic Failure in Apologies

Learners relied heavily on illocutionary force indicating devices (IFIDs) without sufficient explanation or repair.

Figure 1 Components of Apology Strategies used by Learners.

Figure 1 shows that IFIDs accounted for over 60% of apology components, while offers of repair and explanations were minimally used.

Pragmatic Failure in Refusals

Refusal strategies were frequently abrupt, lacking mitigation or supportive moves.

Table 2
Refusal Strategy Types and Pragmatic Effects

| Strategy | Example | Pragmatic Effect |
|----------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| Direct refusal | “I can’t attend.” | Perceived impoliteness |
| Excuse-based | “I am busy.” | Insufficient mitigation |
| Avoidance | Silence | Ambiguity |

Pedagogical Implications

The findings suggest the urgent need for explicit pragmatic instruction in Nigerian ESL classrooms. Teachers should:

- Introduce pragmatics as a core syllabus component
- Employ contrastive pragmatics to highlight cultural differences
- Use role-play and authentic discourse samples
- Encourage reflective awareness of intercultural communication norms

V. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that cross-cultural pragmatic failure among Nigerian ESL learners is primarily driven by sociocultural transfer and insufficient pragmatic instruction. Addressing this gap requires a shift from form-focused pedagogy to communication-oriented, culturally informed language teaching.

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