



## *Cultural Identity and Pragmatic Competence: A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Punjabi and Pashto Learners of English in Pakistan*

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### Abstract

*This study examines the influence of cultural identity on pragmatic competence among Punjabi and Pashto speakers learning English in Pakistan. It explores how learners perform speech acts such as requests, refusals, and apologies, focusing on how sociocultural norms shape their communicative strategies. Grounded in the framework of Interlanguage Pragmatics and constructivist epistemology, the study employs both Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) and semi-structured interviews to collect data from students and instructors. Through thematic analysis, distinctive pragmatic tendencies were observed. Punjabi learners exhibited a preference for directness and pragmatic efficiency, which sometimes compromised relational politeness. In contrast, Pashto learners demonstrated a tendency toward indirectness, elaborate politeness expressions, and a higher concern for maintaining social harmony and respect. These differences reflect how deeply cultural identity and social hierarchy influence communicative behavior in English as a second language context. The findings reveal that pragmatic transfer—both positive and negative—occurs frequently and is strongly rooted in learners' cultural frameworks. The study highlights that effective English language teaching should integrate elements of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy to address such variations. It further emphasizes the need for cross-cultural awareness, pragmatic flexibility, and role-based communicative training in ELT classrooms. By bridging culture and language learning, this research contributes to a more inclusive understanding of how local identities shape global communication practices.*

### Keywords:

*Interlanguage Pragmatics, Speech Act, Pragmatic Competence, Cultural Identity. Pakistani Learners, Cross-Cultural Communication.*



## **Background of the Study**

Language is not just a tool for us to communicate our feelings or pass on information; it is an essential social resource, which is used by individuals to build identity, negotiate relationships, and perform actions. Scholars like Chomsky (1957) have emphasized the cognitive role of language; Fishman (1972) and Bourdieu (1991) have emphasized its presence in the processes of social integration and symbolic capital. These views put the focus upon the role of language more than the communicative function, and is a strategic communication for survival, persuasion and placing on self in social structures; Within the second language acquisition context, pragmatic competence has become an important aspect of the ability to communicate. Pragmatic competence is appropriate use of language in specific social contexts (especially to carry out speech acts such as acceptance, rejections and regrets. These acts are subconsciously culturally and face sensitive. As such, they are most suitable for thinking about cross-cultural variation in communicative behavior. Pakistan is a socio-linguistically rich country, with Punjabi and Pashto being two such languages widely spoken local languages. These students frequently have varying cultural scripts into their usage of the English language. Punjabi speakers are straightforward and pragmatic. Despite the fact that the Pashto speakers are more concerned with indirection, and the harmony of relations. These orientations - represent deeper cultural values and shape learners' speech act in English. Previous studies have examined the discourse of marginalized groups, as well as strategic use of Language in Socio-Economic Contexts. However, minimal research has been undertaken on how cultural and identity is a determining factor for pragmatic performance of educated learners in educational contexts. This study fills this gap by looking at the culturally informed strategies used by Punjabi and Pashto learners of English in the realization of speech acts. It takes inspiration from Searle's (1979) Indirect Speech. Interlanguage Pragmatics and Act Theory in order to analyze that how learners negotiate the conflict between the L1 norms and L2 expectations. By taking into account the pragmatic behavior of university level learners of Islamabad, this research has a positive effect on understanding of language as a tool for the expression of culture communicative adaptation. It gives the role of identity on linguistic choices to the foreground and stresses the importance of using culturally responsive pedagogical approaches to English language teaching.

## **Problem Statement**

In a multilingual and multicultural educational environment, English learners find it hard to pragmatic adaptation on account of the influence of their indigenous cultural identities, previous Pragmatic failure has been explored in terms of conversational maxims, discourse and

gender, politeness strategies, the specific role of cultural identity in defining indirectness and speech act. Realization is still an under-researched area. Punjabi and Pashto students in particular bring with them: sociocultural norms into their communication: English-Punjab speakers prefer straightforwardness; Pashto speakers underline harmony between relationships and indirectness.

This study addresses the gap by investigating how learners from these two cultural backgrounds perform speech acts such as requests, refusals, and apologies in English. It draws on the Interlanguage Pragmatics framework to analyze how cultural scripts influence pragmatic transfer and communicative strategies. By focusing on university-level learners in Islamabad, the research aims to uncover how identity and cultural orientation shape pragmatic behavior in formal and informal English interactions.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the pragmatic strategies deployed by Punjabi learners during English speech act performance?
2. How do Pashto learners perform requests, refusals, and apologies in English?
3. In what way do the strategies reflect cultural identity differences?

### **Literature Review**

#### **1. Second language acquisition (SLA) Pragmatic Competence.**

Pragmatic competence has to do with the aptitude to utilize language in a social setting properly. It also involves the interpretation of speech acts, production of a speech act, politeness strategies, and context-sensitive communication (Bachman, 1990; Taguchi, 2009). Being one of the fundamental elements of communicative competence, it adds to grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence (Canale and Swain, 1980). However, grammatical correctness and vocabulary learning are the basic determinants of learning a language, but pragmatic competence helps a language learner to effectively interact in the real world (Kasper & Rose, 2002).

But pragmatic competence does not necessarily emerge in conjunction with linguistic competence. The learners usually have problems with following the sociopragmatic rules, especially when native scripts in their cultures are not closely similar to those of the target language (Thomas, 1983). This disconnection may lead to pragmatic failure, in which even grammatical utterances may cause misunderstanding or even offense because of social misuse.

#### **2. Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP) Theory**

Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP) is a study focused on how pragmatic norms are acquired and used by learners of the second language who may be influenced by the native

sociocultural values (Kasper and Blum-Kulka, 1993). ILP identifies two important dimensions: pragma linguistic competence (the knowledge of the linguistic forms that are employed to carry out speech acts), and sociopragmatic competence (the knowledge of the social norms and contextual appropriateness of the linguistic forms). The ILP theoretical ground is based on some influential models. The speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) theorizes language as an action and it dwells on communicative actions like requests, refusals, and apologies. The Politeness Theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987) discusses the face-saving, and cultural diversity in interaction. According to Grice, (1975), in the theory of Conversational Implicature, indirectness and inference are important in communication. All these frameworks offer the analytical prism against which the pragmatic action of the Punjabi and Pashto students may be viewed.

### **3. Politeness Tactics and Cultural Self**

The Politeness Theory created by Brown and Levinson (1987) includes two dimensions of face, namely positive face, or the wish to be liked and approved, and negative face, or the wish to be independent and not imposed upon. The cultural norms play a major role in determining how the learners deal with face-threatening acts during communication. Punjabis tend to prefer positive politeness tactics and bald-on-record expressions, which display assertiveness and preference of familiarity (Saleem and Saleem, 2023). Conversely, Pashto students are more likely to use negative politeness and off-record as well as focus on deference and harmony in relations (Alam, 2021). These trends are similar to the cultural dimensions developed by Hofstede where the Punjabi culture is individualistic and the Pashto one is collectivistic and high-power distance (Hofstede, 2001). These cultural orientations influence pragmatic decisions of the learners and their interactional behavior in the English language.

### **4. Pragmatic Transfer and Sociocultural Scripts.**

Pragmatic transfer will take place when learners will transfer norms of their first language to speech acts in English. Such a translation may result in communication success or failure based on the intensity of the compatibility between the two cultural systems (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). This process is based on sociocultural scripts internalized norms that define how to interact.

Empirical studies have shown that Punjabi students have pragmatic transfer in congratulatory speech acts, which are likely to be dependent on social power issues (Saleem & Saleem, 2023). There are other oddities to Pashto, such as a request being phrased indirectly and an apology being phrased directly, which students who are socially conditioned (Alam &

Gill, 2021). Such results suggest that how cultural scripts are important in the formation of pragmatic behavior in learners and the need to use culturally sensitive pedagogy.

### **5. Pakistani Learners Comparative Analysis.**

Comparative studies have been done to try to assess pragmatic differences among Pakistani students with other linguistic backgrounds. Alam et al. (2021) have discovered that Pashto learners are more supportive of a direct approach in offering an apology whereas Saraiki learners would rather be indirect. The sociopragmatic transference in requests, refusals and acceptance of Pashto and Saraiki language learner Thesis by Alam, NUML created a new apology system.

It is noted by Saleem and Saleem (2023) that social hierarchy elicits speech act realization in Punjabi learners, especially when congratulation is involved. Alam and Gill (2021) observed that Pashto learners tend to apply the native norms using speech acts in English and may cause cultural incongruence. All these studies affirm the importance of culturally responsive pedagogies in English Language Teaching (ELT) and, in particular, in multilingual settings such as Pakistan, where students come to the classroom with a wide range of cultural expectations.

### **6. Cultural Identity and Language Learning.**

Cultural identity has become a central factor in developing attitudes, motivation and practical decisions of the learners. According to Norton (2013), the concept of identity refers to how individuals conceptualize their connection to the world, arranged through time and space. Investment in the English language is also affected by cultural identifications and the validity of the learners in the target language community (Darvin & Norton, 2015).

The learners in the multilingual countries such as Pakistan work between the complex constructions of identity. Introduction of the distinct cultural is given by speakers of Punjabis and Pashtos. Directions to the English acquisition process that determines their pragmatic conduct and interaction in the classroom (Rahman, 2011; Sarfraz et al., 2023). Such dynamics of identity play important roles in the interpretation of the language instruction process to facilitate inclusivity and language competence instruction.

### **Gap in Research and Reason.**

Although previous studies have investigated the Punjabi and Pashto learners, very little research has investigated the comparative analysis in a pedagogical manner. There has also been a lack of interest in the performance of these learners in the academic context where pragmatic failure may have a major social and educational repercussion.

The proposed research will fill these gaps, conducting a systematic analysis of requests, refusals, and apologies between Punjabi and Pashto learners. It further examines the effect of cultural identity on the choice of pragmatic strategies and provides pedagogical suggestions of culturally responsive ELT practice in Pakistan.

### **Pedagogical Implication and Instruction Pragmatically.**

Learners need to be trained explicitly in pragmatics to acquire sociopragmatic awareness (Taguchi, 2009; Bardovi-Harlig, 1999). Some of the effective teaching strategies are role-play and simulation tasks, which enable learners to rehearse speech acts in diverse contexts, compare and contrast norms of the first language with those of a second language, and reflective tasks, which foster metapragmatic awareness.

Studies always indicate that pragmatic competence is not something that creeps up as a result of language proficiency and it must be carefully and strategically interventional (Kasper & Rose, 2002). These strategies can be used to incorporate into ELT curricula to ensure a learner is better able to negotiate cross-cultural communication skills and minimize cases of pragmatic failure.

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative research design that was founded on the constructivist epistemology. Constructivist approach recognizes that knowledge is constructed socially and is affected by cultural, contextual not to mention experience factors. It helped the researcher to explore the nature of the way Punjabi and Pashto English learners pragmatically perform speech acts with culturally sensitive processes. The design followed was as follows. Interlanguage Pragmatics which deals with the way in which second language learners learn and apply pragmatic knowledge to regular communication.

### **3.1 Theoretical Framework**

It was written in an Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP) model proposed by Kasper & Blum-Kulka (1993). The pragmatic competence is discussed in two important categories. The linguistic resources available to carry out speech acts are called ILP, pragmalinguistic competence, while sociopragmatic competence, which includes the social conventions and correctness of language application situationally. The way was selected to be explored using such a framework where the English speech acts, such as requests, refusals, and apologies, along with the impacts of their cultural backgrounds on pragmatic transfer, are processed by Punjabi and Pashto learners.

### **The participants and the method of sampling.**

The participants were chosen through purposive sampling. The English learners of the university-level students of Punjabi and Pashto ancestry who attended courses in English Language Teaching (ELT) in Islamabad were the sample of the study. The criteria adopted in the selection of the student were the cultural background, degree of study, and experience in formal exposure to the English language. The application of this strategy made the participants be linguistically competent and culturally based to provide useful insight concerning pragmatic behavior.

### **3.3 Data Collection Methods**

The data were collected using two major tools and these were the open-ended Discourse Completion tasks (DCTs) and semi-structured interviews.

The participants were given scenarios in the DCTs, and based on prompts, they were supposed to perform speech acts in the English language. These activities free pragmatic choices of the learners in real-life yet controlled scenarios in simulated form. The semi-structured interviews were done to interview learners and instructors to obtain more insight into the cultural driving force of speech act strategies and perception of pragmatic competence.

### **3.4 Method of Analysis**

The thematic analysis was used to interpret the data. The strategy helped the researcher to identify the repeat patterns, the cultural orientations and the strategies preferences in the speech act performances. The analysis was carried out and ensured by the ILP framework that the language forms and the sociocultural norms were considered. The responses were classified based on the type of speech act, level of being direct, politeness strategies and evidence of pragmatic transfer.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis of the obtained data on Punjabi and Pashto students of the English language studying in ELT programs of the university in Islamabad is discussed in this section. This paper will discuss three basic speech acts that are requests, refusals and apologies and why cultural identity is applicable in the practical choice of students. Thematic patterns were identified by using the Interlanguage Language Pragmatics which were paying attention to the directness, politeness strategies and pragmatic transfer.

### **4.1 Requests**

Students of English who were Punjabis were more inclined to effective and direct request strategies. They exhibited responses with imperative expressions or least mitigation which is related to cultural orientation towards clarity and insistence. To say the least, in a case

with regard to a student who requested that a deadline be extended, Punjabis tend to use expressions such as, please, date, I require more time, and no elaborations. exposition and interpersonal modification.

Nevertheless, more indirect and relationship sensitive methods were employed by Pashto learners. The things demanded were most commonly included in the terms of respect, apologetic, or personal suffering. Such phrases as: Could you mind giving me some more time? occurred the most often or I am sorry I am inconvenienced, but I only want to have my time enlarged. The Pashto culture is reflected in expressions, and hierarchy, deference, and relational harmony as priorities are employed.

The thematic analysis showed that Punjabi students are more concerned with pragmatic efficiency whereas Pashto students preferred the interpersonal relationship. These variations explain that cultural identity determines the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic aspects of performance in speech acts.

#### **4.2 Refusals**

Punjabi students of English language learners tend to apply direct strategies with minimum justification in their performance of refusals. They usually responded by saying simple refusals like I cannot do that or I am sorry I will not be able to help because of the culture of being straight and assertive. Although these utterances were grammatically correct, they sometimes did not contain the signs of politeness typical of the English-speaking situation, and this resulted in the possible pragmatic failure.

On the other hand, Pashto students showed a close tendency towards indirectness and face-saving techniques. In most cases, their rejections were wrapped in convoluted reasoning, self-pity, and cries of contravention to social limitations. The general reactions where I would like to help, however I have got a family commitment or I am very sorry but it would be hard on my part. Cultural beliefs in Pashto traditions of upholding relational peace and eschewing conflict are indicative these compliments.

Thematic analysis revealed that the Punjabi students are practically efficiency-oriented even in face-threatening though Pashto learners are interpersonal sensitivity oriented. These trends show how a cultural identity affects the sociopragmatic side of the refusals and demonstrate the need to have pedagogical attention to the justification strategies in teaching the English language.

#### **4.3 Apologies**

Punjabi students had a tendency to employ certain formulae in doing apologies, such as, I am. sorry or it is my fault and did not make them elaborate and contextually justified in

the first place. It was not profound even though such expressions were pragmatically right in informal cases, sufficient in more formal or emotionally-charged situations. It is a tendency towards pragmatic simplicity and is interested in the accuracy of the language and not the repair of relationships.

Rather, Pashto learners adopted more advanced forms of apology that entailed regrets, regret to the injury, and compensation. Common reactions were the reason being that I am very sorry that happened and I hope you can forgive me or the plea accept, apologize; I was not intending you to hurt. This type of expression is associated with the Pashto cultural beliefs of honor, respect and emotional responsibility.

It has been shown in the review that Pashto learners are more likely to employ longer chains of apologies whereas Punjabi ones like short and to-the-point sentence constructions. These variations denote the effects of cultural identity on pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic aspects of the performance process of apology and point out to the necessity to train context-specific apology skills in English language classes

## **5. Discussion**

This paper established that there was a difference between the pragmatic of Punjabi and Pashto English learners' strategies that are culturally predetermined. These were displayed in all three speech acts, requests, refusals and apologies and profound sociocultural orientations towards communication.

Punjabi students had the tendency of being straightforward and realistic. Their speech acts actualizations may often be short, rude and implanted. In spite of its fact that this strategy is equal to English speaking criteria in certain circumstances, there are certain cases where it was not relational sensitive that ought to have been shown in graver circumstances or of a more emotional cast. This means that Punjabi students might be trained to emphasize on politeness methods and accommodate specific contexts.

Conversely, Pashto students said that they were very fond of indirectness and relational harmony. They often showed themselves by means of respect, apology, and social justification. These methodologies are the reflections of Pashto cultural values that are hierarchical submissive, and emotionally liable. These were learners who were effective in preserving interpersonal contact, and though not always effective and efficient particularly, they were reacting at school or at work.

The thematic analysis proved that pragmatic transfer, positive and negative is a widespread practice in learners of English in Pakistan. Positive transfer was experienced in the event where the L1 norms matched L2 expectations leading to the ability to communicate

appropriately and effectively. Negative transfer on the other hand resulted in pragmatic failure particularly in cases where the learners used culturally mediated strategies that did not co-exist with English standards of directness and clarity.

These results support the significance of culturally responsive pedagogy in English language teaching. Students should not only be given linguistic structures, but also the sociocultural knowledge that will make them adjust their pragmatic behavior within a given context. Role play, intercultural workshops, and the direct teaching of the methods of mitigation may all be used as the instructional strategies to assist learners in developing pragmatic flexibility and prevent misunderstandings.

### **Pedagogical Implication and Conclusion**

This research study confirms that cultural identity is extremely significant when it comes to determining the pragmatic mastery of Punjabi and Pashto learners of English. Using the speech acts like refusals and apologies, requests, learners demonstrated clear communicative orientations basing on their home social cultural norms. Punjabi students like being straight forward, practical and efficient whereas Pashto students enjoyed being indirect, and in harmony with other people. Such tendencies representative of greater values in the culture and they demonstrate how the language may be applied as a means of mechanism of identity bargaining and social role.

The study also suggested the prevalence of pragmatic transfer- positive and negative- in the second language communication. Students were likely to use the rules of L1 in L2, and were either adapted successfully or failed pragmatically. It emphasizes the need to have particular training, that is not only concerned with language accuracy, but sociopragmatic awareness.

The instructional approaches that are proposed to help the learners to train pragmatic competence include:

- **Pragmatic flexibility in the situation:** The teaching process may be developed through role-playing which simulates situations that are offered in the real life, which allows the learners to practice speech acts in a different social situation.
- **Enhancing knowledge of the cross-cultural norms:** Intercultural discussions and workshops will assist learners to be aware of the disparity in communicative expectations and change their strategies to accommodate them.

- **Learning politeness and strategic skills:** The use of explicit training in mitigation strategies, signs of politeness, and relationship language can help learners to deal with face-sensitive communication.
- **Promoting cultural awareness in language education:** The teachers ought to remember the cultural background of learners and help them strike the right balance between the native standards and target language ideals.

Through the incorporation of these strategies in the English language teaching approach, the teaching professionals can develop a pragmatic flexibility and intercultural competence in the English language learners. This will not just enhance the effectiveness of communication but it will also help the learners to cope with different academic, professional and social fields.

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