

Pragmatic Competence: Exploring the Influence of Cultural Background on Pragmatic Competence in ESL Learners

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Original Article

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Abstract

The primary objective of this paper is to illustrate how culture influences the process of learning English as a second language worldwide. Language and culture are intricately intertwined, akin to two sides of the same coin. The comprehension of culture holds the utmost significance in comprehending any language. Mitchell and Myles (2004) posit that "language and culture are not separate but acquired together, with each mutually reinforcing the development of the other." Disparities in culture can give rise to numerous errors and misunderstandings. Thus, this paper aims to address the perplexing inquiries surrounding the impact of culture on English language acquisition, exploring the specific ways in which cultural factors shape language learning outcomes. Furthermore, it endeavors to shed light on effective strategies for teachers and learners to navigate and bridge cultural differences, thereby enhancing the overall English language learning experience. Language influences not only individuals' values and behaviors but also their sense of identity. When it comes to learning the English language, various skills such as grammar, writing, listening, and speaking come into play. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the influence of Pakistani culture on the learning of these four language skills. Moreover, it is essential to acknowledge the reciprocal relationship between both aspects; language and culture, as they are deeply intertwined and mutually shaping.

Keywords: Comprehension, English language learning, Production, Language and culture relationship, Pragmatics competence.

1. Introduction

1.1. Language and Culture: Inherent Relationship

This paper aims to explore the inherent relationship between language and culture, emphasizing the importance of incorporating cultural elements into second-language instruction to improve the comprehension of language students. Language not only reflects culture but also serves as its symbol (Gleason, 1961). Therefore, cultural aspects should be integrated as an integral and fundamental part of language learning and teaching. By integrating culture seamlessly into the language curriculum and instructional methods, students can achieve success in learning language. Second language teachers should pay attention to the diverse range of cultures, identifying significant cultural components in all aspects of curriculum design, and employing suitable teaching strategies to bridge cultural gaps and facilitate learning activities. Language acts as a medium for communication, enabling the expression of emotions, thoughts, needs, desires, and more through words, symbols, and gestures (Smith, 1987). On the other

hand, culture encompasses the distinctive characteristics of a specific group, their language, religion, cuisine, social customs, music, and arts. Hence, culture manifests itself through language, making it essential to comprehend a language's culture when learning it. Without familiarity with the associated culture, the process of acquiring a new language remains incomplete.

1.2. Learning English as Second Language (ESL)

Learning a second language involve mastering pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. In the 21st century, people confidently cross borders, exploring remote corners of the world and bringing about changes even within classrooms. Effective cross-cultural communication requires individuals who possess cultural awareness, respond appropriately in various social contexts and demonstrate empathy, tolerance, and openness towards others.

When teaching a foreign language as SL, the aim is to prepare students for real-life situations they may encounter while visiting countries with different cultural norms, such as Western countries. The goal is to equip students with the skills to avoid misinterpretation, embarrassment, exclusion from communication, or being completely misunderstood. Language education goes beyond achieving native-like proficiency in the target language; it focuses on developing students' intercultural communicative competence by incorporating culture into teaching practices. By connecting language to its natural counterpart, culture, teaching practices stimulate students' understanding and development of intercultural competence (Mohammed, 2020). This enables them to appropriately interpret and comprehend behaviors influenced by culture. Educators emphasize the importance of considering the local culture of learners when teaching English, as incorrect translation and transliteration of Islamic concepts can lead to severe intellectual and spiritual consequences.

1.3. Interculturality

Language is a means of communication that encodes and decodes information through voice sounds, gestures, or written symbols. The main purpose of language is to convey thoughts and interact with others. According to Halliday (1973), language serves seven functions, including manipulating the environment, regulating events, conveying facts and knowledge, ensuring social maintenance, expressing feelings and emotions, acquiring knowledge, and creating literary works. Language and culture are intertwined and have a deep symbolic relationship. They affect each other and stand for the whole culture. Language represents culture in the thoughts of its speakers, and culture symbolizes language through its economic, religious, philosophical, and other systems (Kachru, 1985).

1.4. Intercultural Classroom

The question whether to teach language and culture together or separately has been a critical issue in English language teaching. Scholars in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics have engaged in discussions about this matter for approximately two decades. This study is the extension of those concerns raised by the previous research. In this paper, a quantitative investigation has been carried out to evaluate the importance of inclusion or taking care of cultural element in the ESL classrooms from different departments at undergraduate level from the Pakistani government university.

1.5. Research Objectives:

- To examine the perceived influence of cultural background on pragmatic competence among ESL learners
- To identify specific cultural variables that ESL learners believe impact their pragmatic competence
- To assess the relationship between cultural factors, ESL learners' motivation, and their language learning strategies.

1.6. Research Questions:

Q.1. How do ESL learners perceive the influence of their cultural background on the development of pragmatic competence?

Q.2. Which specific cultural variables do ESL learners believe impact their pragmatic competence, motivation and their language learning strategies?

The research objectives and questions aim to explore the influence of cultural background on pragmatic competence in ESL learners using the Likert scale survey. The study seeks to understand participants' perceptions, identify cultural variables, and investigate the relationships between cultural factors, motivation, and language learning strategies. By addressing these objectives and questions, the study aims to contribute to the existing literature on cultural influences in ESL learning and provide insights for language educators and curriculum designers.

2. Literature Review**2.1. Culture VS Language**

The "target language culture" alongside English to familiarize language learners with the culture of native countries (Byram, 1990; Byram & Flemming, 1998). The second perspective suggests that there should be no teaching of the "target language culture" in countries where English is already an established variety (Kachru, 1985). The other two perspectives also oppose the idea of teaching the "target language culture" in conjunction with English. However, while one perspective supports the incorporation of "local culture" in teaching of English language (Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996; McKay, 2003), whereas the other perspective argues that it has become a lingua franca and therefore should be taught in a culture-free context (Alptekin, 2005).

2.2. Nature and Impact of Culture

Culture encompasses the full range of learned human behavior patterns, as defined by Edward B. Tylor in 1871. It includes knowledge, beliefs, art, law, morals, customs, and other capabilities and habits acquired by individuals as members of society. Culture is not limited to a specific gender, as both men and women contribute to its creation and existence. Anthropology has focused predominantly on the study of culture since Tylor's time, recognizing its significance in human survival. However, culture is a fragile phenomenon that exists only in our minds, making it constantly changing and easily lost. The tangible artifacts discovered by archaeologists in their excavations are merely material remains that reflect cultural patterns. They are products created and used based on cultural knowledge and skills. Culture is multifaceted, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music, arts, beliefs, values, and the way people perceive the world and their own lives. Cultures vary within regions, societies, and subgroups, leading to unique cultural activities and customs in different countries. Furthermore, culture plays a role in specific contexts such as workplaces or families, shaping their values and behaviors.

2.3. Previous Studies on Culture & Pragmatic Competence of ESL Learners

Language and culture are inseparable. They are intricately interwoven, and one cannot be separated from the other without losing their significance. Therefore, language learning is essentially cultural learning, and language teaching inherently involves teaching culture (Wei, 2005; Brown, 1994; Gao, 2006).

2.4. Culture is a Skill like other Language Skills

Gao (2006) emphasizes the importance of cultural studies in foreign language classrooms and the role of foreign language teachers in enhancing students' cultural awareness and communication competence. Similarly, Wang argues that foreign language teaching is essentially teaching foreign culture. Tomalin (2008) adds that the international role of the English language and globalization necessitates the teaching of culture as a fifth language skill. This includes understanding and appreciating the values, ways of performing duties, and unique peculiarities of other cultures, as well as developing intercultural sensitivity and awareness through English language interaction.

2.5. Vocabulary Association

Tomalin in 2008 presented research asserting culture has a significant influence on vocabulary. Different cultures have different connotations and meanings associated with words. For example, the color white may symbolize purity and virtue in Yemen, but it represents mourning in China. Understanding the cultural implications of vocabulary is crucial to avoid misinterpretation and potential mockery.

2.6. Culture Affects Listening Comprehension

Culture also plays a role in listening comprehension. Familiarity with the cultural background knowledge related to the listening material makes it easier to understand and grasp the meaning. However, if the material is closely tied to an unfamiliar cultural context, comprehension becomes challenging. Therefore, Cultural knowledge is an integral part of listening ability and it can either hinder or facilitate understanding. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge and leverage the role of culture in listening comprehension. Syllabus designers should consider the cultural background of students when designing appropriate curricula Mohammed (2020).

2.7. Speaking Skill and Culture

Speaking skills in a second language are not solely dependent on pronunciation and intonation but also need an understanding of the cultural background knowledge associated with the target language. To communicate successfully and avoid vagueness or miscommunication, it is important to acquire cultural awareness through extensive reading and practical use of the language. Teachers should put emphasis on the practical application of language in daily life situations, enabling learners to use appropriate sentences and utterances in the correct context. Without sufficient cultural background knowledge, even individuals who possess strong linguistic abilities may make mistakes or experience misunderstandings.

In short, cultural knowledge plays a vital role in speaking skills, as it helps individuals use language appropriately in different contexts. Cultural understanding is also crucial in translation, enabling accurate and nuanced rendering of expressions and idioms.

2.8. Culture and the Translator

Cultural influence is also evident in translation. Translation is significantly impacted by cultural factors, requiring comprehensive knowledge of both the source and target languages. Each society has its own set of phrasal verbs and proverbial expressions, and translating them

accurately can be confusing and prone to misinterpretation without a deep understanding of the cultural context.

There are different language examples. Consider one of the phrase "She's a real Pandora's box." To translate this phrase effectively, it requires understanding the cultural connotations associated with the term "Pandora's box." In Greek mythology, Pandora's box refers to a container that, once opened, released all the evils and miseries into the world. Therefore, calling someone "a Pandora's box" implies that they possess negativity.

Strategically, when translating this phrase, it is essential to capture the cultural meaning and implications. A literal translation of the phrase may not convey the intended metaphorical sense. The translator needs to be aware of the mythological reference and the connotations it carries within the source culture. By understanding the cultural significance of "Pandora's box," the translator can accurately convey the metaphorical meaning in the target language.

With the help of this example, it is clear that cultural references impact the translation process. Without familiarity of the cultural background, a translator may miss the metaphorical connotations and fail to effectively convey the intended meaning of the phrase. Cultural competence and familiarity with the source and target cultures are crucial for successful translation that accurately captures the cultural nuances and metaphorical implications of such expressions.

2.9. Culture and Teaching ESL

Teaching cultural aspects through multimedia resources such as videos, podcasts, and online articles can also be very effective. These resources can expose learners to different cultural perspectives and provide opportunities for discussion and reflection.

A logical way is to incorporate multicultural literature into the curriculum. By reading stories, poems, and novels from diverse cultures, learners can gain insight into the perspectives and experiences of people from different backgrounds. Additionally, learners can develop critical thinking skills as they analyze and evaluate the themes, characters, and cultural references in the literature.

Another way to develop cultural awareness is through cultural immersion experiences such as field trips or study abroad programs. These experiences provide learners with firsthand exposure to different cultures, allowing them to see and experience cultural practices and customs that they might not have otherwise encountered. This can lead to greater empathy and understanding of different ways of life.

Also, teachers can encourage learners to engage in intercultural communication by interacting with speakers of the second language from different cultures. This can be done through online language exchange programs, pen pal programs, or in-person conversation groups. Such experiences can help learners to develop greater cultural sensitivity and understanding as they engage in authentic communication with people from different cultural backgrounds.

3. Methodology

3.1. Target Population

The target population is "the entire aggregation of respondents that meet the designated set of criteria". The target population in this study constituted all people from 16 and 41 years above with English and non-English background. For 55 resources, the target population was all registered with any of Colleges, Universities and Cooperate offices in Lahore. Convenience

sampling is a type of non-probability sampling that is referred to the researching subject of the population that are easily accessible to the researchers. So, we applied convenience sampling in order to achieve our goal and to meet certain practical criteria.

3.2. Research Instrument

A structured questionnaire was developed to bring consistency in questions pattern This made it easy to analyze it with effective results. In the data analysis section, detailed description has given to all the obtained results of the questionnaire.

3.3. Survey Development

The survey questionnaire was constructed based on a review of relevant literature on cultural background and pragmatic competence in ESL learning. Likert scale items were designed to capture participants' perceptions of the impact of cultural background on their pragmatic competence. The items cover various dimensions, such as language use in social contexts, awareness of cultural norms, and adaptation strategies. Additionally, demographic information and language proficiency data be collected.

3.4. Data Collection

The survey questionnaire was administered to the selected ESL learners. Participants were provided with clear instructions on how to complete the questionnaire. The survey was conducted using a combination of both online platforms and paper-based forms, depending on the participants' preferences and accessibility. Participation in the survey was voluntary, and anonymity and confidentiality of responses were ensured.

Descriptive statistical analyses will be conducted to summarize the Likert scale data. Means, standard deviations, and frequencies will be calculated for each item to examine the participants' perceptions of cultural background and pragmatic competence. Inferential statistics, such as correlation analysis, may be employed to explore relationships between cultural variables and pragmatic competence, as well as potential differences across participant subgroups.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval will be obtained from the relevant research ethics committee prior to data collection. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants, emphasizing their voluntary participation, anonymity, and the confidential handling of their data.

The study aims to investigate the relationship between cultural background and pragmatic competence in ESL learners using a Likert scale survey. The section outlines the participant selection process, the development of the survey questionnaire, including pilot testing, the data collection procedure, and the planned data analysis techniques. Ethical considerations regarding informed consent and data confidentiality are also highlighted.

4. Data Analysis

Drawing on the survey results, percentages show the tendency and significance of the cultural influence on the second language acquisition and the strategies most cherished by the learners to make the learning process easy, comprehensible and effective. Here is the quantitative presentation of the data to be interpreted later in the results and discussion section.

4.1. Data Presentation

SR	Questions	Yes	No	Don't Know	Somehow	%
1	People adopt culture with language learning	62%	8%	18%	12%	100%
2	Social/Religious subjects should be added, and all SLAs	59%	7%	18%	16%	100%
3	English language learning makes people rude/proud	62%	12%	7%	19%	100%
4	People consider English language as a class not just as a language	78%	5%	3%	14%	100%
5	People change their personalities by learning 2 nd language	52%	4%	6%	38%	100%
6	Culture effect the perspectives of people towards the world	47%	23%	14%	16%	100%
7	Language is a tool of communication and a carrier of culture	63%	14%	4%	19%	100%
8	Culture has a great influence on the formation of vocabulary	74%	7%	4%	15%	100%
9	Steps should be taken to develop cultural awareness	81%	2%	3%	14%	100%
10	Language and culture are considered as inseparable from each other's	67%	3%	6%	24%	100%
11	The goal of language education should not be native speaker competence in target language	77%	2%	5%	16%	100%
12	Language is a means of expression	74%	14%	3%	9%	100%
13	English language learners prefer isolation rather than sitting in their own community	69%	18%	5%	8%	100%
14	Language stands for the whole culture	72%	4%	8%	16%	100%
15	People from different culture learn English language differently	77%	7%	6%	10%	100%
16	English language learning affects the dressing thinking and way of living	73%	7%	5%	15%	100%
17	English language should be compulsory in all fields	43%	46%	2%	9%	100%
18	Culture combines people also a source of language	63%	8%	4%	25%	100%
19	To learn a language "we must learn its culture"	67%	17%	3%	13%	100%
20	In our society people give more importance to English speaker	76%	6%	4%	14%	100%
21	English language should be taught by native speaker	37%	35%	3%	25%	100%
22	Our own cultural awareness is important in SLA's	87%	2%	3%	8%	100%

4.2. Results

The results are presented in the table to provide a comprehensive data analysis drawn from the survey. The table consists of 22 questions that discuss various aspects of the relationship between language learning, specifically English, and cultural factors. The responses were collected using a structured questionnaire, and the participants were interviewed directly to ensure clarity and avoid any misinterpretation. The answers were categorized into four main options: Yes, No, Don't Know, and Somehow, with the percentage of each response calculated by taking the average of each response.

The table represents the responses of the participants regarding language learning and cultural factors. The questions focus on the impact of learning English on individuals' behaviors, attitudes, and personalities, as well as the role of culture in language learning and teaching. The survey aimed to examine the participants' views of the relationship between language and culture and their understanding of the importance of cultural awareness in SLA.

4.3. Analysis and Findings:

1. People adopt culture with language learning: Most participants (62%) agreed that culture is adopted along with language learning. This suggests that language learners not only acquire linguistic skills but also develop an understanding of the associated culture. It highlights the importance of incorporating cultural elements into language teaching to enhance learners' overall language-learning experience.
2. Social or religious subjects should be added, and all SLAs: The majority of participants (59%) agreed that social and religious topics should be included in the language learning curriculum. This suggests that language learners appreciate the cultural context and provide an understanding of the target culture's social and religious features can enhance their language learning experience.
3. English language as a status symbol: A large number of participants (62%) felt that studying English may make people rude or proud. This suggests that the influence of the English language and its related culture may cause some language learners to change their attitudes and behaviors. This research highlights the need for language teachers to address the possible detrimental influence of language learning on students' behavior and attitudes.
4. Language as a social status: The majority of interviewees (78%) agreed that the English language is seen as a marker of social status rather than a language in their society. This point suggests that many people perceive others on the basis of their ability to speak English. Such a notion can pressure native speakers into learning English so they can be perceived better than other native speakers.
5. Language effects personality: More than half of the respondents (52%) believed that learning a second language can result in their personality change. This finding highlights the need for language teachers to be aware of potential changes in learners' personalities and consider the impact of these changes on their learning experience.
6. Culture affects the vision of people towards the world: Almost half of the participants (47%) agreed that culture influences individuals' worldviews. This research emphasizes the necessity of considering cultural aspects while teaching a second language in order to assist learners in developing a more complete knowledge of the world.
7. Language is a tool of communication and a carrier of culture: A significant majority of respondents (63%) established that language serves as both a communication tool and a

- carrier of culture. It highlights the inseparable relationship between language and culture and the significance of considering cultural factors in language teaching.
8. Culture has a great influence on the formation of vocabulary: The high majority of participants (74%) supported the view that culture significantly impacts vocabulary formation. This result is consistent with the idea that cultural context is crucial for understanding and using vocabulary effectively in a second language.
 9. Steps should be taken to develop cultural awareness: Most respondents (81%) believed that measures should be taken to enhance cultural awareness. This demonstrates the importance of cultural understanding in language learning and the need for language teachers to incorporate cultural elements into their teaching strategies.
 10. Language and culture are considered inseparable from each other: Two-thirds of the participants (67%) agreed that language and culture are interdependent. This finding supports the idea that language and culture are deeply interwoven, and language learning should also involve cultural aspect's learning.
 11. The aim of language education should not be native speaker competence in the target language: A majority (77%) believed that the objective of language education should not be to attain native speaker competence. The answers indicate that language learners value the development of intercultural communicative competence over native-like proficiency. It is consistent with the view that a non-native cannot have a native-like speaking quality unless they surround themselves with the native people of the targeted language.
 12. Language is a source of expression: Most participants (74%) felt that language serves as a tool of expression and is necessary to learn to communicate effectively. This finding emphasizes the importance of understanding cultural context when learning a second language to convey thoughts and emotions effectively.
 13. English language learners prefer isolation rather than sitting in their community: More than two-thirds of respondents (69%) agreed that English language learners tend to isolate themselves from their communities. This discovery highlights the potential social impact of language learning and the need for language teachers to address this issue in their teaching strategies.
 14. Language stands for the whole culture: The majority of participants (72%) agreed that language represents the entire culture. The result supports the idea that cultural learning should be incorporated into language learning in order to provide learners with a thorough understanding of the target culture.
 15. People learn language differently who belongs to different cultures: Most respondents (77%) agreed that individuals from different cultural backgrounds have different learning behaviors. It demands the necessity for language teachers to take into account the various cultural backgrounds of their learners when designing and implementing language teaching strategies.
 16. English language learning affects lifestyle: The majority of participants (73%) agreed that learning English affects various aspects of their lives, including dressing, thinking, and lifestyle. This finding underscores the impact of language learning on learners' identities and stresses the importance of addressing cultural factors in language teaching.
 17. English language status challenge: The respondents were divided equally on this issue, with 43% agreeing and 46% disagreeing that English should be compulsory in all fields. The results show that the audience views English as a non-native language and stresses the importance of speaking their native language in their daily routines.

18. Culture combines people and is also a source of language: "Most participants (63%) agreed that culture unites people and serves as a source of language. This finding emphasizes the role of culture in language learning and highlights the importance of taking into account cultural factors when teaching a second language."
19. To learn a language, "we must learn its culture": The majority of respondents (67%) supported this statement, further emphasizing the importance of cultural learning in language education.
20. In our society, people give more importance to English speakers: "Most participants (76%) agreed that English speakers are given more importance in their society. This finding highlights the perceived value of English proficiency and its potential impact on learners' motivation and attitudes toward language learning."
21. English language should be taught by native speakers: The 'respondents' were divided on this issue, with 37% agreeing and 35% disagreeing. This finding suggests that the role of native speakers in English language teaching remains debatable and that language teachers should consider their learners' specific needs and goals when teaching English.
22. Our own cultural awareness is important in SLAs: A majority of respondents (87%) agreed that awareness of their own culture is essential in second language acquisition. This result emphasizes the need for language learners to develop a deep understanding of their culture and the target culture to achieve effective communication and intercultural competence.

Overall, the data analysis reveals that the relationship between language learning and culture is complex and multifaceted. The results indicate the importance of considering cultural factors in language teaching and highlight the need for language teachers to address the potential impact of language learning on learners' behaviors, attitudes, and personalities. The results also highlight the importance of cultural awareness in the learning of a second language and suggest that language education should put greater emphasis on developing learners' intercultural communicative ability rather than merely aiming for native-like proficiency.

5. Conclusion

This paper contributes to provide an in-depth understanding of the language and culture inter-dependent nature which facilitates to devise relevant strategies and suitable approach for teaching second language. Culture intervention is an important aspect in second language learning. Furthermore, motivation is an important stimulus so this is possible by introducing interesting and context situated. Additionally, integrating cultural aspects into second language teaching is an effective way to engage the students in meaningful learning activities.

In this globalized world, Intercultural competence is very important for better survival. Incorporating native and non-native aspects in the language classroom harness the skills significance for navigating and communicating effectively in diverse and intercultural environment.

Considering to introduce conducive environment for the language learners to deduce meaning through interaction with native speakers or text. In the past, this interactional freedom was missing from the learning environment and students were unable to have this hand on experience resulting in frustration and a barrier towards good learning. Acknowledging and prioritizing the diversity in learning styles and cultural expectations is key to effective language learning classroom.

It is also suggested to promote social use of language with the positive intention and conveying the sense of solidarity among interlocutors which adds another layer to second language learning. Side by side the attainment of linguistic competence, understanding of the cultural contexts of social interaction improves the communication skills. In language classroom, this holistic approach emphasizes that linguistic proficiency increases if cultural nuances are comprehensible which are an important aspect of shaping the language.

In summary, the symbiotic relationship between language and culture should be an important objective in language classroom. By understanding and incorporating this aspect, teachers can develop pedagogies that enhance linguistic skills, as well as pragmatic competence, ultimately focusing on preparing learners as better communicators in diverse and intercultural environment.

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