

The Role of Pragmatics in Intercultural Communication Competence

Ananda Sasi Kirana¹, Aidil Syah Putra², Maely Aisyah Rezqy Lubis³, Sintiya Ridiyanti⁴
^{1,2,3,4}Universitas Muhammadiyah Tangerang, Banten, Indonesia
Email: anandasasik@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In the context of globalization, interaction among individuals from different cultural backgrounds has become increasingly common in social, educational, and professional domains. Intercultural communication competence (ICC) is understood as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in such interactions, which involves not only linguistic proficiency but also pragmatic awareness. This study seeks to investigate the role of pragmatics in intercultural communication competence by examining participants' perceptions of pragmatic use in intercultural communication. Using a descriptive qualitative research design, the study involved 15 seventh-semester students from the English Education Study Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Tangerang. Data were gathered through closed-ended written interview questions distributed online via Google Forms. The data were analyzed qualitatively by interpreting response patterns related to pragmatic competence. The findings reveal that participants largely acknowledge the significance of pragmatic awareness, particularly in relation to politeness strategies, understanding implied meanings, and sensitivity to cultural norms, in achieving effective intercultural communication. Furthermore, the results indicate that grammatical accuracy alone does not ensure communicative success across cultures, as pragmatic competence plays a vital role in reducing misunderstanding and promoting appropriate interaction. This study concludes that pragmatics is a fundamental component of intercultural communication competence and emphasizes the need to integrate pragmatic awareness into language education to enhance intercultural communicative effectiveness.

Keywords: *Pragmatics, Intercultural communication competence, Pragmatic awareness, Intercultural interaction*

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalized world, interaction among individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds has become a central feature of social, educational, and professional contexts. Intercultural communication competence (ICC) refers to the ability to communicate both effectively and appropriately in such interactions. This competence entails not only mastery of linguistic forms but also sensitivity to the cultural and contextual norms that shape language use (Byram, 2021; Deardorff, 2020). As international languages are widely employed as lingua francas, communication breakdowns are more often attributed to differences in meaning interpretation and politeness conventions than to grammatical inaccuracies alone (Taguchi & Roever, 2017).

Pragmatics is closely linked to ICC, as it examines how meaning is negotiated and interpreted within specific contexts through speech acts, politeness strategies, and implied meanings. Previous research indicates that pragmatic failure constitutes a major source of

misunderstanding in intercultural communication, even among speakers with high levels of linguistic proficiency (Ishihara & Cohen, 2021). Differences in sociopragmatic norms, including expectations concerning directness and politeness, may result in misinterpretation, interpersonal tension, and unfavorable perceptions of speakers' intentions (Kádár & Haugh, 2019).

Recent studies further suggest that pragmatic competence should be regarded as a core component of intercultural communication competence rather than a supplementary skill. Effective intercultural communication requires both pragmalinguistic competence, referring to the appropriate use of linguistic forms, and sociopragmatic awareness, which involves understanding culturally grounded norms and values underlying language use (Taguchi, 2018; Ren & Han, 2019). From an educational perspective, research highlights the importance of explicit pragmatic instruction in supporting learners' ability to communicate effectively in multicultural contexts (Ishihara, 2022).

Despite the growing body of research on pragmatics and intercultural communication, further investigation is required to clarify how pragmatics is integrated into contemporary ICC frameworks, to identify common pragmatic challenges in intercultural interactions, and to examine the contribution of pragmatic competence to effective and appropriate communication. Therefore, this article aims to examine the role of pragmatics in intercultural communication competence through a review of relevant theories and empirical studies published over the past decade.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Intercultural Communication Competence: Theory

Intercultural communication competence (ICC) is widely conceptualized as a multidimensional construct that enables individuals to communicate effectively and appropriately across cultural boundaries. Early theoretical models emphasize the integration of knowledge, attitudes, skills, and cultural awareness as fundamental components of successful intercultural interaction. Byram's framework underscores the importance of openness and curiosity, knowledge of social groups and cultural practices, skills of interpretation and interaction, and critical cultural awareness in the development of ICC (Byram, 2021). Similarly, Dearsdorff (2020) proposes a process-oriented model in which internal attributes, such as adaptability, empathy, and flexibility, contribute to appropriate and effective communication outcomes.

These theoretical perspectives demonstrate that grammatical proficiency alone is insufficient for successful intercultural communication, as communicative effectiveness is also shaped by cultural expectations and contextual factors. More recent scholarship conceptualizes ICC as a dynamic and context-dependent competence that develops through ongoing interaction and experience rather than as a static set of abilities (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2019). Within this perspective, language use is inseparable from

cultural meaning-making, thereby positioning pragmatics as a key element in understanding how ICC is enacted in real communicative contexts.

Pragmatic Competence in Intercultural Communication

Pragmatic competence refers to the ability to use language appropriately according to context and to interpret speakers' intended meanings beyond literal linguistic forms. In intercultural communication, pragmatic competence becomes particularly salient because interlocutors often rely on differing sociocultural norms when performing speech acts, expressing politeness, and conveying implicit meanings. Taguchi and Roever (2017) conceptualize pragmatic competence as comprising two interrelated dimensions: pragmalinguistic competence, which concerns the selection of appropriate linguistic forms, and sociopragmatic competence, which involves understanding culturally specific norms governing language use.

Empirical studies over the past decade consistently indicate that miscommunication in intercultural interactions is more frequently caused by pragmatic differences than by grammatical errors, even among speakers with relatively high levels of language proficiency (Ishihara & Cohen, 2021). Variations in communicative practices, such as degrees of directness, refusal strategies, and expressions of politeness, may be interpreted differently across cultures, often resulting in misunderstanding or negative evaluations of speakers' intentions (Kádár & Haugh, 2019). These findings highlight the central role of pragmatic competence in facilitating effective intercultural communication by mediating the relationship between linguistic forms and culturally appropriate meaning.

Pedagogical Implications for Intercultural Communication Competence

Given the close relationship between pragmatics and ICC, recent scholarship emphasizes the importance of integrating pragmatic instruction into language education. Research suggests that pragmatic competence does not automatically develop alongside

grammatical knowledge, particularly in foreign language contexts where learners have limited exposure to authentic intercultural interaction (Taguchi, 2018). Consequently, explicit instruction has been shown to be effective in enhancing learners' awareness of pragmatic norms and intercultural variation. Ishihara (2022) argues that pedagogical approaches focusing on metapragmatic awareness, the use of authentic materials, and reflective learning activities can support learners in understanding how language use is shaped by cultural contexts.

Furthermore, the incorporation of intercultural scenarios into pragmatic instruction enables learners to critically reflect on their own cultural assumptions while developing strategies for appropriate communication in diverse settings. These pedagogical perspectives indicate that pragmatic instruction plays a crucial role not only in improving communicative effectiveness but also in fostering intercultural sensitivity and adaptability.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a descriptive qualitative design to investigate the role of pragmatics in intercultural communication competence. A qualitative approach is deemed suitable as the study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions and viewpoints regarding the use of pragmatics in intercultural communication, rather than to examine relationships between variables quantitatively (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Although closed-ended questions are employed for data collection, the emphasis of the analysis remains on the qualitative interpretation of response patterns in order to obtain meaningful insights into pragmatic competence. The data for this study are derived from primary sources, specifically participants' responses to closed-ended written interview questions administered online through Google Forms. Participants are selected through purposive sampling based on their relevance to the objectives of the study (Patton, 2015). The sample consists of 15 seventh-semester students enrolled in the

English Education Study Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Tangerang. These participants are considered appropriate due to their academic background and exposure to language learning and intercultural communication. Participation in the study is voluntary, and all participants are informed of the research purpose prior to data collection.

Data are collected using written interviews consisting of closed-ended questions distributed online via Google Forms. This approach enables participants to provide responses independently and systematically, while also supporting efficient data organization and management. The questions are designed to elicit participants' perceptions of pragmatic aspects in intercultural communication, including politeness strategies, interpretation of implied meaning, and norms governing cross-cultural communication. Data analysis is conducted qualitatively by examining patterns and tendencies in participants' responses to the closed-ended questions. The analysis follows established qualitative data interpretation procedures, with a focus on identifying general trends related to pragmatic competence in intercultural communication (Miles et al., 2014). The results are then interpreted in relation to the theoretical framework and relevant studies discussed in the literature review.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Result

The results of this study reveal that most participants possess a clear understanding of the importance of pragmatics in developing intercultural communication competence. Drawing on responses from 15 seventh-semester students of the English Education Study Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Tangerang, several meaningful tendencies were identified. To begin with, a large majority of participants (86.7%) acknowledged that cultural background significantly influences the way politeness is expressed in communication. This indicates that participants are aware of sociopragmatic variation and understand that politeness norms

differ across cultures. In addition, 66.7% of respondents reported modifying their speaking style when interacting with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, suggesting an ability to adapt pragmatic behavior in intercultural situations.

Furthermore, more than half of the participants (53.3%), along with an additional 20% who strongly agreed, recognized that variations in communication styles such as levels of directness and indirectness may lead to misunderstandings in intercultural interactions. This finding demonstrates participants' awareness that pragmatic differences can affect communicative success. Similarly, 73.3% of respondents agreed that the ability to interpret implied or indirect meanings plays a crucial role in intercultural communication, highlighting the importance of contextual understanding.

The findings also show that 73.3% of participants believed that awareness of cultural norms assists them in interpreting others' intentions more accurately in intercultural encounters. This suggests that pragmatic awareness contributes to deeper comprehension beyond literal meaning. Additionally, 80% of respondents expressed agreement that learning pragmatics can enhance intercultural communication competence, reflecting positive attitudes toward the role of pragmatic knowledge in communication. Finally, 66.7% of participants agreed that pragmatic competence supports more effective and appropriate communication in intercultural contexts. Although a small number of participants provided neutral responses, the overall results indicate a shared recognition of pragmatics as a key factor in successful intercultural communication.

Discussion

The findings of this study further confirm the central role of pragmatics in intercultural communication competence. Participants' strong acknowledgment of the influence of cultural background on politeness aligns with theoretical perspectives proposed by Byram (2021) and Deardorff (2020), who emphasize that effective intercultural

communication requires sensitivity to cultural and contextual norms, not merely grammatical accuracy. Participants' recognition of communication style differences as a potential source of misunderstanding is consistent with previous research suggesting that pragmatic failure often causes more serious communication problems than grammatical errors in intercultural interactions (Taguchi & Roever, 2017; Ishihara & Cohen, 2021). Their awareness of indirect meaning and implied intentions further supports the view that pragmatic competence is essential for interpreting meaning appropriately across cultural boundaries.

In addition, participants' positive perceptions of learning pragmatics support Taguchi's (2018) argument that pragmatic competence does not always develop naturally alongside linguistic proficiency and therefore benefits from explicit instruction. These findings also reinforce Ishihara's (2022) assertion that pragmatic-focused instruction can strengthen learners' intercultural awareness and communicative effectiveness. Overall, the results of this study indicate that pragmatic competence particularly in terms of sociopragmatic awareness and sensitivity to cultural norms plays a significant role in enabling effective and appropriate intercultural communication. Consequently, integrating pragmatics into intercultural communication frameworks and language education is essential, especially in contexts where English functions as a lingua franca.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the role of pragmatics in the development of intercultural communication competence by examining participants' perceptions of pragmatic awareness in intercultural interactions. The findings reveal that pragmatic competence is a key factor in supporting effective and appropriate communication across cultural contexts. Participants generally showed an understanding that cultural differences, particularly in norms of politeness, indirectness, and meaning interpretation, have

a strong influence on intercultural communication.

Furthermore, the results indicate that linguistic accuracy alone does not guarantee communicative success in intercultural settings. Instead, participants perceived pragmatic knowledge as the appropriate use of requests, refusals, and apologies as essential for minimizing misunderstanding and maintaining positive interpersonal relationships. Awareness of cultural norms was also viewed as important in helping individuals interpret others' intentions more accurately and adapt their communication strategies accordingly. The study also highlights the perceived value of learning pragmatics in enhancing intercultural communication competence. Most participants acknowledged that increased pragmatic awareness contributes to more effective and culturally appropriate interaction in intercultural environments. These findings align with existing theoretical frameworks that emphasize pragmatics as an integral component of intercultural communication competence.

In conclusion, this research emphasizes the significance of incorporating pragmatic awareness into intercultural communication and language education. By developing an understanding of how language use is shaped by cultural and contextual factors, individuals can improve their ability to communicate successfully in diverse cultural settings. Future studies are encouraged to involve broader participant groups or employ mixed research methods to further investigate the role of pragmatics in intercultural communication competence.

REFERENCES

- Byram, M. (2021). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence: Revisited*. Multilingual Matters.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Deardorff, D. K. (2020). *Manual for developing intercultural competencies: Story circles*. UNESCO.
- Ishihara, N. (2022). Pragmatics instruction and intercultural competence. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 191, 1–10.
- Ishihara, N., & Cohen, A. D. (2021). *Teaching and learning pragmatics: Where language and culture meet* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Kádár, D. Z., & Haugh, M. (2019). *Understanding politeness*. Cambridge University Press.
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Spitzberg, B. H., & Changnon, G. (2019). Conceptualizing intercultural competence. In D. K. Deardorff (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of intercultural competence* (pp. 2–52). SAGE.
- Taguchi, N. (2018). *Pragmatic competence in second language acquisition*. Routledge.
- Taguchi, N., & Roever, C. (2017). *Second language pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.