The role of cultural context in interpreting pragmatic meaning

O papel do contexto cultural na interpretação do significado pragmático

El papel del contexto cultural en la interpretación del significado pragmático

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Abstract
This study investigates how cultural background influences the interpretation and use of pragmatic meaning among university students specializing in semantics and pragmatics, all of whom are preparing for careers in teaching English as a foreign language. While these students possess foundational linguistic knowledge, there remains a gap in understanding how cultural variables affect the interpretation of indirect speech acts, politeness strategies, implied meanings, and figurative expressions. A total of 52 participants engaged in this mixed-method investigation conducted over four classroom sessions. Data collection involved Likert-scale self-assessments and performance-based multiple-choice tasks designed to assess both confidence and competence in pragmatic interpretation. Results showed that while students expressed moderate confidence, their actual responses revealed challenges in recognizing culturally embedded pragmatic cues. These findings highlight the importance of integrating explicit, culturally informed pragmatic instruction even in advanced linguistic programs. The study concludes with recommendations to better prepare future English teachers for cross-cultural communication challenges in their classrooms.
Keywords: University students; Semantics and pragmatics; Cultural context; Politeness strategies; Teaching and Learning.

Resumo
Este estudo investiga como o contexto cultural influencia a interpretação e o uso do significado pragmático entre estudantes universitários de semântica e pragmática, todos em preparação para o ensino de inglês como língua estrangeira. Embora esses estudantes possuam conhecimento linguístico fundamental, ainda existe uma lacuna na compreensão de como as variáveis culturais afetam a interpretação de atos de fala indiretos, estratégias de polidez, significados implícitos e expressões figurativas. Um total de 52 participantes participaram desta investigação de método misto, conduzida ao longo de quatro sessões em sala de aula. A coleta de dados envolveu autoavaliações em escala Likert e tarefas de múltipla escolha baseadas em desempenho, elaboradas para avaliar tanto a confiança quanto a competência na interpretação pragmática. Os resultados mostraram que, embora os estudantes tenham expressado confiança moderada, suas respostas revelaram dificuldades no reconhecimento de pistas pragmáticas culturalmente contextualizadas. Essas descobertas destacam a importância de integrar o ensino explícito e culturalmente informado da pragmática, mesmo em programas linguísticos avançados. O estudo conclui com recomendações para melhor preparar futuros professores de inglês para os desafios da comunicação intercultural em suas salas de aula.
Palavras-chave: Estudantes universitários; Semântica e pragmática; Contexto cultural; Estratégias de cortesia; Ensino e Aprendizagem.

Resumen
Este estudio investiga cómo el contexto cultural influye en la interpretación y el uso del significado pragmático entre estudiantes universitarios especializados en semántica y pragmática, quienes se preparan para ejercer como profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera. Si bien estos estudiantes poseen conocimientos lingüísticos básicos, aún existe una brecha en la comprensión de cómo las variables culturales afectan la interpretación de actos de habla indirectos, estrategias de cortesía, significados implícitos y expresiones figurativas. Un total de 52 participantes participaron en esta investigación de método mixto, realizada en cuatro sesiones de clase. La recopilación de datos incluyó autoevaluaciones en escala Likert y tareas de opción múltiple basadas en el desempeño, diseñadas para evaluar la confianza y la competencia en la interpretación pragmática. Los resultados mostraron que, si bien los estudiantes expresaron una confianza moderada, sus respuestas reales revelaron dificultades para reconocer las claves pragmáticas culturalmente arraigadas. Estos hallazgos resaltan la importancia de integrar una instrucción pragmática explícita y culturalmente fundamentada, incluso en programas lingüísticos avanzados. El estudio concluye con recomendaciones para preparar mejor a los futuros profesores de inglés para los desafíos de la comunicación intercultural en sus aulas.
Palabras clave: Estudiantes universitarios; Semántica y pragmática; Contexto cultural; Estrategias de cortesía; Enseñanza y Aprendizaje.

1. Introduction

In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), increasing attention is being directed toward the role of pragmatic competence—the ability to use language appropriately in social and cultural contexts. While grammatical and lexical skills are foundational in EFL settings, learners who reach intermediate levels (e.g., B1 proficiency) encounter more complex demands, such as understanding indirect speech, politeness strategies, and figurative language (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Bardovi-Harlig, 1999).

Pragmatic competence is closely tied to cultural understanding. What is considered polite or indirect in one culture may be interpreted as vague, dismissive, or even rude in another (Wierzbicka, 1991). Learners unaware of such nuances are prone to pragmatic failure, which refers to socially inappropriate language use that occurs despite grammatical accuracy (Thomas, 1983). This has real communicative consequences, especially in academic or professional contexts.

Despite its central role in communication, pragmatics is often neglected in EFL instruction, where the focus remains on linguistic form rather than communicative appropriateness (Taguchi, 2011; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). Learners at the B1 level often have limited access to authentic input and culturally grounded discourse models, resulting in difficulties interpreting indirect requests, sarcasm, and nonliteral meanings (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998).

This problem is compounded by a lack of awareness — many learners are not even conscious that pragmatic rules exist or differ cross-culturally (Kecskes, 2015). As a result, their communicative strategies remain limited, which restricts their ability to negotiate meaning effectively in real-world interactions.

The present study investigates how cultural background influences university students' interpretation and use of pragmatic meaning in English communication, with a particular focus on B1-level learners. Specifically, it examines learners' understanding of:

- Indirect speech acts
- Implied meanings
- Politeness strategies
- Figurative expressions in context

This mixed-method study combines Likert-scale self-assessments of confidence with multiple-choice interpretation tasks to evaluate both perceived and actual pragmatic awareness.

Following this introduction, the article presents a comprehensive literature review, describes the methodological framework, reports and analyzes the results, discusses key findings, and offers implications for EFL pedagogy. It concludes with recommendations for integrating explicit, culturally-informed pragmatics instruction into language classrooms.

2. Literature Review

In second language acquisition (SLA), pragmatic competence is the ability to understand and use language effectively and appropriately in social interaction. Bachman and Palmer (1996) categorize it as part of communicative competence, alongside grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence. Yet, unlike grammar or vocabulary, pragmatic knowledge is context-dependent and not easily transferable across cultures or languages (Leech, 1983; Thomas, 1983).

A particularly persistent problem arises when learners can produce grammatically correct sentences but fail to interpret non-literal meanings, such as sarcasm, irony, indirect requests, or politeness formulas (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993). This is commonly referred to as pragmatic failure, which often goes unnoticed by learners and teachers alike (Thomas, 1983), despite its real consequences for mutual understanding and intercultural communication.

Culture shapes not only how we speak but how we interpret what is said. Pragmatic norms — such as appropriate levels of formality, directness, and emotional expression — vary across societies. Wierzbicka (1991) and Kecskes (2015) argue

that this variability presents a major challenge for L2 learners, who may unknowingly rely on their L1 pragmatic conventions when interpreting or producing L2 utterances, leading to pragmatic transfer or miscommunication.

Example: In some cultures, refusing an offer directly is impolite, whereas in English-speaking cultures, a direct but polite "No, thank you" is preferred. Learners may misread or misapply such cues.

In B1 learners, these misinterpretations are particularly pronounced because they are only beginning to move beyond formulaic language and engage with more nuanced discourse.

Kasper and Rose (2002) emphasize the importance of explicit instruction in pragmatics to raise learners' awareness of culturally bound meaning. Without it, learners may not even realize that they are misinterpreting speech acts or producing inappropriate responses. Taguchi (2011) demonstrated that students exposed to explicit instruction — including contextualized role plays and metapragmatic explanation — performed significantly better on pragmatic comprehension tasks.

Further, Ishihara and Cohen (2010) advocate for culturally reflective activities in which students compare norms from their native culture with those of English-speaking communities. These exercises improve students' ability to recognize implied meaning, politeness strategies, and non-verbal communication cues, which are essential for effective pragmatic competence.

Unlike ESL learners, EFL students often lack real-life communicative opportunities. This limits their exposure to natural discourse and restricts the pragmatic input they receive. As Bardovi-Harlig (1999) notes, even when pragmatics is implicitly embedded in textbooks, it is often decontextualized, lacking authentic social scenarios.

Moreover, many learners are unaware that pragmatics even exists as a domain of language knowledge. Lyster (2016) argues that self-awareness of pragmatic gaps is critical for adult learners, especially at the intermediate levels. Yet, pragmatic awareness is rarely assessed or emphasized in language classrooms.

A promising approach to address this gap is the integration of self-perception measures, such as Likert-scale reflections, to help learners evaluate their confidence in recognizing indirectness or sarcasm, for instance. Taguchi (2015) emphasizes that learners' self-assessment of their pragmatic ability is a strong predictor of both motivation and long-term development.

This study contributes to the field by incorporating self-reported confidence alongside performance-based interpretation tasks, giving a dual-layered view of students' pragmatic development.

The rise of intercultural pragmatics (Kecskes, 2014) suggests that learners should not aim to simply imitate native speakers, but rather develop the skills to negotiate meaning across cultures. This includes:

- Recognizing culturally embedded speech norms
- Flexibly adapting to new discourse expectations
- Building pragmatic strategies based on mutual intelligibility, not just conformity

3. Method

3. 1 Participants

A social research involving students was carried out through interviews and questionnaires in qualitative and study that was quantified through the use of the Liker scale (Pereira et al., 2018; Risemberg, 2026). The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data use with qualitative insights derived from open-ended questionnaire responses and classroom observations. Similar methodological triangulation has been highlighted as effective in capturing both measurable performance and contextualized learner perspectives (Herrera, 2025). The participants in this study were undergraduate students enrolled in the Department of Teaching English as a Foreign Language at a university. All participants were at a B1 level of English proficiency, based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). A

total of 52 students divided in two groups, took part in the study. The group included individuals from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds, with two different native languages reported.

All students had a foundational understanding of English and were familiar with basic academic and communicative use of the language. Their participation was voluntary, and no academic credit or incentive was given.

3.2 Research Design

The study used a mixed-methods approach to explore how cultural context influences learners' interpretation and use of pragmatic meaning in English. Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered through a specially designed classroom questionnaire.

The focus was on how students understand and apply:

- Indirect speech acts
- Implied meanings
- Politeness strategies
- Figurative expressions

3.3 Data Collection Instrument

A researcher-designed questionnaire was used to gather data. The questionnaire was developed to match B1-level linguistic capabilities and was divided into four sections:

1. Background Information:

    Participants were asked to provide their native language, experience living in English-speaking environments, and the number of years they had studied English.

2. Multiple Choice Section:

    Students interpreted short dialogues and statements to determine intended meanings, such as politeness, sarcasm, or indirect requests.

3. Likert Scale Section:

    Students rated their confidence and perceived ability to interpret and use pragmatic features of English.

4. Open-ended Section:

    Students gave written examples of polite or indirect expressions and described experiences involving misunderstanding or miscommunication.

The questionnaire was administered during regular class time, in **Google Form formats.** Average completion time was 20–30 minutes.

3.4 Procedure

Prior to data collection, the study's aim and purpose were explained in simple English. Students gave informed consent to participate anonymously. They were told that participation was voluntary and that the data would be used for research purposes only.

The researcher was present during the data collection to clarify instructions, if needed, without influencing student responses. Data was collected over two sessions, and responses were exported for analysis.

3.5 Data Analysis

- **Quantitative data** (multiple choice and Likert-scale) were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns in understanding and confidence.

- **Qualitative responses** were analyzed thematically to reveal trends in pragmatic challenges, culturally influenced strategies, and student awareness of implied meaning

4. Results

This section presents the findings from the student questionnaire, which aimed to explore how cultural background influences B1-level university students' interpretation and use of pragmatic meaning in English.

4.1 Participants' Backgrounds

A total of 52 students from the Department of Teaching English as a Foreign Language participated in the study. The students represented five different native languages: Spanish, Kichwa, Quichua, and English. While Spanish was the most common native language, this linguistic diversity provided a meaningful context for analyzing how cultural background may influence pragmatic understanding.

4.2 Interpretation of Pragmatic Meaning (Multiple Choice Results)

Students were asked to interpret indirect expressions, sarcastic remarks, and polite suggestions. The results showed that:

- 85% correctly interpreted the statement *"It's getting cold in here"* as an indirect request to close a window.
- 76% recognized sarcasm in the phrase *"Nice job!"* used after a mistake, although a minority misinterpreted it as genuine praise or anger.
- 94% identified that *"Could you maybe turn that down a little?"* was a polite way to request lower volume — showing strong awareness of softening strategies in English.

These results suggest that most B1-level learners in this context are capable of accurately interpreting common pragmatic cues in English, though sarcasm remains slightly more challenging.

4.3 Self-Reported Confidence (Likert Scale Analysis)

Students rated their confidence in using and understanding pragmatic language features. The most notable trends were:

- A majority (over 70%) reported feeling confident or very confident understanding indirect speech.
- Around 80% felt comfortable using polite phrases in everyday classroom or social settings.
- Confidence was lower for understanding jokes or sarcasm, with about 30% indicating neutral or low confidence, highlighting a potential area for instructional support.

These findings are visualized in a stacked bar chart (see earlier Table 1), illustrating the generally high confidence levels, with a dip when it comes to more culturally nuanced aspects like humor or irony.

Table 1 - Self-Reported Confidence – Likert Scale Analysis.

Statement	1 (Strongly Disagree)	2	3 (Neutral)	4	5 (Strongly Agree)
I feel confident understanding indirect expressions in English.	5	14	23	9	1
I use polite phrases when making requests in English.	8	17	15	11	1
I understand jokes or sarcasm in English conversations.	5	18	16	11	2

Source: Author.

1. **Indirect Expressions**
   o Majority selected 3 (Neutral) or 2, showing moderate confidence.
   o Only 1 student strongly agreed, and 5 strongly disagreed.
   o This suggests a need for more support in this area.

2. **Polite Requests**
   o Slightly stronger confidence overall, with more students selecting 4 or 3.
   o However, 25 students selected 1 or 2, revealing that some are still uncertain.
   o This shows a mix of confidence and hesitation, possibly influenced by cultural politeness norms.

3. **Sarcasm/Jokes**
   o This was the most difficult area, with 23 students selecting 1, 2, or **3**.
   o Very few felt confident interpreting humor or sarcasm — a common issue in L2 pragmatics.

4.4 Qualitative Insights (Open-Ended Responses)

Students' open responses provided deeper insights into their pragmatic awareness:

- When asked to write polite requests, most responses demonstrated good control of indirect and polite phrasing, e.g., *"Would you mind helping me with this?"*
- When describing a moment of misunderstanding, many students cited confusion over tone, implied meaning, or sarcasm, often due to unfamiliarity with cultural norms.

These accounts reflect the influence of students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds on their ability to interpret what is *not directly said*, which lies at the heart of pragmatic competence.

5. Discuss

This study aimed to examine how cultural background influences B1-level university students' interpretation and use of pragmatic meaning in English, with a specific focus on indirect speech acts, implied meanings, politeness strategies, and figurative expressions. The findings offer valuable insights into both the strengths and challenges B1 learners face when navigating pragmatic communication in a second language.

5.1 Interpreting Indirectness and Politeness

The results indicate that most students could accurately interpret indirect speech acts and polite requests. For instance, when presented with the statement *"It's getting cold in here,"* the majority correctly inferred its indirect function as a request to close a window. Similarly, students demonstrated high accuracy in identifying softened requests such as *"Could you maybe turn that down a little?"* as polite strategies, suggesting a strong awareness of hedging and mitigation—important features of pragmatics in English.

These outcomes suggest that at the B1 level, students are beginning to internalize key elements of context-sensitive meaning, especially when expressions align with common social interactions they are likely exposed to in language classes or media.

5.2 Challenges with Sarcasm and Implied Tone

In contrast, responses to the sarcastic statement *"Nice job!"* after a mistake were more varied. While many students selected "sarcastic," others interpreted it as "angry" or "polite." This variation highlights a notable challenge in decoding sarcasm, which often depends heavily on intonation, facial expressions, and cultural norms.

Furthermore, students' self-reported confidence levels—particularly regarding understanding jokes and sarcasm—were lower compared to their confidence with indirect or polite expressions. This finding aligns with previous research, which has shown that sarcasm and humor are among the most difficult pragmatic features for L2 learners due to their reliance on contextual cues and shared cultural knowledge (Taguchi, 2011; Bouton, 1999).

5.3 Cultural Background and Misunderstandings

The open-ended responses provided important qualitative insights. Students often described instances where they misunderstood implied meaning or failed to detect tone, leading to confusion or discomfort. These moments of pragmatic failure were often tied to cultural differences in how directness, irony, or politeness are expressed.

This reinforces the central idea that language learners do not only need vocabulary and grammar, but also cultural-pragmatic awareness to successfully interpret what is "not said but meant" in communication. Students from cultures where direct speech is the norm may struggle more with indirectness, while others may misread politeness strategies due to unfamiliar conventions.

5.4 Pedagogical Implications

The findings underscore the importance of explicitly teaching pragmatics in the English language classroom—especially in multicultural or multilingual contexts. While B1-level learners show promising awareness of indirectness and politeness, sarcasm, irony, and humor require targeted instruction, including:

- Exposure to authentic dialogues

- Reflection on tone and intention

- Cross-cultural comparisons

- Role-play and media-based tasks

Instructors can also incorporate metapragmatic discussion—encouraging students to talk about what certain expressions mean and how they may be perceived across cultures.

5.5. Limitations and Future Research

This study was limited to students within a single university department and focused solely on B1-level learners. While the sample showed linguistic and cultural diversity, the results may not be generalizable to other proficiency levels or institutional contexts.

Future studies could:

- Compare pragmatic competence across different CEFR levels

- Explore classroom interventions that enhance pragmatic awareness

- Investigate cross-cultural pragmatics more deeply by comparing students from specific cultural backgrounds

6. Conclusion

This study set out to explore how B1-level university students interpret and apply pragmatic meaning in English, particularly in the context of indirect speech acts, politeness strategies, implied meanings, and figurative language. The findings demonstrate that while students show developing competence in understanding indirectness and polite forms, challenges remain in decoding sarcasm, implied tone, and culturally dependent expressions.

The use of both quantitative and qualitative methods, including Likert-scale and open-ended responses, offered a nuanced picture of student awareness. The questionnaire effectively revealed that learners' pragmatic performance is often influenced by their cultural background, which shapes their interpretations of intention, tone, and politeness norms in English.

These insights affirm the importance of integrating cultural context into pragmatics instruction—supporting the claim by Kasper and Rose (2002) that pragmatic competence in a second language cannot develop fully without cultural grounding. As Taguchi (2011) also notes, explicit instruction and contextual exposure are critical for developing pragmatic fluency.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for educators, curriculum designers, and future researchers:

7.1 Incorporate Pragmatic Instruction in EFL Curricula

EFL programs at the university level should explicitly teach pragmatic elements such as:

- Indirectness and speech acts
- Politeness formulas and hedging
- Sarcasm and humor in context

Use of role-plays, authentic video materials, and culturally reflective scenarios is encouraged.

7.2 Emphasize Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Awareness

Learners benefit from comparing how the same expressions are interpreted across cultures. Activities like contrastive dialogue analysis can help students recognize how culture shapes meaning, especially in indirect or ironic communication.

7. 3 Use Formative Assessment Tools

Surveys and reflective tools (such as the one used in this study) should be incorporated regularly to:

- Monitor students' growth in pragmatic awareness
- Adapt instruction to address identified gaps

7. 4. Further Research with Broader Samples

Future studies could replicate this design with:

- Students of varying CEFR levels (A2–C1)
- Different age groups or cultural backgrounds
- Classroom interventions that teach pragmatics explicitly

Such research would enrich our understanding of how pragmatic competence develops across contexts and how educators can best support it.

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