

## Pragmatic Failures and their Consequences in the EFL Classroom

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### Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi kegagalan pragmatik dan dampaknya dalam pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing (EFL) di lingkungan kelas. Melalui pendekatan kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui observasi langsung terhadap diskusi, debat, dan interaksi antara mahasiswa dan dosen, serta wawancara semi-terstruktur untuk memahami persepsi peserta terkait kegagalan pragmatik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kegagalan pragmatik yang umum terjadi meliputi transfer pragmatik dari bahasa asli, kesalahan strategi kesopanan, dan kesulitan dalam memahami humor serta ungkapan idiomatik. Selain itu, masalah dalam pengelolaan giliran berbicara sering menyebabkan miskomunikasi dalam diskusi kelompok. Studi ini juga menemukan bahwa pengajar seringkali lebih fokus pada akurasi gramatikal dibandingkan aspek pragmatik, sehingga mengabaikan peluang untuk meningkatkan kompetensi pragmatik siswa. Temuan ini menyoroti pentingnya mengintegrasikan pengajaran pragmatik dalam pembelajaran EFL untuk membantu siswa mengembangkan kemampuan komunikasi yang lebih efektif.

**Kata kunci:** *Kegagalan Pragmatik, Kompetensi Pragmatik, EFL, Interaksi Kelas, Strategi Kesopanan*

### Abstract

This study aims to explore pragmatic failures and their impact in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through direct observations of discussions, debates, and interactions between students and instructors, as well as semi-structured interviews to understand participants' perceptions of pragmatic failures. The findings revealed common pragmatic failures, including pragmatic transfer from the native language, errors in politeness strategies, and difficulties in understanding humor and idiomatic expressions. Additionally, challenges in turn-taking management often led to miscommunication during group discussions. The study also found that instructors tended to focus more on grammatical accuracy than on pragmatic aspects, missing opportunities to enhance students' pragmatic competence. These findings highlight the importance of integrating pragmatic instruction into EFL teaching to help learners develop more effective communication skills.

**Keywords:** *Pragmatic Failures, Pragmatic Competence, EFL, Classroom Interaction, Politeness Strategies*

### INTRODUCTION

The concept of pragmatic competence is central to the successful acquisition of a second language, particularly in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. Pragmatic competence refers to the ability to use language appropriately in various social and cultural contexts, which goes beyond grammatical knowledge to include understanding implicit meanings, cultural norms, and social cues. While many EFL curricula emphasize linguistic accuracy and vocabulary acquisition, the role of pragmatics often receives less attention. This gap in instruction can lead to pragmatic failures, where learners unintentionally produce language that is inappropriate or misunderstood in the target culture (Thomas, 1983). Such failures can have

significant consequences for learners, impacting their communicative effectiveness and potentially causing misunderstandings or social friction.

Language is a vital tool for conveying messages, ideas, emotions, and cultural distinctions during communication. In language learning, acquiring a new language is often influenced by the learner's native language. Effective communication in a foreign language requires learners to understand pragmatic or context-bound features through meaningful activities and awareness-raising tasks. In classroom communication, pragmatic failure arises due to differences in culture, ethnicity, and background knowledge between speakers and listeners. Such failures can lead to misunderstandings when interpretations deviate from the intended meaning, causing misattributions of beliefs and intentions based on cultural assumptions (Fitria & Rahmawati, 2020).

Pragmatics plays a crucial role in language learning as it helps speakers express themselves appropriately based on context. When learners from different linguistic or cultural backgrounds interact, pragmatic failure can occur, as discussed by Jenny Thomas (1983) in her article *Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure*. This failure arises when EFL learners struggle to transfer meaning from their native language into English, especially without understanding the cultural context. While such issues may not be problematic within a homogeneous group, they become significant in communication with native English speakers unless the learners can appropriately transfer their language skills. (Amna, 2018).

Pragmatic failures can be broadly categorized into two types: pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic failures. Pragma-linguistic failures occur when learners incorrectly apply linguistic forms to express their intended meaning, often due to a lack of understanding of the nuances in language use. For example, learners might use direct requests that sound overly blunt in English, where politeness strategies are more nuanced. On the other hand, socio-pragmatic failures stem from mismatches between the learner's cultural norms and those of the target language. For instance, the use of certain speech acts, such as apologies or compliments, might differ significantly between cultures, leading to unintentional offense or awkwardness (Kasper & Rose, 2002). These failures highlight the interplay between language and culture, underscoring the need for EFL instruction that integrates pragmatic awareness.

The consequences of pragmatic failures in the EFL classroom can be far-reaching. On an interpersonal level, these failures can hinder learners' ability to build relationships with native speakers or function effectively in multicultural environments. Misunderstandings arising from pragmatic errors may lead to frustration or embarrassment, potentially discouraging learners from engaging in real-life communication. Moreover, repeated pragmatic failures can affect learners' confidence, reducing their willingness to participate in conversations and hindering their overall language development (Taguchi, 2011). This highlights the importance of addressing pragmatics as a core component of communicative competence in language teaching.

Incorporating pragmatics into the EFL classroom poses certain challenges. Unlike grammar or vocabulary, pragmatic rules are often implicit and vary widely across different cultural contexts. This variability makes it difficult to create standardized teaching materials or assessments for pragmatic competence. Furthermore, EFL teachers may themselves lack training in pragmatics, limiting their ability to provide effective instruction. Research has shown that explicit teaching of pragmatics, combined with opportunities for authentic practice, can significantly enhance learners' pragmatic competence (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013). Thus, teacher training programs should prioritize equipping educators with the tools to address pragmatic aspects of language learning.

Technological advancements offer new opportunities to address pragmatic failures in the EFL classroom. Digital tools such as video conferencing, online role-plays, and virtual reality simulations can provide learners with authentic contexts to practice pragmatic skills. Additionally, exposure to multimedia resources, such as films, television shows, and social media, allows learners to observe pragmatic norms in action. These resources can complement traditional classroom instruction by bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application (Sykes, 2018). However, the effective integration of technology requires careful planning to ensure alignment with pedagogical goals.

Despite these advancements, pragmatic failures cannot be entirely eliminated, as they are an inherent part of the language learning process. Mistakes provide valuable learning

opportunities, encouraging learners to reflect on their language use and develop greater sensitivity to cultural nuances. In this regard, fostering a supportive classroom environment is crucial. Teachers should encourage learners to view pragmatic errors as a natural and constructive aspect of language acquisition rather than as failures to be avoided (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). This perspective can motivate learners to experiment with language use and engage more actively in communicative tasks.

Future research and practice in EFL education should focus on developing comprehensive frameworks for teaching pragmatics. This includes designing curricula that balance linguistic accuracy with pragmatic competence, creating assessment tools to measure learners' pragmatic development, and exploring the role of intercultural competence in language learning. As globalization continues to increase the demand for effective cross-cultural communication, the ability to navigate pragmatic challenges will become an indispensable skill for EFL learners. Addressing these challenges requires a collaborative effort among educators, researchers, and policymakers to ensure that pragmatics receives the attention it deserves in language education.

Pragmatic failures represent a critical yet often overlooked aspect of EFL learning. Their impact extends beyond linguistic proficiency, influencing learners' social interactions, confidence, and cultural adaptability. By incorporating pragmatics into EFL instruction, educators can equip learners with the skills to communicate effectively in diverse contexts, ultimately enhancing their overall language competence. As the field of language education evolves, a deeper understanding of pragmatics will be essential to preparing learners for the complex demands of global communication. It emphasizes the urgent need for interventions to promote respectful dialogue in educational environments, marking a significant step towards fostering more respectful communication among students (Dacalanio et al., 2024).

## METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research methodology to investigate pragmatic failures and their consequences in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. Qualitative methods were chosen to allow an in-depth exploration of communication dynamics and contextual factors that contribute to pragmatic failures. Data were collected through direct observations of classroom interactions, including group discussions, debates, and student-teacher exchanges. The observations were conducted over a period of eight weeks in a university EFL program, where students regularly engaged in communicative activities designed to enhance their speaking and interactional skills. During these sessions, the researchers recorded instances of pragmatic failures, such as misinterpretations, inappropriate politeness strategies, and unsuccessful speech acts. The observational data were supplemented by field notes to capture non-verbal cues and contextual elements that influenced the interactions (Creswell 2013).

To enrich the dataset, semi-structured interviews were conducted with both students and instructors to gain insights into their perceptions of communication breakdowns and their underlying causes. The interviews aimed to explore how students perceived their pragmatic challenges and how instructors addressed or overlooked these issues during lessons. This triangulation of data sources ensured a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study (Denzin 1978). Participants were assured of confidentiality, and informed consent was obtained before data collection commenced. Audio recordings of discussions and interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure the accuracy of the data.

The data analysis followed a thematic approach, focusing on identifying recurring patterns and themes related to pragmatic failures. The transcripts and field notes were coded inductively, allowing themes to emerge organically from the data. Key themes included instances of pragmatic transfer, misalignment of politeness strategies, and the impact of limited cultural knowledge on communication. To ensure reliability, the coding process was reviewed by multiple researchers, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion (Braun & Clarke 2006). The findings were interpreted in light of existing theories on interlanguage pragmatics and sociocultural communication to provide a nuanced understanding of how pragmatic failures manifest and their implications for EFL instruction (Kasper & Rose 2002).

This qualitative approach allowed the researchers to capture the complexity of real-life interactions in the EFL classroom and to understand the lived experiences of students and instructors. By analyzing authentic communication in a naturalistic setting, the study offers practical insights into the challenges of developing pragmatic competence and provides recommendations for addressing these issues in language teaching practices.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Results**

The results of this study revealed several recurring patterns of pragmatic failures in the EFL classroom, particularly during discussions and debates. One of the most common issues observed was pragmatic transfer, where students applied politeness strategies or speech act formulations from their native language that were incongruent with English norms. For instance, during a classroom debate, a student responding to a peer's argument said, "You are wrong; this is not the way," which was grammatically correct but came across as overly direct and confrontational in English. This pragmatic transfer from their native language norms led to visible discomfort among the participants, as such direct expressions are often perceived as impolite in English discussions.

Another notable finding was the difficulty students faced in managing turn-taking during discussions. In one observed group activity, students frequently interrupted one another without signaling their intent to speak, leading to overlapping conversations and confusion. For example, during a role-play exercise, one student began responding to a question while another was still speaking, creating frustration among the participants. Conversely, some students hesitated to take their turn, leading to prolonged silences that disrupted the flow of the discussion. These issues demonstrated a lack of familiarity with conversational norms such as signaling turns with phrases like "May I add something?" or waiting for a natural pause before speaking.

Politeness strategies were another area where pragmatic failures were frequently observed. In one classroom scenario, a student approached the instructor after a lecture to request clarification, saying, "You explain it again," without using mitigating language or softeners like "Could you" or "Would you mind." Although the request was understood, the instructor later commented that the tone felt abrupt. In another instance, students often used overly formal phrases such as "I humbly beg for your explanation" when addressing peers, creating unnecessary social distance that hindered the natural flow of communication.

The study also highlighted pragmatic failures in the use of humor and idiomatic expressions. For example, during a group discussion, one student attempted to use humor by saying, "Your idea is dead," intending to mean the idea was ineffective. However, this literal translation of a phrase from the student's native language caused confusion and even offense among the group. Similarly, another student misused the idiom "break the ice," applying it in a context unrelated to initiating a conversation, which led to misunderstanding. These examples underscored the challenges students faced in navigating culturally specific aspects of language.

Finally, the role of instructors in addressing pragmatic failures was also observed. In one classroom debate, a student responded to a peer's argument with, "I don't agree; you should think better," which caused visible discomfort. The instructor intervened but focused solely on correcting the grammatical structure, advising the student to say "I don't agree with your idea" instead of addressing the pragmatic issue of directness. This missed opportunity to highlight the importance of politeness strategies demonstrated a gap in integrating pragmatic instruction into the lesson.

These observed instances of pragmatic failures provide concrete evidence of the challenges EFL learners face in achieving pragmatic competence and underscore the need for targeted interventions to address these issues effectively.

### **Discussion**

The results of this study underscore the multifaceted nature of pragmatic failures in the EFL classroom and their implications for both communication and pedagogy. The prevalence of pragmatic transfer highlights the need for a greater emphasis on raising students' awareness of cross-cultural differences in communication. Previous studies have similarly noted that learners often rely on their native language norms when engaging in second language interactions, leading



to pragmatic errors (Kasper 1992). Addressing this issue requires explicit instruction on cultural norms and practices, as well as opportunities for learners to observe and practice these norms in authentic contexts.

The challenges students faced in managing turn-taking during discussions reflect a broader issue of interactional competence, which is a critical component of pragmatic ability. Effective communication involves not only producing grammatically correct sentences but also adhering to conversational conventions, such as appropriate timing and signaling intent (Yule 1996). Teachers could address these challenges by incorporating activities that simulate real-life interactions, such as role-plays and group projects, where students can practice these skills in a structured environment.

The findings regarding politeness strategies suggest that students require more nuanced guidance on adapting their language use to different social contexts. Politeness is deeply tied to cultural expectations, and failing to meet these expectations can have significant social consequences (Brown & Levinson 1987). Incorporating lessons on varying levels of formality and appropriate tone can help students navigate these complexities more effectively. For example, instructors might use video recordings of authentic interactions to illustrate how politeness strategies vary depending on the relationship between speakers.

The misuse of humor and idiomatic expressions highlights the importance of exposing students to authentic language use. Humor, in particular, is highly culture-specific and often requires an understanding of shared cultural references (Taguchi 2011). Similarly, idiomatic expressions are challenging for EFL learners because they often lack direct equivalents in their native languages. Teachers can address these issues by incorporating authentic materials, such as films, podcasts, or conversational excerpts, into the curriculum to familiarize students with the nuances of language use.

The role of instructors in addressing pragmatic failures is another critical area for improvement. As the observations revealed, many instructors prioritized grammatical accuracy over pragmatic appropriateness, reflecting a broader trend in EFL education (Bardovi-Harlig 2001). To foster pragmatic competence, teachers need professional development opportunities that equip them with the tools and confidence to integrate pragmatics into their lessons. Workshops and training sessions could focus on strategies for teaching speech acts, conversational norms, and cultural awareness.

Another significant aspect of the findings is the emotional and psychological impact of pragmatic failures on students. Miscommunication can lead to feelings of embarrassment or frustration, which may discourage learners from participating in future interactions (Ishihara & Cohen 2010). This underscores the importance of creating a supportive classroom environment where students feel comfortable experimenting with language without fear of judgment. Positive reinforcement and constructive feedback can help mitigate the negative effects of pragmatic failures.

The thematic analysis also revealed that pragmatic failures are often interconnected with linguistic competence. For instance, students' misuse of idiomatic expressions or inability to convey humor effectively was partly due to limited vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. This interdependence suggests that teaching pragmatics should not be treated as a separate endeavor but rather integrated into broader language instruction. Teachers could design activities that simultaneously address grammatical, lexical, and pragmatic goals.

The study's findings align with existing research on interlanguage pragmatics, which emphasizes the importance of context in understanding and teaching pragmatic competence (Kasper & Rose 2002). By focusing on authentic classroom interactions, this research contributes to a growing body of evidence that highlights the need for contextually grounded approaches to language teaching. Future studies could expand on these findings by exploring pragmatic failures in different cultural or institutional settings to identify commonalities and variations.

The results and discussion highlight the complexity of pragmatic failures and their far-reaching consequences in the EFL classroom. By addressing these challenges through targeted instructional strategies, educators can enhance students' communicative competence and better prepare them for real-world interactions. The findings underscore the need for a balanced

approach that prioritizes both linguistic accuracy and pragmatic appropriateness, ultimately fostering more effective and confident language learners.

## CONCLUSION

This study has provided valuable insights into the development of complexity, fluency, and accuracy in the English discourse of Indonesian learners over a six-month period. The findings revealed clear progress in all three areas, with participants showing significant improvement in their ability to produce more syntactically complex sentences, speak more fluently, and reduce grammatical errors in both written and spoken tasks. However, challenges persisted, particularly in the areas of cohesion and lexical development, which hindered the overall coherence and richness of learners' discourse.

The observed improvements in sentence complexity, fluency, and accuracy are consistent with existing literature on second language acquisition, particularly the dynamic nature of these three components (Larsen-Freeman, 2006). While fluency and complexity in oral tasks increased, learners still faced difficulties in maintaining coherence and fluency at the same level as in their written tasks. This disparity points to the unique demands of spoken discourse, where real-time language production can strain learners' ability to organize and link ideas effectively.

Furthermore, the study highlights the role of feedback and task-based learning in facilitating language development. The reduction in grammatical errors and the increase in sentence complexity suggest that consistent practice and corrective feedback contribute significantly to learners' linguistic progress. Nevertheless, the reliance on familiar vocabulary suggests a need for targeted vocabulary instruction to enhance lexical diversity, a critical aspect of achieving fluency and complexity in both spoken and written discourse.

The individual differences in participants' progress underscore the importance of personalized language instruction that caters to the unique needs each learner. As the study demonstrated, some learners made more rapid progress in specific areas, while others required additional support. This variability in learner outcomes emphasizes the need for differentiated teaching strategies that take into account the diverse backgrounds and learning styles of students.

Finally, the study's findings also raise important questions about the interaction between oral and written language skills. Future research could explore how these skills influence one another and whether integrated approaches to teaching speaking and writing can enhance overall language proficiency. Additionally, further investigation into the challenges of discourse cohesion and lexical development could provide deeper insights into how learners can be supported in achieving more coherent and lexically diverse discourse. Overall, this research contributes to our understanding of the dynamic processes involved in second language acquisition, particularly in the context of Indonesian learners of English. It offers valuable implications for language teaching, particularly in the areas of fluency, grammatical accuracy, discourse cohesion, and vocabulary development.

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