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The Role of Pragmatics in Cross-Cultural Communication



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The Role of Pragmatics in Cross-Cultural Communication



 **George Smith**

University of Ottawa

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Abstract

Purpose: The general purpose of this study was to explore the role of pragmatics in cross-cultural communication.

Methodology: The study adopted a desktop research methodology. Desk research refers to secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork. Desk research is basically involved in collecting data from existing resources hence it is often considered a low cost technique as compared to field research, as the main cost is involved in executive's time, telephone charges and directories. Thus, the study relied on already published studies, reports and statistics. This secondary data was easily accessed through the online journals and library.

Findings: The findings reveal that there exists a contextual and methodological gap relating to pragmatics in cross-cultural communication. The study provided valuable insights into the pivotal role of pragmatics in facilitating effective communication across diverse cultural contexts. By exploring principles such as speech acts, politeness strategies, and implicature, the research enhanced understanding of how language is used and interpreted in cross-cultural interactions. The findings underscored the importance of pragmatic competence and cultural sensitivity in achieving mutual understanding. Furthermore, the study highlighted the need for incorporating pragmatic awareness training into educational curricula and policymaking efforts to promote cultural inclusivity and cooperation. Overall, the study's contributions deepen our understanding of cross-cultural communication dynamics and offer practical guidance for navigating cultural differences in an interconnected world.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Speech Act theory, Politeness theory and Relevance theory may be used to anchor future studies on the role of pragmatics in cross-cultural communication. The study provided several key recommendations that contributed to both theory and practice in the field of intercultural communication. These recommendations included incorporating pragmatic competence training into educational curricula, implementing cross-cultural training programs in organizations, developing initiatives and policies to promote intercultural understanding, considering cultural factors in online communication platforms, engaging in reflective practices to enhance awareness of cultural differences, and establishing cross-cultural pragmatics as a distinct field of study. These suggestions aimed to enhance individuals' ability to navigate cross-cultural interactions effectively, promote inclusivity and mutual understanding in diverse settings, and advance theoretical knowledge in the field of intercultural communication.

Keywords: *Pragmatics, Cross-Cultural Communication, Intercultural Competence, Speech Acts, Politeness Strategies, Cultural Sensitivity, Reflective Practice, Training Programs*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Cross-cultural communication is a field of study that examines how people from different cultural backgrounds interact and communicate with each other. It encompasses verbal and non-verbal communication, as well as the underlying cultural values, beliefs, and norms that shape communication behaviors. In today's globalized world, effective cross-cultural communication is crucial for successful interactions in various contexts, including business, diplomacy, education, and everyday social interactions (Gudykunst & Kim, 2017).

In the United States, a culturally diverse country with a significant immigrant population, cross-cultural communication is both prevalent and essential. For example, communication styles may vary between different ethnic groups within the US. Statistics from the US Census Bureau (2020) indicate that Spanish is the second most spoken language in the country after English, highlighting the importance of bilingual communication. Additionally, cultural differences in communication norms may be observed in business settings, where assertiveness and directness are valued in some cultures, while others prioritize indirect communication and relationship-building (Matsumoto, Hwang & Frank, 2016)

Similarly, in the United Kingdom, cultural diversity plays a significant role in shaping communication patterns. With a history of colonialism and immigration, the UK is home to a wide range of cultural communities. For instance, research by Holmes and Stubbe (2015) suggests that British communication tends to be more reserved and indirect compared to American communication styles. Additionally, cultural influences may be evident in workplace communication, where British professionals often value politeness, understatement, and avoiding confrontation (Holmes, 2013).

In Japan, communication is deeply influenced by cultural values such as hierarchy, collectivism, and harmony. Japanese communication tends to be more implicit and context-dependent, with an emphasis on non-verbal cues and social etiquette (Gudykunst & Nishida, 2013). For example, bowing is a common form of greeting in Japan, reflecting respect and deference. Statistics from the Japan National Tourism Organization (2020) show that tourism to Japan has been steadily increasing, highlighting the importance of effective cross-cultural communication for tourists and locals alike.

In Brazil, a country known for its cultural diversity and vibrant social dynamics, cross-cultural communication is shaped by a blend of indigenous, European, African, and immigrant influences. Brazilian communication tends to be warm, expressive, and relationship-oriented, with an emphasis on non-verbal cues such as gestures, facial expressions, and body language (Samovar, Porter, McDaniel & Roy, 2016). Moreover, Alencar & Lima (2019) suggests that communication styles may vary across different regions of Brazil, reflecting regional differences in cultural norms and values.

In African countries, cross-cultural communication is influenced by the continent's rich cultural heritage and linguistic diversity. With over 2,000 languages spoken across Africa, language plays a crucial role in communication (Mazrui & Mazrui, 2016). For example, in Nigeria, a country with over 500 ethnic groups, English serves as the official language for communication across diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Additionally, cultural practices such as storytelling, music, and dance are important means of communication in many African societies (Ngugi, 2018). Cross-cultural communication is a complex and dynamic process that involves understanding and navigating cultural differences in communication styles, norms, and values. Effective cross-cultural communication is essential for fostering mutual understanding, respect, and cooperation in diverse global contexts. By recognizing and appreciating cultural differences, individuals and organizations can build stronger relationships and achieve greater success in their interactions.

Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that studies how context contributes to meaning in communication. It goes beyond the literal interpretation of words and focuses on understanding the intentions, implications, and effects of utterances within specific contexts (Huang, 2014). One of the key concepts in pragmatics is implicature, which refers to the meaning conveyed indirectly through language. For example, when someone says, "It's hot in here," they may imply that they want the air conditioning to be turned on. Understanding implicatures requires knowledge of cultural norms and social context, making pragmatics essential for effective cross-cultural communication (Hymes, 2016). Cross-cultural communication involves interactions between individuals from different cultural backgrounds, where cultural norms and values influence communication patterns (Gudykunst & Kim, 2017). Pragmatic principles play a crucial role in navigating these cultural differences. For instance, the use of politeness strategies varies across cultures, with some cultures valuing directness and others prioritizing indirectness (Holmes, 2013). Understanding how to express politeness appropriately in different cultural contexts requires pragmatic competence, including knowledge of speech acts and cultural norms (Yule, 2016).

Speech acts are another important concept in pragmatics, referring to the actions performed by speakers through their utterances. Different cultures may have distinct conventions for performing speech acts, leading to potential misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication. For example, the speech act of offering may be expressed differently in Japanese culture compared to American culture, with Japanese speakers often using indirect expressions to offer assistance. Pragmatic analysis helps identify these cultural differences and facilitates effective communication across cultures (Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz, 2017). Cultural scripts and frames also influence communication patterns in cross-cultural interactions. A cultural script refers to the culturally specific sequence of actions or behaviors expected in a particular situation, while a frame refers to the context or perspective that individuals use to interpret interactions. Pragmatic analysis helps uncover these underlying cultural scripts and frames, enabling individuals to understand the implicit rules governing communication in different cultural contexts.

Furthermore, the notion of face, or public self-image, is central to understanding interpersonal interactions in cross-cultural communication. Face concerns vary across cultures, with some cultures prioritizing positive face (the desire to be liked and approved) and others valuing negative face (the desire to be free from imposition) (Matsumoto, Hwang & Frank, 2016). Pragmatic strategies such as politeness formulas and face-saving techniques are employed to maintain harmony and preserve face in intercultural interactions (García & Florian, 2019).

An important aspect of pragmatics in cross-cultural communication is the recognition of cultural variations in speech patterns and conversational styles. For example, some cultures engage in high-context communication, where meaning is embedded in the context and relies heavily on non-verbal cues, while others prefer low-context communication, which emphasizes explicit verbal messages. Pragmatic analysis helps individuals navigate these differences and adapt their communication style accordingly to facilitate mutual understanding (Scollon & Scollon, 2001). Cross-cultural pragmatics also involves examining how language and culture shape perceptions of politeness, respect, and social distance. For instance, studies have shown that cultural norms regarding politeness vary, with some cultures placing greater emphasis on deference to authority figures and others prioritizing egalitarianism (Ide, 1989). Pragmatic analysis sheds light on these cultural differences and provides insights into how individuals interpret and respond to communicative acts in cross-cultural encounters (Kádár & Haugh, 2013).

Moreover, the study of pragmatics in cross-cultural communication extends to intercultural pragmatics, which focuses on interactions between speakers of different languages and cultures (Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 1997). Intercultural pragmatics examines how cultural differences in

language use impact communication and explores strategies for bridging these differences (Bargiela-Chiappini & Haugh, 2019). By understanding the cultural underpinnings of communication, individuals can engage in more effective cross-cultural interactions and avoid misunderstandings (Kecskes, 2010). Pragmatics plays a crucial role in cross-cultural communication by providing insights into how language use is shaped by cultural norms, values, and context. Through the analysis of speech acts, politeness strategies, cultural scripts, and frames, individuals can navigate cultural differences and communicate effectively in diverse cultural settings. By fostering pragmatic competence and intercultural awareness, individuals can build stronger relationships and achieve mutual understanding in cross-cultural encounters.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Cross-cultural communication presents a significant challenge in today's globalized world, where interactions between individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds are increasingly common. While extensive research has been conducted on various aspects of communication and culture, there remains a notable gap in understanding the role of pragmatics in facilitating effective cross-cultural communication. According to a recent report by the Pew Research Center (2020), the number of international migrants worldwide reached an estimated 281 million in 2020, highlighting the growing need for improved cross-cultural communication skills. Despite the increasing diversity of global populations, many individuals and organizations struggle to navigate cultural differences in communication effectively, resulting in misunderstandings, conflicts, and missed opportunities for collaboration (Gudykunst & Kim, 2017).

The existing literature on cross-cultural communication has primarily focused on broad cultural dimensions such as language proficiency, cultural values, and communication styles. However, there is a lack of research specifically addressing the pragmatic aspects of communication, such as speech acts, implicature, and politeness strategies, in cross-cultural contexts. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating how pragmatic competence influences communication effectiveness and intercultural understanding. By examining the role of pragmatics in cross-cultural communication, this research seeks to provide insights into the linguistic and cultural factors that shape communicative behaviors across different cultural contexts.

The findings of this study will benefit a wide range of stakeholders, including individuals, organizations, educators, and policymakers, involved in cross-cultural interactions. For individuals, understanding the pragmatic aspects of communication in cross-cultural contexts will enhance their ability to navigate diverse cultural settings and establish meaningful connections with people from different backgrounds. This study's findings will also inform the development of training programs and resources aimed at improving cross-cultural communication skills in various professional fields, such as business, diplomacy, healthcare, and education (Holmes, 2013). Furthermore, policymakers can use the insights gained from this research to develop policies and initiatives that promote intercultural understanding and cooperation on a global scale. Overall, this study's findings have the potential to contribute to more harmonious and productive interactions in an increasingly interconnected world.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Speech Act Theory

Developed by philosopher J.L. Austin and later expanded upon by John Searle, Speech Act Theory posits that utterances not only convey information but also perform actions. According to this theory, when individuals speak, they are not merely describing the world but also engaging in social acts such

as requesting, promising, or apologizing (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). In the context of cross-cultural communication, understanding speech acts is crucial as different cultures may have distinct conventions for performing these acts. For example, the speech act of refusal may be expressed directly in some cultures but indirectly in others, leading to potential misunderstandings. By examining how speech acts are performed and interpreted across cultures, researchers can gain insights into the role of pragmatics in facilitating effective communication in diverse cultural contexts (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969).

2.1.2 Politeness Theory

Proposed by sociolinguists Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, Politeness Theory explores the ways in which individuals manage interpersonal relationships through language (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The theory distinguishes between positive politeness, which involves strategies to show friendliness and solidarity, and negative politeness, which involves strategies to avoid imposition and maintain autonomy. Politeness strategies may vary across cultures, with some cultures placing greater emphasis on maintaining social harmony and saving face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In the context of cross-cultural communication, understanding politeness strategies is essential for navigating cultural differences and avoiding unintended offense. By examining how politeness is expressed and interpreted in different cultural contexts, researchers can shed light on the pragmatic principles underlying cross-cultural communication (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

2.1.3 Relevance Theory

Developed by linguists Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, Relevance Theory posits that communication is guided by the principle of relevance, where individuals strive to communicate information that is relevant to the context and the interlocutors' cognitive environment (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). According to this theory, comprehension involves the search for the most relevant interpretation of an utterance, balancing cognitive effort and contextual expectations. In the context of cross-cultural communication, Relevance Theory provides a framework for understanding how individuals interpret and respond to communicative acts across cultural boundaries. By examining how relevance is negotiated in intercultural interactions, researchers can gain insights into the cognitive processes underlying cross-cultural communication and the role of pragmatics in achieving mutual understanding (Sperber & Wilson, 1986).

2.2 Empirical Review

Wang & Lee (2016) explored the development of pragmatic awareness and its influence on intercultural communication competence over time. The researchers conducted a series of surveys and interviews with participants from diverse cultural backgrounds, assessing their pragmatic awareness and communication experiences at multiple points in time. The study revealed that individuals who demonstrated higher levels of pragmatic awareness exhibited greater adaptability and effectiveness in cross-cultural communication. Furthermore, it identified specific factors that contributed to the development of pragmatic awareness, such as exposure to diverse cultural contexts and reflective practices. The findings underscore the importance of incorporating pragmatic awareness training into educational curricula and providing opportunities for individuals to engage in reflective practice to enhance their intercultural communication skills.

Zhang & Chen (2019) investigated how pragmatic norms and conventions manifest in online communication across different cultural contexts. The researchers conducted a content analysis of social media interactions on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, examining the use of pragmatic markers, speech acts, and politeness strategies in cross-cultural online communication. The study found that while certain pragmatic features were universal across cultures, others exhibited significant

variation depending on cultural norms and values. Additionally, it identified cultural-specific communication patterns and strategies employed by users to convey meaning and maintain social relationships in online contexts. The findings highlight the importance of considering cultural factors when designing online communication platforms and developing strategies for promoting cross-cultural understanding and collaboration in virtual environments.

Li & Wang (2017) examined how politeness strategies are employed in business communication across different cultural contexts. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews and analyzed written correspondence from multinational corporations, exploring the use of politeness markers, speech acts, and face-saving strategies in cross-cultural business interactions. The study revealed that while certain politeness strategies were universally valued in business contexts, others exhibited cultural variation in their implementation and interpretation. Additionally, it identified cultural-specific norms and expectations that influenced communication behaviors among business professionals. The findings underscore the importance of cultural sensitivity and awareness in cross-cultural business communication, emphasizing the need for training programs and resources that address cultural differences in politeness norms and practices.

Kim & Park (2018) investigated how pragmatic factors influence negotiation strategies and outcomes in intercultural contexts. The researchers conducted simulated negotiation exercises and analyzed negotiation transcripts from participants representing different cultural backgrounds, examining the use of language, speech acts, and politeness strategies in negotiation interactions. The study found that cultural differences in communication styles and norms significantly impacted negotiation processes and outcomes. It identified specific pragmatic features that were associated with successful negotiation, such as the use of indirect speech acts and face-saving strategies. The findings highlight the need for negotiators to be aware of cultural differences in communication and adapt their negotiation strategies accordingly. Training programs that incorporate cross-cultural pragmatics can help negotiators enhance their effectiveness in intercultural negotiation contexts.

Chen & Wu (2015) explored how politeness norms influence communication behaviors and patient-provider interactions in cross-cultural healthcare settings. The researchers conducted focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews with healthcare professionals and patients from diverse cultural backgrounds, examining their perceptions and experiences of politeness norms in healthcare communication. The study identified cultural differences in politeness norms and their impact on patient-provider communication. It revealed that while some politeness strategies were universally valued in healthcare contexts, others varied depending on cultural expectations and preferences. The findings emphasize the importance of cultural competence and sensitivity in healthcare communication, highlighting the need for healthcare professionals to adapt their communication style to accommodate diverse cultural norms and values.

Liu & Li (2020) investigated how pragmatic factors affect conflict resolution strategies and outcomes in intercultural contexts. The researchers conducted controlled experiments using scenario-based simulations and observed participants' negotiation and conflict resolution strategies, analyzing the influence of language use, speech acts, and politeness strategies on conflict resolution processes. The study found that cultural differences in communication styles and pragmatic norms significantly impacted conflict resolution efforts. It identified specific pragmatic features that contributed to successful conflict resolution, such as the use of indirect speech acts and face-saving strategies. The findings underscore the importance of considering pragmatic factors in conflict resolution interventions and training programs. By enhancing their understanding of cross-cultural pragmatics, individuals and organizations can improve their ability to manage and resolve conflicts in diverse cultural contexts.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a desktop research methodology. Desk research refers to secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork. Desk research is basically involved in collecting data from existing resources hence it is often considered a low cost technique as compared to field research, as the main cost is involved in executive's time, telephone charges and directories. Thus, the study relied on already published studies, reports and statistics. This secondary data was easily accessed through the online journals and library.

4.0 FINDINGS

This study presented both a contextual and methodological gap. A contextual gap occurs when desired research findings provide a different perspective on the topic of discussion. For instance, Zhang & Chen (2019) investigated how pragmatic norms and conventions manifest in online communication across different cultural contexts. The researchers conducted a content analysis of social media interactions on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, examining the use of pragmatic markers, speech acts, and politeness strategies in cross-cultural online communication. The study found that while certain pragmatic features were universal across cultures, others exhibited significant variation depending on cultural norms and values. The findings highlight the importance of considering cultural factors when designing online communication platforms and developing strategies for promoting cross-cultural understanding and collaboration in virtual environments. On the other hand, the current study was focused on the role of pragmatics in cross-cultural communication.

Secondly, a methodological gap also presents itself, for example, Zhang & Chen (2019) in their study on how pragmatic norms and conventions manifest in online communication across different cultural contexts; conducted a content analysis of social media interactions on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, examining the use of pragmatic markers, speech acts, and politeness strategies in cross-cultural online communication. Whereas, the current study adopted a desktop research method.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The study has provided valuable insights into the complex interplay between language, culture, and communication. Through an exploration of pragmatic principles such as speech acts, politeness strategies, and implicature, the research has illuminated the pivotal role that pragmatics plays in facilitating effective cross-cultural interactions. By understanding how language is used and interpreted in diverse cultural contexts, individuals and organizations can enhance their ability to navigate cultural differences and achieve mutual understanding. The findings underscore the importance of pragmatic competence in cross-cultural communication, emphasizing the need for individuals to develop awareness and sensitivity to cultural norms and expectations.

Furthermore, the study has highlighted the importance of considering pragmatic factors in educational and training programs aimed at enhancing cross-cultural communication skills. By incorporating pragmatic awareness training into curricula and providing opportunities for individuals to engage in reflective practice, educators can help prepare students and professionals for successful communication in diverse cultural settings. Additionally, the research has implications for policymakers and organizations seeking to foster intercultural understanding and cooperation. By recognizing the role of pragmatics in shaping communication behaviors, policymakers can develop policies and initiatives that promote cultural sensitivity and inclusivity in various domains.

Overall, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of communication across cultures and provides practical insights for improving intercultural interactions. By recognizing the importance of pragmatic competence and cultural awareness, individuals and organizations can

navigate cultural differences more effectively and build stronger relationships in an increasingly interconnected world. As globalization continues to accelerate, the findings of this study serve as a valuable resource for promoting cross-cultural understanding and collaboration in diverse global contexts.

5.2 Recommendations

The study provides valuable recommendations that contribute to both theory and practice in the field of intercultural communication. Firstly, the study suggests that incorporating pragmatic competence training into educational curricula can significantly enhance individuals' ability to navigate cross-cultural interactions effectively. By providing students with opportunities to develop their understanding of speech acts, implicature, and politeness strategies, educators can equip them with the necessary skills to communicate across cultural boundaries with greater success. This recommendation contributes to theoretical advancements by emphasizing the importance of pragmatic awareness in fostering intercultural competence.

Secondly, the study highlights the need for organizations to implement training programs that address cultural differences in communication styles and norms. By offering workshops and seminars on cross-cultural pragmatics, businesses can enhance their employees' ability to engage in successful cross-cultural interactions. Moreover, incorporating cultural sensitivity training into organizational practices can help minimize misunderstandings and conflicts in multicultural workplaces. This recommendation contributes to both theory and practice by emphasizing the practical applications of cross-cultural pragmatics in real-world settings.

Furthermore, the study recommends that policymakers develop initiatives and policies that promote intercultural understanding and cooperation on a global scale. By supporting multicultural education programs and fostering international collaborations, policymakers can contribute to the development of a more inclusive and interconnected society. Additionally, encouraging cross-cultural dialogue and exchange initiatives can help bridge cultural divides and promote mutual respect and understanding among diverse populations. This recommendation contributes to policy development by advocating for measures that promote cultural diversity and inclusivity.

Moreover, the study underscores the importance of considering cultural factors when designing online communication platforms and virtual environments. By incorporating cross-cultural pragmatics into the design of digital interfaces, technology developers can create platforms that are more inclusive and accessible to users from diverse cultural backgrounds. Additionally, implementing features that facilitate cross-cultural communication, such as multilingual interfaces and cultural sensitivity prompts, can help promote mutual understanding and collaboration in online spaces. This recommendation contributes to both theory and practice by addressing the unique challenges and opportunities presented by digital communication technologies.

Furthermore, the study suggests that individuals and organizations should engage in reflective practices to enhance their awareness of cultural differences in communication. By regularly reflecting on their own communication behaviors and considering alternative perspectives, individuals can develop greater sensitivity to cultural nuances and improve their intercultural communication skills. Similarly, organizations can foster a culture of reflexivity by encouraging employees to engage in dialogue and feedback exchanges about their cross-cultural experiences. This recommendation contributes to both theory and practice by emphasizing the importance of ongoing self-reflection and learning in intercultural communication contexts.

Lastly, the study recommends the development of cross-cultural pragmatics as a distinct field of study within the broader discipline of intercultural communication. By establishing cross-cultural pragmatics

as a specialized area of research, scholars can deepen their understanding of the pragmatic principles underlying cross-cultural communication and develop theoretical frameworks and models to guide future research and practice. Additionally, creating interdisciplinary collaborations between linguists, sociologists, psychologists, and communication scholars can facilitate the integration of diverse perspectives and methodologies in the study of cross-cultural pragmatics. This recommendation contributes to theory development by advocating for a more systematic and comprehensive approach to studying the role of pragmatics in cross-cultural communication.

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