

## Pragmatic Failure Committed by Jordanian Undergraduate EFL Learners

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### Abstract

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The study aims at shedding light on pragmatic failure committed by Jordanian learners of English when producing some language functions in light of two variables; gender and power. The sample of the study consists of 30 undergraduate students at Amman Arab University majoring in English language and translation. The data was collected through a completion test including four items representing four language functions: accepting compliment, asking for permission, expressing congratulation and expressing condolence. Each one of the four items consists of three situations; where the addressee is male, where the addressee is female and where the addressee is someone in power. The findings of the study revealed that the tested students showed good level of communicative competence. This success is attributed to the use of common (refers to the familiarity and commonality of the expressions) and neutral (i.e. they are not gender or status based expressions) expressions by students when responding to the test items. The pragmatic failure committed by students refer to lack of linguistic competence (i.e, pragnalinguistic failure), socio-cultural differences and pragmatic transfer (i.e. sociopragmatic failure)

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**Keywords:** gender, language functions, power, pragmatic failure, pragnalinguistic, socio pragmatic failure

### 1. Introduction

It is known that the main purpose of learning a language is communication. However, mastering a new language along with its grammar rules does not necessarily mean that you can communicate easily and appropriately with its native speakers, particularly in the case of social contexts or situations (Amaya 2008:11). The subfield of linguistics that deals with how language can serve differently in various contexts or situations (i.e. how context contributes to meaning) is pragmatics. To begin with, what is pragmatics?

Many scholars advanced some working definitions of pragmatics. Pragmatics can be defined as the study of language use in communication. It is the study of the relationships among the sentences or utterances used in certain contexts or situations (Luo and Jian 2011:283). This definition confirms the intrinsic relationship between our knowledge of the real world and the way we understand and interpret language. Moreover, Yule (1996:3) views pragmatics as the study of contextual meaning in which senders and recipients rely on contextual information to grasp what is meant by a piece of language.

This study is basically concerned with pragmatic failure. The concept of pragmatic failure was first proposed by Thomas (1983:91) in a study entitled "cross-cultural pragmatic failure". He utilized the term pragmatic failure in referring to the inability to understand what is meant by what is said. Pragmatic failure falls into two major types namely, pragnalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure (Ibid: 91). To clarify, pragnalinguistic failure, on the one hand, occurs when a speaker of a foreign language lack the necessary knowledge of expressing himself in the right way, s/he tends to adapt the expressions of the second language based on the rules of first language.

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Sociopragmatic failure, on the other hand, occurs as a result of cross-cultural differences that exist among languages and when the speaker neglects the gender, identity and social status of the listener during the conversation. Therefore, pragmatic failure can lead to failure in communication and misunderstanding between the addresser and addressee. Hymes (1971) points out that communicative competence is a cover term that includes both linguistic competence and sociolinguistic knowledge of a language. Thus, in cross-cultural communication, interlocutors must have both socio-cultural and linguistic knowledge of both the source and the target language. Consequently, interlocutors can avoid pragmatic transfer and reduce the likelihood of pragmatic failure. The current paper is primarily aimed at investigating the pragmatic competence of the participants in using the appropriate expressive functions namely: accepting compliments, asking for permission, expressing congratulations and expressing condolence, in light of gender (male and female) and power (someone of a higher status) of the addressee. For example, what would a participant say to a male classmate to express condolence for the death of his grandfather? What would a participant say to a female classmate to express condolence for the death of her grandfather? And what would a participant say to his/her head manager at work to express condolence for the death of her grandfather? (See appendix one)

In the light of what has been mentioned above, the current study raises the following research questions. 1- To what extent are Jordanian EFL learners successful in the production of some expressive language functions such as accepting compliments, asking for permission, expressing congratulations and expressing condolence? 2-Is there any statistically significant difference between the three variables; males, females and power when expressing the aforesaid language functions by the respondents?

## 2. Literature Review

It is generally agreed that possible misunderstanding may arise when people from different first language backgrounds and cultures attempt to communicate with each other. This phenomenon caught the attention of many researchers. In their study of the pragmatic failure committed by Chinese EFL learners, Muir and Zongfang (2011:258) argue that these failures can be classified under prgmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failure. The prgmalinguistic failure lies in sentence construction and results from misunderstanding of word meaning, whereas the sociopragmatic failure lies in the speakers' perception and expression of specific Chinese-based pragmatic conventions. They argue that the pragmatic failure is caused by the students' limited language proficiency in L2 and L1 pragmatic transfer. Additionally, their study concludes that the improvement of pragmatic competence and pragmatic appropriateness in students' EFL written production can only be achieved through enhancing pragmatic knowledge and awareness.

In the same vein, Shen (2013:134-135) attempts to explore the contributing factors to pragmatic failure in Chinese EFL classrooms which in turn leads to misunderstanding or confusion in cross-cultural communication. According to this study, the phenomenon of pragmatic failure can be attributed to the teaching strategies adopted in EFL classrooms in which learners passively receive the information, the absence or lack of authentic cultural materials of the target language, and the linguistic competence oriented evaluation system which is designed to test a student's linguistic competence and neglect the cultural aspect of the language.

Shi (2014:1037) argues in the study of the pragmatic failure in Chinese and English interpretation practice that culture is always carried by language in communication. The findings of the study show that competent interpreters cannot fulfill their aims without knowing the pragmatic differences between Chinese and English. Consequently, it is of great importance for qualified interpreters to be aware of such pragmatic differences.

Al Saidi (2015:113) investigates the socio-pragmatic failure in the English/Arabic translation of different examples taken from many published works such as Quranic and Biblical translation, and extracts from newspaper headlines and literature. He concludes that when translators have adequate linguistic competence and cultural knowledge of the target language, socio-pragmatic failure can be reduced or even suppressed.

Nursanti et al. (2015:14) in their paper regarding the analysis of pragmatic failure, reached the finding that pragmatic failure represents the mistakes made by interlocutors when failing to interact as a result of incompatible expressions or inappropriate style. This failure can be viewed as prgmalinguistic failure and sociolinguistic failure at the same time, therefore, it can be said that there is no clear cut distinction between the two types of pragmatic failure.

### 3. Methodology

This study is quantitative in nature. To answer the first research question, the researcher relies on percentages and frequencies of the acceptable and unacceptable responses in order to measure the participants' pragmatic competence. Following that, the researcher comments briefly on these percentages and frequencies to come up with the reasons that probably stand behind the pragmatic failure. This was done through a completion test (See appendix one). This study also employed ANOVA to investigate if there is any statistically significant difference between the two variables; gender and power in terms of accepting compliments, asking for permission, expressing congratulations and expressing condolence.

#### 3.1 Instruments

The data for the present study was collected through a completion test which includes four items (accepting compliments, expressing congratulations, asking for permission, expressing condolence), with three situations for each. The first situation in each item is designed to measure students' pragmatic competence when the addressee is male, while the second situation is designed to measure students' pragmatic competence when the addressee is female. The third situation is designed to measure students' pragmatic competence when the addressee is a person of a high position (power). The main purpose of using each item in the three situations is to examine the pragmatic competence of the subjects in relation to gender and power variables.

The subjects were asked to write down the appropriate utterances in English according to their own understanding. The researcher prefers using open questions instead of multiple choice questions in order to reduce answers that can be got by fluke to the minimum and in turn assuring high validity of the study instruments. After collecting the participants' answers and before analyzing them, they were subjected to acceptability judgment. They were given to a native speaker of English to judge their aptness to each situation.

#### 3.2 Sample of the study

The sample of the study is comprised of 30 male and female undergraduate students. All the participants are in their fourth academic year and specialized in English language and translation at Amman Arab University in Jordan.

### 4. Results and discussions

This part of the study answers and discusses the results in light of the two research questions of this study.

Q1- To what extent are Jordanian EFL learners successful in the production of some expressive language functions such as accepting compliments, asking for permission, expressing congratulations and expressing condolence?

Q2- Is there any statistically significant difference between the three variables; males, females and power when expressing the aforesaid language functions by the respondents?

#### 4.1 Findings and discussion related to the first research question

As mentioned above, the researcher used a completion test to measure the competence of Jordanian EFL learners in the production of expressive language functions. Tables one, two and three below show the types of expressive language functions used in this study and the situations in which they are used.

Table 1. Frequencies and percentages of the acceptable responses where the addressee is male

| No | Expressive language functions  | Frequency | Percentage |
|----|--------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| 1  | Responses to compliments       | 23        | 0.77       |
| 2  | Expressing congratulations     | 25        | 0.83       |
| 3  | Asking for permission to leave | 17        | 0.57       |
| 4  | Expressing condolence          | 15        | 0.50       |
|    | Average                        | 80        | 0.67       |

As shown in Table one above, the average percentage of acceptable responses is 67% which means that students are at a good level of using English expressive language functions. It seems that the students' responses are the highest when expressing congratulations with a percentage of 83%. Most acceptable responses used to express congratulation to males are 'congratulations' and 'congrats' which can be regarded as neutral ones. That is, students psychologically tend to use expressions that have no gender affiliation.

The second highest percentage of students' acceptable responses is the expressive function of accepting compliments with 77%. Most students' responses here were, 'thanks' 'thank you', and 'that is kind of you', rarely accompanied with gender oriented terms such as, man, buddy and friend. The third highest percentage of acceptable responses is 57% which is achieved by the expressive function asking for permission to leave. In expressing asking for permission to leave, the respondents used expressions like 'excuse (sorry) me, I have (want) to leave' and 'I think I should leave, see you later'. With regard to the function of expressing condolence, the results show that the percentage of the acceptable responses is the lowest 50%. Most expressions used to express condolence range from 'I am sorry' to 'sorry for your loss'. It is worth mentioning, when expressing condolence, some students' responses are as follows; 'May God be with you in your hard times', 'God bless him, stay strong', 'May his soul rest in peace', 'May Allah shower him with mercy', and 'we belong to Allah and for him we will return' which are grammatically acceptable and can be used on pragmatic basis between English speaking Muslims.

The analysis of Table one above shows that pragmatic failure results from socio-cultural pragmatic and pragmalinguistic sources which goes in line with the findings of the studies by Muir and Zongaf (2011) and Shi (2014). Put differently, some unacceptable answers resulted from cultural differences between Arabic and English and pragmatic transfer. In response to compliments, for example, some students respond by saying 'you may take it if you like' which is a conventional expression used among Jordanians when someone admires something you own. This expression leads to misunderstanding if it is said to a native speaker of English who usually accept compliments by saying 'thank you'. Other examples of socio-cultural differences which lead to pragmatic failure appear evidently in using some responses to express condolence such as, 'the end of sadness' and 'I was heartbroken by this sad news'. Examples of failure that refer to pragmalinguistic source appear in expressions like 'sorry for what you lost' instead of 'sorry for your loss' to express condolence and you 'should have more that' instead of 'good, you deserve more and more' to express congratulations.

Table 2. Frequencies and percentages of the acceptable responses where the addressee is female

| No      | Expressive language functions  | Frequency | Percentage |
|---------|--------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| 1       | responses to compliments       | 24        | 0.80       |
| 2       | Expressing congratulations     | 24        | 0.80       |
| 3       | Asking for permission to leave | 14        | 0.47       |
| 4       | Expressing condolence to males | 15        | 0.50       |
| Average |                                | 77        | 0.64       |

As shown in Table two above, the average percentage of acceptable responses is 64%. This table shows also the following findings: The two items one and two achieved the highest percentage of acceptable responses with 80%. Most students' responses to compliments are: 'thanks, want to go for a ride tonight', 'thank you', 'it is nice of you' and 'nice to hear that from you darling', whereas to express congrats the majority of the students rely frequently on using 'congrats' and 'congratulations'. The second highest percentage of acceptable responses was achieved by the function of expressing condolence with 50%. Most students' acceptable responses in this regard were, 'May his soul rest in peace' 'I am sorry (about that)', and 'I am so sad to hear this'. The lowest percentage of acceptable responses which is 47% is related to the expressive function of asking for permission to leave. Examples of acceptable responses used to ask for permission are 'excuse me, I have (want) to leave (go)' and 'it was a nice meeting, I have to go now'.

Additionally, the pragmatic failure in this situation stems from sociopragmatic transfer as in the case of using 'the rest in your life' to express condolence. This expression can be used by Jordanians to express condolence but not among native speakers of English. Another source of pragmatic functions to be highlighted here is pragmalinguistic. In asking for permission to leave, for example, some students used 'in care to you, do you allow me' instead of saying 'I should go, take care'.

Table 3. Frequencies and percentages of the acceptable responses where the addressee is someone in power.

| No      | Expressive language functions situations | Frequency | Percentage |
|---------|--|-----------|------------|
| 1       | responses to compliments                 | 19        | 0.63       |
| 2       | Expressing congratulations               | 23        | 0.77       |
| 3       | Asking for permission to leave           | 21        | 0.70       |
| 4       | Expressing condolence to males           | 19        | 0.63       |
| Average |  | 82        | 0.68       |

Table three above shows that the average percentage of acceptable responses is 68%. It also shows that item two achieved the highest percentage 77% among the accurate answers whereas the second highest percentage is item three with 70%. Items one and four achieved the lowest percentage with 63% among the accurate percentages. As revealed by students' responses, the reason behind the success in using expressive function in this domain is that students tend to use polite language with persons in power. To express congratulations, for example, most responses contain flattery words such as 'congratulations sir (boss), you deserve more', and 'you are a great example to others'. To ask for permission to leave, students used polite expressions, for example, 'May I leave (sir)?' and 'Pardon, I should leave'. Moreover, with regard to expressing condolence, most students' acceptable responses were 'I am sorry', and 'sorry for your loss', whereas in relation to accepting compliments, students' responses usually contain flattery terms and expressions such as 'I am glad to hear that sir', 'thank you boss' and 'your opinion means a lot to me'.

The sources of such pragmatic failure are the cultural differences and the lack of linguistic competence. Failure resulted from the cultural differences appear in some responses such as 'the rest in your life' in expressing condolence which is acceptable in a Jordanian culture context but not in an English one. In accordance to the role of linguistic competence in pragmatic failure, the expression 'it is under your service' is literally translated from Arabic to English which seems unacceptable by an English native speaker. Such failure can be mainly ascribed to interference from mother tongue of the respondents "Arabic". This is consistent with a study conducted by Almahammed, (2016, p. 1) as expressed in his own words "It is believed that first language (L1) transfer is a fundamental aspect of second language acquisition (SLA), language teaching and language learning".

To sum up, the pragmatic failures committed by students refer to two main sources: pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failures. Pragmalinguistic failure appears when students literally translate some Arabic forms into English, whereas the sociopragmatic failure arises from cultural differences between Arabic and English and the pragmatic transfer. It is worth mentioning that when 'expressing condolence' there are some expressions can be acceptable on a pragmatic basis only between English speaking Muslims.

#### 4.2 Findings and discussions related to the second research question

To answer this question, the researcher utilized one way ANOVA test to show if there is any significant statistical difference between the two variables: gender and power as shown in the following table.

Table 4. The differences between the three variables male, female and power

| ANOVA         |                |          |           |           |           |                            |
|---------------|----------------|----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------------------------|
| <i>F crit</i> | <i>P-value</i> | <i>F</i> | <i>MS</i> | <i>Df</i> | <i>SS</i> | <i>Source of Variation</i> |
| 4.256495      | 0.925266       | 0.078348 | 0.001633  | 2         | 0.003267  | Between Groups             |
|               |                |          | 0.020847  | 9         | 0.187625  | Within Groups              |
|               |                |          |           | 11        | 0.190892  | Total                      |

Table four shows that the significance value (P-value) is greater than 0.05 which in turn indicates that there are no statistically significant differences between the two variables gender and power in terms of accepting compliments, asking for permission, expressing congratulations and expressing condolence as appeared in the participants' responses.

## 5. Conclusion

Generally, students showed good level of communicative competence. The average percentage of their acceptable responses are as follows: 67% when the addressee is male, 64% when the addressee is female and 68% when the addressee is a person in power. The main reason behind this success might be their awareness of the cultural differences between Arabic (their first language) and English language (the target language). To avoid pragmatic failure, it seems that students relied heavily on using common neutral expressions to respond to compliments, express congrats, ask for permission, and express condolence regardless of the gender or status of the addressee. These expressions are common in the sense of their familiarity and commonality among speakers from different language such as 'congratulations' and 'thank you'. They are neutral in the sense that they are not gender or status based expressions; they do not reveal gender or status orientation, although, students used flattery terms in some situations where the addressee is someone of high status. The pragmatic failure committed by students in this study, on the other hand, can be attributed to sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic sources.

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## Appendix one

### Dear participants,

This completion task aims at investigating your pragmatic competence as EFL learners in the production of some English language functions such as compliment, thanking, asking for permission, congratulation and expressing condolence.

Please, complete the following situations using responses that you think appropriate.

**Gender:**  male  female

### Accepting compliments

1. Suppose that your friend " John" admires your new car, you would respond to his compliment by saying\_\_\_\_\_.
2. Suppose that your friend "Sara" admires your new car, you would respond to her compliment by saying\_\_\_\_\_.
3. Suppose that your boss at work admires your new car, you would respond to his/her compliment by saying\_\_\_\_\_.

### Expressing congratulations

1. Suppose that your male colleague won a prize, you would congratulate him by saying \_\_\_\_\_.
2. Suppose that your female colleague graduated from the college, you would congratulate her by saying \_\_\_\_\_.
3. Suppose that your boss at work has been awarded the medal of the exemplary employee, you would congratulate him by saying \_\_\_\_\_.

**Asking for permission**

1. Suppose that you are sitting with your friend "Tom" at the café and you want to leave, you would say \_\_\_\_\_.
2. Suppose that you are sitting with your friend "Sara" at the café and you want to leave, you would say \_\_\_\_\_.
3. Suppose that you are sitting with your head department at the café and you want to leave, you would say \_\_\_\_\_.

**Expressing condolence**

1. Suppose that your male colleague's grandfather has just died, you would give solace to him by saying \_\_\_\_\_.
2. Suppose that your female colleague's grandfather has just died, you would give solace to her by saying \_\_\_\_\_.
3. Suppose that your head department's grandfather has just died, you would give solace to him/her by saying \_\_\_\_\_.