



HIGH-CONTEXT COMMUNICATION IN UZBEK CULTURE AND ITS IMPACT ON ENGLISH PRAGMATIC PERFORMANCE

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Abstract *This study examines the extent to which high-context communication patterns embedded in Uzbek culture influence the pragmatic performance of Uzbek learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Grounded in intercultural communication theory, particularly the distinction between high-context and low-context cultures proposed by Edward T. Hall, the research explores how culturally conditioned norms of indirectness, implicitness, relational sensitivity, and respect for hierarchy shape learners' production and interpretation of English speech acts. Employing a mixed-methods research design that includes Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs), role-play simulations, and semi-structured interviews, the study analyzes pragmatic realization patterns in requests, refusals, and apologies among Uzbek university students. The findings reveal substantial sociopragmatic transfer from Uzbek into English, which frequently results in overextended mitigation, heightened sensitivity to power relations, and communicative ambiguity in low-context English-speaking environments. The study argues that pragmatic divergence is not indicative of linguistic incompetence but rather reflects deeply rooted cultural communication styles, and it emphasizes the necessity of systematic and explicit pragmatics instruction within Uzbek EFL curricula.*

Keywords: *high-context communication, Uzbek culture, pragmatic transfer, interlanguage pragmatics, sociopragmatics, EFL learners*

Introduction

Pragmatic competence represents an indispensable component of communicative competence in second language acquisition, as successful

interaction depends not only on grammatical accuracy but also on the speaker's ability to interpret and produce contextually appropriate utterances that align with sociocultural expectations. In cross-cultural communication, misunderstandings frequently arise not because learners lack vocabulary or syntactic knowledge, but because they apply culturally conditioned communicative norms that may not correspond to those of the target language community.

Uzbek culture is commonly characterized as a high-context communicative environment, in which meaning is conveyed implicitly through shared background knowledge, relational dynamics, non-verbal cues, and socially recognized hierarchies. In contrast, English-speaking societies, particularly in Anglo-American contexts, are generally described as low-context cultures where communicative clarity, explicitness, and direct verbal expression are highly valued. This divergence in communicative orientation creates a fertile ground for pragmatic transfer when Uzbek learners use English, as they may unconsciously rely on culturally ingrained strategies that function effectively in their native environment but may produce ambiguity or unintended interpretations in English-speaking contexts. The present study seeks to investigate how high-context communication norms prevalent in Uzbek society shape English pragmatic performance among university-level EFL learners, with specific attention to speech acts such as requests, refusals, and apologies, which are particularly sensitive to sociocultural variation.

High-Context and Low-Context Communication. The theoretical foundation for understanding cultural variation in communication styles can be traced to the work of Edward T. Hall, who introduced the distinction between high-context and low-context cultures as a means of explaining how societies encode and interpret meaning. According to Hall's framework, high-context cultures rely extensively on implicit understanding, shared experiences, and non-verbal signals, such that much of the communicative message remains unspoken yet mutually comprehensible among members of the cultural group. In such contexts, maintaining

interpersonal harmony and respecting social hierarchies often take precedence over directness or explicitness.

Conversely, low-context cultures emphasize explicit verbalization, individual responsibility for clarity, and relatively egalitarian interactional norms. In these settings, directness is frequently interpreted as transparency rather than impoliteness, and speakers are expected to articulate their intentions clearly without assuming shared contextual knowledge.

The broader concept of communicative competence, as developed by Dell Hymes, extends linguistic theory beyond structural knowledge to include sociocultural appropriateness and contextual adaptability. Within this paradigm, pragmatic competence encompasses both sociopragmatic knowledge, which concerns understanding social norms and power relations, and pragmalinguistic knowledge, which involves selecting appropriate linguistic forms to express intended meanings. Research in interlanguage pragmatics consistently demonstrates that second language learners often transfer pragmatic norms from their first language into the target language, particularly when sociocultural values differ significantly between the two linguistic communities. Such transfer may lead to pragmatic failure, defined not as grammatical error but as a mismatch between intended meaning and perceived interpretation.

Uzbek society traditionally emphasizes collectivism, respect for elders, deference to authority, and the preservation of interpersonal harmony, all of which contribute to a communication style characterized by indirectness, mitigation, and sensitivity to relational context. Refusals, for instance, are rarely delivered in a direct or abrupt manner; instead, they are frequently accompanied by explanations, apologies, or expressions of regret that serve to soften potential face-threatening acts. Similarly, requests may be framed in elaborate or highly deferential terms, particularly when directed toward individuals of higher social status. When such culturally embedded strategies are transferred into English, they may be interpreted

differently in low-context environments, where efficiency, clarity, and brevity are often prioritized.

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design in order to capture both quantitative patterns and qualitative insights into pragmatic performance. The participants consisted of sixty undergraduate students majoring in English at a pedagogical university in Uzbekistan, all of whom demonstrated upper-intermediate proficiency in English according to institutional assessment standards.

Data were collected through three complementary instruments. First, Discourse Completion Tasks were administered to elicit written responses to situational prompts involving requests, refusals, and apologies across varying levels of social distance and power. Second, role-play activities were conducted to observe spontaneous oral production in simulated academic and professional contexts. Third, semi-structured interviews were carried out to explore participants' metapragmatic awareness and their perceptions of politeness and appropriateness in English communication. The collected data were analyzed using both sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic frameworks, with particular attention paid to levels of directness, mitigation strategies, lexical and syntactic choices, and sensitivity to contextual variables such as power and imposition.

Results

The analysis revealed consistent patterns indicating the influence of high-context communication norms on English pragmatic performance. In the case of requests, participants frequently employed extensive mitigation devices, including multiple politeness markers, apologetic prefaces, and lengthy background explanations, even in situations characterized by minimal social distance or low imposition. While these strategies reflect culturally appropriate politeness in Uzbek interaction, they occasionally resulted in verbosity or reduced clarity in English.

With regard to refusals, many participants demonstrated a marked reluctance to produce direct negative responses, instead opting for vague expressions, conditional statements, or delayed commitments that could be interpreted by English interlocutors as uncertainty rather than polite decline. This tendency suggests a strong orientation toward preserving relational harmony, even at the expense of communicative precision. In apology scenarios, participants often provided elaborate justifications and emotional expressions, emphasizing relational repair and moral responsibility, which again reflects high-context norms but may exceed expectations in low-context settings where concise acknowledgment is typically sufficient.

Overall, the findings indicate substantial sociopragmatic transfer, particularly in participants' heightened sensitivity to power distance and hierarchical relations, which sometimes led them to overformalize interactions that would be considered relatively egalitarian in English-speaking academic contexts.

Discussion

The results of the study support the hypothesis that high-context communication patterns in Uzbek culture significantly shape English pragmatic performance among EFL learners. The observed overindirectness, extended mitigation, and hierarchical sensitivity are not manifestations of linguistic deficiency but rather logical extensions of culturally embedded communicative values. When these values are transferred into English, however, they may produce pragmatic ambiguity or unintended interpretations due to differing cultural expectations. The findings contribute to intercultural pragmatics research by illustrating how deeply rooted cultural norms influence second language use even at relatively advanced proficiency levels. They also underscore the importance of distinguishing between grammatical competence and pragmatic adaptability when evaluating learners' communicative effectiveness.

Pedagogical Implications

Given the demonstrated impact of cultural communication styles on pragmatic performance, it is essential that English language instruction in Uzbekistan incorporate explicit and systematic pragmatics training. Such instruction should include comparative analysis of Uzbek and English communication norms, awareness-raising activities that highlight contextual variation, and role-play scenarios that simulate low-context environments. Teacher education programs should also emphasize intercultural communicative competence, enabling future educators to address pragmatic issues consciously rather than implicitly.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that high-context communication patterns characteristic of Uzbek culture exert a significant influence on English pragmatic performance, particularly in the realization of speech acts that involve politeness, hierarchy, and relational sensitivity. While these patterns serve valuable social functions within Uzbek society, their unmodified transfer into English may result in pragmatic divergence in low-context communicative settings. Developing intercultural pragmatic competence therefore requires fostering adaptive communicative flexibility through explicit pedagogical intervention, thereby equipping learners to navigate diverse linguistic and cultural environments effectively.

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