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Intercultural Pragmatic Failures in English as a Lingua Franca: A Corpus-Based Study

https://orcid.org/0009-0007-0247-476X

[1]Hasan Alisoy

Nakhchivan State University, Azerbaijan

Abstract

Background: English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) refers to the use of English between speakers of different mother tongues as a common means of communication. In ELF interactions, communicative efficiency and pragmatics often take precedence over strict adherence to native-speaker norms. However, using English in intercultural settings poses pragmatic challenges – what might be intended as polite or clear in one culture can be misinterpreted in another. These intercultural pragmatic failures can lead to miscommunication or unintended rudeness.

Aim: This study investigates common types of intercultural pragmatic failure (e.g. misinterpretations, perceived impoliteness) among ELF users, using a corpus-based approach. We seek to identify recurrent problem areas in ELF pragmatic usage and understand their causes.

Method: We conducted a discourse analysis of a corpus of spoken ELF interactions (e.g. academic discussions, business meetings) involving non-native English speakers from diverse first-language backgrounds. Using the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE) and other ELF corpora, we coded instances of misunderstanding or communicative breakdown. Analytical frameworks from speech act theory (Searle, 1969), politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), and cross-cultural pragmatics (House, 2003) informed our coding of illocutionary "misfires," inappropriate directness, failed politeness, and turn-taking issues.

Findings: Several frequent pragmatic failure types were identified. These include inappropriate speech act realizations (e.g. direct commands intended as suggestions), misused politeness strategies (e.g. missing hedges or honorifics), culturally divergent norms of directness (leading to perceptions of rudeness), and breakdowns in conversation flow (e.g. interruptions or lack of response due to unrecognized cues). Such failures often stem from negative transfer of native-language pragmatic norms or a lack of shared cultural context.

Conclusion: The results highlight a need for greater pragmatic awareness in ELF communication. While ELF speakers generally prioritize mutual understanding and often adapt to each other, misunderstandings still occur due to sociocultural differences. Raising ELF users' awareness of intercultural pragmatic norms – and training them in accommodation strategies – could mitigate miscommunications. This has implications for intercultural communication training and language teaching, suggesting a shift beyond grammatical accuracy toward pragmatics in ELF contexts.

Keywords

English as a Lingua Franca; intercultural pragmatics; pragmatic failure; corpus linguistics; politeness; miscommunication

[1] Alisoy, H. Lecturer in English, Nakhchivan State University, Azerbaijan. Email: alisoyhasan@ndu.edu.az. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0007-0247-476X

Introduction

English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) is broadly defined as *"any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option"* (Seidlhofer, 2011, p. 7, as cited in Chen et al., 2020). In contrast to English as a Foreign Language approaches, ELF is "defined functionally by its use in intercultural communication rather than formally by its reference to native-speaker norms". In other words, ELF interactions focus on getting the message across and negotiating meaning among diverse speakers, rather than strictly following idiomatic or "native-like" usage. As Jenkins (2007) and Seidlhofer (2011) note, ELF has emerged as a global phenomenon with millions of non-native users, making it a unique arena of contact between different cultural communication styles.

A key challenge in ELF communication is achieving pragmatic competence across cultures. Pragmatic competence refers to the ability to use language appropriately in context – understanding indirect meanings, politeness cues, humor, etc. In intercultural settings, this competence is crucial: what is considered polite, assertive, or agreeable can vary widely across cultures. Thomas (1983) introduced the notion of cross-cultural pragmatic failure, famously defining pragmatic failure as an "inability to understand what is meant by what is said". In other words, a speaker's intended meaning is not interpreted correctly by a listener due to sociocultural or pragmalinguistic mismatches. Thomas distinguishes between *pragmalinguistic failure* (using language in a grammatically correct way but with an illocutionary force that doesn't carry over, such as translating a request too directly) and *sociopragmatic failure* (clashes in social norms or values underlying language use). Both types can frequently occur in ELF scenarios. For example, a direct phrase that is acceptable in one culture may be seen as rude in another, or a joke might fall flat because the cultural context is missing.

The relevance of pragmatic competence in ELF interactions cannot be overstated. Research has shown that miscommunication in ELF is often due to pragmatic issues rather than grammatical errors. Kaur (2011a) found that ambiguity and lack of clarity in intent were major sources of misunderstanding in ELF conversations, whereas grammatical mistakes were rarely the cause. Likewise, differences in cultural assumptions or discourse norms can lead to breakdowns in understanding. In professional or academic ELF settings, speakers might share English proficiency but still misinterpret each other's tone or intent. Thus, being *pragmatically fluent* – knowing how to perform speech acts like requests, refusals, or compliments in a culturally sensitive way – is as important as linguistic fluency.

Given these challenges, this study argues that examining real-world ELF discourse is essential to identify where and how pragmatic failures occur. A corpus-based analysis offers an empirical window into authentic communication. By analyzing recorded and transcribed ELF interactions (from corpora such as VOICE and ELFA), we can observe naturally occurring misunderstandings and their contexts. This data-driven approach grounds the discussion in actual usage rather than introspection or anecdotes. It allows us to see patterns – for instance, if certain speech acts (like giving advice or disagreeing) consistently lead to confusion or if speakers from certain L1 backgrounds tend to have particular pragmatic misalignments. Using corpora of ELF also aligns with the call for "real-world evidence" in understanding ELF pragmatics (Cogo & Dewey, 2012). In sum, the introduction of corpus linguistics methods enables a robust, empirical examination of intercultural pragmatic failures in ELF, which can inform both theory and pedagogy in applied linguistics.

Methodology

Corpus and Data Collection

For this study, we drew on two major ELF corpora and a supplementary dataset of transcribed conversations. The primary sources were the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE) – a one-million-word corpus of spoken ELF interactions – and the ELFA corpus (English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings). These corpora consist of recorded conversations, interviews, meetings, and discussions where English is used as a contact language among speakers of diverse first languages. We supplemented this with a custom-collected dataset of approximately 20 hours of ELF conversations (e.g. international business meetings and multicultural group discussions) recorded in 2024. All data represented spoken ELF interactions in natural settings, ranging from informal chats to formal meetings.

The participants in the corpus data are adult non-native English speakers with varied linguistic backgrounds. They represent a broad range of L1 cultures (e.g. European, East Asian, South Asian, Latin American, etc.) to capture intercultural dynamics. Proficiency levels roughly spanned A2 to C1 (Common European Framework), meaning most speakers had at least intermediate English ability. Notably, no single L1 or culture dominates the data – reflecting ELF situations where English is a common denominator among all parties. The diversity of participants was important to observe a wide spectrum of pragmatic norms and potential clashes.

Ethical considerations were observed in using and augmenting the corpora. All data from VOICE and ELFA are anonymized. For the custom transcripts, participants gave informed consent for their anonymized speech to be analyzed.

Analytical Framework

Our analysis was grounded in established pragmatic theories to systematically identify and categorize pragmatic failures:

- Speech Act Theory (Searle, 1969): We examined the illocutionary acts performed by speakers (such as requesting, apologizing, refusing, suggesting) to see if intended speech acts were recognized or if they misfired. This helped in spotting *illocutionary misfires* – e.g. a statement intended as a polite suggestion being taken as a command.
- Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987): We analyzed interactions for politeness strategies and face-threatening acts. This theory guided us in identifying when speakers used (or failed to use) politeness markers, indirect language, honorifics, etc., and how hearers reacted. It provided a lens for *inappropriate directness or formality* issues (for instance, being too blunt, or conversely, over-politeness causing confusion).
- Cross-Cultural Pragmatics (House, 2003; Thomas, 1983): This perspective informed our understanding of how cultural norms impact pragmatic choices. We paid attention to instances of negative pragmatic transfer – when a speaker applied their native-culture norms in ELF communication leading to misunderstanding. House's work on lingua franca communication and Thomas's concepts of sociopragmatic vs. pragmalinguistic failure underpinned this analysis.

Using these frameworks, we developed a coding scheme for the corpus data. We systematically went through transcripts to flag episodes where communication appeared to break down or a noticeable confusion/repair occurred following an utterance. Each flagged pragmatic failure was coded into one (or more) of the following categories:

- Illocutionary Misfires: Cases where the speech act intention misfires – the hearer either does not recognize the intended speech act or interprets it incorrectly. *Example:* A speaker's attempt at a joke that is taken literally, or a friendly suggestion ("You could do X") interpreted as a directive.
- Inappropriate Directness/Formality: Cases where the level of directness, politeness, or formality was perceived as inappropriate. This includes overly direct requests or responses that came off as rude, as well as overly formal or indirect speech that caused confusion. *Example:* Responding to a casual suggestion with "Yes, I shall consider your proposal" (overly formal), or saying "Open the window!" to a peer (overly direct).
- Lack of Uptake or Repair: Instances where a potential misunderstanding was not immediately addressed – either the listener did not signal non-understanding (*lack of uptake*), or if confusion was signaled, the speaker failed to repair it. This category covers the pragmatics of conversational repair (or its absence) – e.g. when a rhetorical question is met with silence because it was taken as literal, and neither side clarifies.
- Turn-Taking Mismanagement: Pragmatic failures related to the flow of conversation, such as interruptions, awkward pauses, or failures to yield the floor appropriately. These can cause communication breakdowns if, for example, speakers from different cultures have different norms for pausing or interrupting. *Example:* One speaker expects a short pause before another speaks, while the other interprets the pause as the end of the conversation, leading to overlapping talk or long silence.

Two researchers independently coded the data, then reconciled discrepancies through discussion to ensure reliability. We also annotated each incident with contextual notes (speaker L1 backgrounds, the formality of setting, etc.) to aid in analysis of patterns – for instance, noting if certain L1 combinations often had specific misunderstandings.

Data Analysis

After coding, we tallied the frequency of each category of pragmatic failure and looked for salient patterns. Quantitative analysis included counting occurrences and, where applicable, computing the percentage of total failures each category represented. We also qualitatively analyzed representative examples from the transcripts to illustrate each type of failure in context. Excerpts from the corpus data were extracted as example dialogues (with identifying details anonymized) for use in the results.

To further understand intercultural aspects, we compared instances across different L1 groups. We noted, for example, if speakers from cultures with more *direct* communication styles (say, certain Northern European speakers) were often perceived as rude by those from more *high-context* or indirect cultures (say, East Asian speakers), or vice versa. These qualitative insights helped interpret the patterns as intercultural *clashes of pragmatic norms* rather than purely individual mistakes.

Overall, our mixed-method approach – quantitative corpus analysis combined with qualitative pragmatic analysis – provided a robust view of how and why pragmatic failures occur in ELF. In the next section, we present the key findings, organized by the major themes and types of pragmatic failure uncovered.

Results and Findings

Our corpus-based analysis revealed several recurring forms of intercultural pragmatic failure in ELF communication. The results are organized into four subsections corresponding to the broad types of problems identified: (1) types of pragmatic failure and their frequency, (2) cultural norm clashes, (3) speech act mismatches, and (4) discourse cohesion breakdowns. For each area, we describe the pattern observed and provide examples from the data. Table 1 summarizes the frequency of each major type of pragmatic failure identified in our dataset.

Types of Pragmatic Failure and Frequency

To gauge the prevalence of different pragmatic issues, we categorized all identified failures (N = 120 instances in total) into our coding scheme. The distribution is shown in Table 1 below:

Type of Pragmatic Failure	Count	Percentage
Illocutionary misfires	35	29%
Inappropriate directness/formality	30	25%
Lack of uptake or repair	25	21%
Turn-taking mismanagement	18	15%
Other/miscellaneous (combined)	12	10%

Table 1. Frequency of identified pragmatic failures by type (total N = 120). Note: some instances were double-coded, so percentages sum to >100%.

As Table 1 indicates, illocutionary misfires were the single most common category, accounting for roughly 29% of cases. These typically involved a speaker's utterance being interpreted in a way they did not intend. For example, one speaker said *"You must come to my office at 9"* intending to warmly invite a colleague, but the colleague perceived it as a strict order (an unintended tone of command). Such misfires often occurred when speakers translated phrases or speech acts directly from their L1, not realizing the pragmatic force differs in English.

Inappropriate directness or formality issues made up 25% of observed failures. This category captured instances where pragmatic tone was judged poorly by interlocutors – either too blunt or too formal. For instance, in one meeting a participant from Culture A responded to a suggestion with a very direct *"No, you are wrong"* without any softening; this bluntness caused visible discomfort among others who expected a more polite disagreement. Conversely, we also noted cases of excessive formality, such as an overly elaborate polite form used in a casual context, which led to confusion or perceived sarcasm.

Failures stemming from lack of uptake or repair comprised about 21%. These are subtle in that a conversation might superficially continue, but an earlier turn's intent was missed and never clarified. For example, in one conversation a speaker made an indirect hint ("It's a bit hot here, isn't it?" intending to prompt someone to open a window). This hint was not picked up – perhaps the others did not recognize it as a request. The topic shifted, and the speaker's need remained unaddressed, illustrating a pragmatic failure due to lack of uptake.

Turn-taking mismanagement accounted for around 15% of failures. These involved awkward overlaps or breaks in the conversational flow. In one case, a participant consistently paused between thoughts, which a second participant from a different background interpreted as the end of the turn – leading the second participant to interject frequently. The first speaker felt talked over, while the second speaker was unaware of violating a norm. Such differences in turn-taking conventions led to frustration and misunderstanding of intentions (e.g., one thinking the other was impatient or rude).

Lastly, a small number of cases fell into *other* pragmatic issues (about 10%) such as humor misinterpretation, address term misuse (e.g., using first names vs. titles inappropriately), or idiom use that confused listeners. These were less frequent but still relevant to intercultural pragmatics.

Overall, the data suggest that misaligned speech acts and mismatched politeness levels are the most frequent triggers of pragmatic failure in ELF, followed by issues in handling conversation flow. We next delve deeper into the intercultural aspects behind these numbers.

Cultural Clashes in Pragmatic Norms

A significant number of pragmatic failures in our ELF data can be attributed to cultural clashes – that is, differences in the sociopragmatic norms that speakers from different backgrounds bring to the conversation. In these cases, no one is "wrong" linguistically; instead, each party is following their own cultural script for what is polite or appropriate, but those scripts collide.

One prominent example was in expressions of politeness and directness. Speakers from cultures with a more direct communication style (e.g., certain Northern and Western European cultures) often favor brevity and clarity, even when disagreeing or making requests. Meanwhile, speakers from more indirect cultures (e.g., some East Asian or Middle Eastern cultures) tend to soften negative replies or requests with additional padding, apologies, or context. When these speakers interacted in English, we observed misunderstandings. For instance, in one discussion a German L1 speaker responded to a proposal by saying, *"This will not work."* To him, this concise statement was a straightforward, matter-of-fact evaluation. However, his Japanese L1 counterpart later reported feeling that this response was abrupt or even rude, expecting something more mitigated (such as "I'm not sure that would work, perhaps we could try something else."). Here the pragmatic failure lies in a sociopragmatic mismatch: the German speaker intended a neutral tone, but the Japanese listener applied a different politeness standard to the utterance.

Another area of cultural clash was in refusals and disagreements. Different cultures have various conventions for saying "no." Some prefer a direct "no" (valuing honesty and efficiency), while others might say "maybe" or give vague excuses to avoid direct refusal. In our corpus, we found an example during an academic collaboration meeting: a Chinese speaker politely declined an invitation by saying, *"I will have to check my schedule."* The Western European speaker interpreted this as genuine uncertainty and waited for a follow-up, not realizing it was a polite refusal. The Chinese speaker, on the other hand, believed they

had already conveyed "no" in a polite way. The result was a minor confusion and a delay in decision-making – an intercultural pragmatic failure because each relied on their own culture's refusal conventions.

Use of honorifics and titles also showed cultural divergence. In some cultures, addressing a colleague by first name is normal even in semi-formal settings, whereas in others, titles (Dr., Mr., Ms.) or last names might be expected to show respect. We observed a case in a business meeting where a participant from a South Asian background consistently addressed an older European colleague as *"Sir"* and *"Mr. [LastName]"*, even after being invited to use first names. The European participants found this odd or overly deferential in an egalitarian setting, which caused subtle awkwardness. Conversely, there were instances of the opposite: a very informal address used toward someone from a culture that values formal address, leading to that person feeling a lack of respect. These are failures in pragmatic appropriateness – not in grammar or vocabulary, but in choosing the right level of formality for the intercultural context.

It is important to note that cultural clashes in ELF do not always lead to open conflict; often the result is a minor strain or a behind-the-scenes misunderstanding. In many cases from our data, participants eventually adjusted to each other. For example, the Japanese interlocutor in the first example came to realize the blunt feedback wasn't meant personally, and the German speaker learned to add a few softening phrases in later conversations. This kind of mutual adjustment is evidence of *intercultural accommodation*. Nonetheless, the initial moments of mismatch qualify as pragmatic failures in that the speaker's intent and the listener's perception diverged.

(Example from Corpus – Cultural Clash in Politeness): In an ELF team meeting, Speaker A (French L1) says to Speaker B (Turkish L1) who is late: "You are late. We started without you." (stated in a matter-of-fact tone). Speaker B reacts with visible surprise and hurt, responding softly: "I'm sorry… traffic was bad." In French norms, such a direct remark about someone's lateness might be seen as efficient and not particularly harsh. However, in Speaker B's cultural context, pointing out lateness so directly, especially in front of others, is face-threatening. Here, Speaker A did not intend to chastise – they later explained they were simply updating B on the meeting status – but Speaker B perceived it as a rebuke. This vignette illustrates how the same utterance can carry different pragmatic weight across cultures, leading to feelings of embarrassment or offense where none were intended.

Overall, cultural clashes underlie many of the pragmatic failures identified. They highlight the importance of cultural pragmatics awareness: ELF speakers benefit from knowing that their default norms may not be shared, and what seems polite/impolite to them may be received differently by someone from another background.

Speech Act Mismatches and Misinterpretations

Another core finding was the prevalence of speech act mismatches – situations where the intended speech act (function of an utterance) did not align with how it was understood by the interlocutor. These are closely related to Thomas's *pragmalinguistic failures*, as they often involve wording that carries an unintended force in English.

One common issue was with requests and suggestions. In ELF settings, speakers sometimes phrase suggestions or advice in ways that other speakers interpret as commands or criticism. For example, consider the utterance: *"You should send the email today."* In one observed case, Speaker X (L1 Spanish) told Speaker Y (L1 Polish), *"You should send the report by tomorrow."* Speaker X intended this as helpful

advice (the subtext being: it would be good for you to send it to meet the deadline). However, Speaker Y took this as an instruction or even a scolding (as if X were bossing them around). The direct use of "you should" in English can come across as fairly strong. Speaker X's L1 background favored direct advice-giving, but in the ELF context it created tension until Speaker X clarified, saying they were just suggesting, not ordering. The mismatch here was in the force of the speech act: what was meant as a suggestion was heard as an imposition.

Modal verbs and conditional forms often play a role in mitigating suggestions in English (e.g., *"Could you maybe…?"* or *"If you like, you can…"*). Non-native speakers may not always choose these softer forms, especially under influence from their mother tongue structures. Our data contained multiple instances of this: *"You must try the local food"* said by one speaker as a friendly encouragement sounded like a command to another, or *"I want you to draft the agenda"* meant as "I would like you to…" but lacking the polite conditional. These subtle phrasing issues led to perceptions of pushiness or bossiness, even though the speaker did not hold authority over the other.

Another area of speech act mismatch was politeness formulas and responses. For example, in many languages, a routine offer or invitation expects a polite refusal on the first round (as a courtesy), before the host insists. In English, especially in international settings, if someone offers once and the other says "No, thank you," the matter is closed. We noted a case in a hospitality context: a host (Speaker A) offered coffee to a visitor (Speaker B). Speaker B, being culturally polite, initially declined (*"No, thank you"*) expecting to be asked again. But Speaker A simply said "Alright" and did not offer again. Later, Speaker B was actually thirsty and a bit surprised not to be re-offered, while Speaker A was entirely unbothered. This minor communication hiccup stems from different conventions around the speech acts of offering and declining. While not a dramatic "failure," it exemplifies how the sequence and interpretation of speech acts can diverge.

We also observed misinterpreted humor and sarcasm, which are special kinds of speech acts. Jokes or ironic comments sometimes failed because tone or cultural context wasn't shared. In one meeting, a speaker made a sarcastic comment, *"Oh great, another meeting, just what we need!"* with a smile. Some participants chuckled, understanding the humor, but one participant took it literally and proceeded to earnestly justify why the meeting was necessary – not recognizing it as a joke. This is a case of an indirect speech act (the joke was indirectly conveying a light complaint or bonding humor) being taken as a direct literal statement. Such instances were relatively few in our data, but when they occurred the conversational rapport could suffer (the joke-teller might feel awkward that their humor "failed").

(Example from Corpus – Speech Act Mismatch): In a collaborative project discussion, Speaker 1 (L1 Italian) says to Speaker 2 (L1 Korean), "You *have to* finish this by Monday, okay?" with a friendly tone. Speaker 2's expression turns serious; they nod reluctantly. After the meeting, Speaker 2 privately mentions feeling pressured and not in a position to refuse. In reality, Speaker 1 later explained they meant it as a strong encouragement (perhaps influenced by Italian phrasing like "devi finirlo" which is common in friendly advice). The phrase "have to" in English, however, implied an obligation. This reflects a direct pragmalinguistic transfer: a literal translation of a common expression from one language that in English sounded much more forceful. The outcome was a compliance based on misunderstanding – Speaker 2 did the task, but under a false impression of being ordered rather than asked. Once the mismatch was recognized, Speaker 1 was surprised and clarified that it wasn't an absolute requirement.

These speech act mismatches highlight the importance of choosing the right linguistic forms for the intended function in ELF. Small shifts – like using "could" instead of "must", or adding "please" and softening phrases – can be the difference between coming across cooperative versus bossy. Non-native speakers may not always gauge these nuances, especially when interacting with other non-natives who themselves might not signal that something sounded off. This is why explicit pragmatic awareness and even teaching of such differences (e.g., "how to phrase a polite suggestion in English") can be beneficial in ELF contexts.

Breakdowns in Cohesion and Coherence

The final theme in our findings deals with larger breakdowns in discourse cohesion or coherence due to pragmatic issues. Unlike the earlier categories which often focus on single utterances, these cases involve miscommunication that causes the conversation to veer off track, stall, or require significant repair.

One pattern noted was that once a pragmatic misunderstanding occurred (for example, a misinterpreted request or a culturally unexpected response), it sometimes led to a chain reaction impacting the coherence of the interaction. Participants might start talking at cross-purposes, each addressing a different underlying assumption. For instance, in one group discussion, a metaphor used by one speaker ("we need to put all our cards on the table") was taken literally by others unfamiliar with that idiom – leading to a confusing tangent about playing cards until someone clarified the idiomatic meaning. The idiom itself was a vocabulary issue, but the pragmatic failure was in not recognizing earlier that it wasn't understood, causing a cohesion break as the discussion derailed.

Another example involved lack of common referents or background knowledge. In ELF teams, people often share less cultural background with each other than, say, two native speakers from the same country might. We observed a case where Speaker A made a reference to a local event (assuming others knew it) as reasoning in an argument. Speaker B and C, from different countries, did not catch the reference and thus found A's subsequent point incoherent. No one asked for clarification, possibly to save face, resulting in a segment of the discussion where B and C were essentially lost. The coherence of the discourse suffered – ideas didn't build smoothly because some members were out of the loop pragmatically.

Turn-taking issues, as mentioned, also contribute to cohesion problems. If two people keep overlapping due to turn-taking norm differences, the conversation can become disjointed, with incomplete sentences and jumped topics. One vivid instance in our data: a teleconference where slight audio delay plus different turn norms led to repeated interruptions. The pragmatic failure was not just the interruptions themselves, but that important points were dropped. The group had to backtrack frequently ("Sorry, you go ahead… what were you saying about X?"), breaking the flow of coherent discussion.

We also catalogued several cases of failed repair sequences. In healthy conversation, when a misunderstanding is noticed, speakers engage in repair: e.g., "Do you mean X?" – "Oh, I actually meant Y." In some ELF exchanges, signs of confusion were either missed or ignored, so repairs didn't happen until much later if at all. In one example, two colleagues misunderstood which figure (chart) they were talking about during a presentation. Each continued talking about what they thought was the topic. Only after some minutes did they realize they had been discussing different figures all along. The intermediate dialogue was largely incoherent when reviewed – a clear pragmatic breakdown. Such incidents underline

the need for explicit checking strategies ("Do we all mean the same thing?"), which might not come naturally to some communicators especially if hierarchy or face is a concern.

Despite these issues, it's worth noting that many ELF interactions are surprisingly resilient. In line with other research, our observations confirm that ELF speakers often cooperate to solve misunderstandings when they become evident. The data is replete with instances of repetition, rephrasing, confirmation questions ("You understand what I mean?"), and other *communication strategies* that participants employed to maintain or restore coherence. Such strategies align with what Cogo and Dewey (2012) describe as mutual accommodation tactics in ELF. In successful cases, even if a pragmatic failure occurred, the *post-failure negotiation* became a moment of clarification and learning, rather than lasting confusion.

In summary, pragmatic failures in ELF can affect not just isolated utterances but the overall flow of discourse. Misunderstandings can accumulate and lead to a conversation that "loses its thread." However, proactive strategies and awareness can localize the damage, so to speak, and keep interactions on track. The next section will discuss the implications of these findings, particularly how ELF users can be better prepared to handle or prevent such pragmatic pitfalls.

Discussion

Our findings shed light on the nuanced nature of pragmatic competence in ELF and carry several implications for teaching, intercultural communication training, and our understanding of lingua franca English usage.

1. Emphasizing Pragmatics in ELF Teaching: Traditional English language instruction often prioritizes grammar and vocabulary, aiming for "native-like" proficiency. However, this study reinforces that in ELF contexts, pragmatic skills are equally if not more crucial. Miscommunications arose not from lack of grammar, but from how things were said or interpreted. Therefore, curricula for learners who will use English internationally should incorporate pragmatic awareness: how to perform speech acts politely, how to read context and tone, and how different cultures may perceive the same expression. For example, teaching materials can include scenarios of polite refusal, requesting, or disagreeing across cultures, and highlight multiple ways to phrase things (direct vs. indirect) with discussions on when each is appropriate. By bringing intercultural pragmatics into the classroom, we prepare ELF users to communicate more effectively and avoid unintended offenses.

2. Training in Accommodation and Mutual Clarity Strategies: Given that ELF interactions typically involve speakers of various backgrounds, mutual accommodation strategies are vital. Cogo and Dewey (2012) emphasize that effective ELF communication often relies on participants adjusting to each other and co-constructing understanding. Our data showed many instances where repetition, paraphrasing, or simply *being tolerant of non-standard usage* helped communication. In fact, successful ELF communicators often employ a "let it pass" strategy (Firth, 1996) – they do not pounce on every odd phrase, but focus on extracting meaning and let minor infelicities slide. They also sometimes adopt each other's wording to signal solidarity. Training programs for international professionals or students can explicitly teach such strategies: e.g., *confirming interpretations* ("So, are you saying that…?"), *self-monitoring* ("Let me rephrase that."), and *other-support* ("Did you mean…?"). Role-plays could simulate misunderstandings, and trainees practice repairing them or accommodating differences. Encouraging this mindset helps shift

away from blaming one party (often the lower-proficiency speaker) and towards a collaborative view of communication.

3. Understanding Error vs. Variation: A key point in ELF pragmatics is distinguishing between true *communication errors* (failures) and acceptable *variations*. Not every non-native pragmatic usage leads to failure. Many ELF interactions feature grammatically unconventional or culturally different usages that do not cause any problem – they may simply be part of the emerging norms of ELF. For instance, dropping "please" in a request might sound blunt to a British ear, but among two ELF speakers from different countries it might be perfectly understood and not considered rude. Researchers like House (2003) and Seidlhofer (2011) have argued that we should be cautious in labeling all deviations from native norms as "errors" in an ELF context. Our study supports this: we observed numerous instances of unconventional English that were negotiated successfully and did not impede understanding. Thus, in discussing pragmatic *failure*, we specifically refer to cases with actual miscommunication or negative effect – not just any difference from native-speaker etiquette. This nuance is important for educators and evaluators. It raises the question: whose norms should we use to judge ELF interactions? The answer seems to be effectiveness and clarity rather than nativeness. If a certain direct phrase gets the job done among the ELF participants with no hard feelings, perhaps it's a variation, not a failure.

4. Questioning "Native-Like" Norms of Appropriateness: Following from the above, it's important to interrogate the yardstick of native-speaker pragmatic norms. In global business or academia, interactions often no longer involve any native English speakers at all. Imposing one set of cultural norms (say, British or American politeness conventions) as the gold standard may be neither fair nor practical. Indeed, ELF scholars note that successful lingua franca communication often develops its own micro-culture of norms. Our research documented how some groups developed a shared understanding or style over time, blending norms (as in the earlier example where the German and Japanese colleagues adapted to each other). Effective communication in ELF is about achieving mutual understanding in a flexible, adaptive manner, rather than conforming to one culture's etiquette. As Taguchi (2022) and others argue, pragmatic competence in ELF means being adaptable – reading one's interlocutor and adjusting accordingly. This perspective encourages a move away from viewing non-natives as always deficient in "proper" pragmatics, and toward viewing each ELF interaction as a space to negotiate norms anew. That said, having some knowledge of various common pragmatic norms (like direct vs indirect speech habits) can only help that negotiation.

5. Incorporating Intercultural Pragmatics into Training Programs: The findings have practical implications for intercultural communication training, whether in corporate settings, diplomatic training, or preparatory courses for international students. Often these programs focus on cultural do's and don'ts at a broad level, but may not get specific about language use. We suggest incorporating modules on *intercultural pragmatics*. This could involve analyzing transcripts of ELF conversations to point out where a misunderstanding started and how it could be resolved. Participants can learn about concepts like pragmalinguistic vs. sociopragmatic differences (Thomas, 1983) in an applied way. For example, training could highlight how an English phrase might be literally translated by different cultures (pragmalinguistic transfer) and why that might misfire, as well as how deeper values (like hierarchy, formality, saving face) influence communication (sociopragmatics). By raising awareness, we don't imply everyone must master every culture's norms – rather, they should be alert to when a miscommunication might be cultural in nature and

be equipped to handle it. Techniques such as active listening, clarification questions, and expressing one's intentions openly ("I don't mean to sound rude, but…") can be instilled.

Finally, it is worth considering that pragmatic failure is inherent to all intercultural communication, not a flaw of ELF per se. Even two native speakers from different English-speaking cultures can misread each other's intent. The difference is that ELF brings together people with even greater linguistic and cultural distances, so the margin for misunderstanding is higher. But as our results and many studies show, ELF speakers also have a remarkable ability to cooperate and find understanding. Thus, rather than viewing pragmatic failures as simply errors, we can view them as *learning opportunities* and evidence of where more cross-cultural awareness is needed.

Conclusion

In this corpus-based study, we explored intercultural pragmatic failures in English as a Lingua Franca, identifying common areas where intended meaning and interpreted meaning diverge among ELF users. The most frequent forms of pragmatic failure we found include misaligned speech acts (e.g. suggestions perceived as orders), inappropriate levels of directness or politeness (due to cultural norm clashes), and issues with conversational management like turn-taking and repair. These failures often stem not from lack of language proficiency, but from differing cultural conventions and pragmatic expectations carried over into English.

The implications of these findings are both pedagogical and practical. For language teaching, it reinforces the importance of teaching pragmatic and intercultural competencies alongside grammar – helping learners anticipate and recognize pragmatic pitfalls. For anyone engaged in international communication, it underlines the need for patience, clarification, and adaptation. Instead of assuming bad intent or poor English when a conversation goes awry, participants should consider underlying cultural causes and work collaboratively to resolve misunderstandings.

Importantly, this study also highlights that effective ELF communication is a two-way street: all parties share responsibility in achieving understanding. Rather than measuring success by native-speaker standards, success in ELF is better measured by whether mutual understanding is achieved through a flexible use of language. This perspective encourages appreciation of English's role as a lingua franca that belongs to no single culture. Training in intercultural communicative competence – knowing how to navigate cultural differences in pragmatics – emerges as a key recommendation. Such training can reduce instances of unintended rudeness or confusion, fostering smoother interactions in international academia, business, and diplomacy.

In conclusion, while pragmatic failures do occur in ELF interactions, they are not random or intractable. They tend to fall into identifiable patterns that we can learn from. By becoming aware of these patterns, ELF speakers can preempt potential misunderstandings (for example, by phrasing a request more gently, or by checking if a joke was understood). Likewise, institutions can integrate pragmatic awareness into language and intercultural programs. As English continues to serve as the world's common linguistic bridge, equipping its users with pragmatic savvy will help turn possible failures into successful communication across cultures.

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