

**INVESTIGATING AREAS OF INTERCULTURAL PRAGMATIC
BREAKDOWNS IN EFL LEARNERS' ONLINE COMMUNICATION
THE CASE OF SECOND-YEAR STUDENTS AT THE DEPARTMENT
OF ENGLISH, UNIVERSITY OF ABBES LAGHOUR-KHENCHELA**

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Abstract:

The objectives of this article are to investigate areas of intercultural pragmatic breakdowns in EFL learners' online communication with native and their causes. This work employed a quantitative method wherein a questionnaire was administered to 74 second-year English students at the University of Abbes Laghrour University to investigate their views regarding those problems. The findings obtained revealed problems linked to pragma-linguistic, sociopragmatic, and pragmastylistic issues. This is due to learners' low language proficiency and lack of exposure to authentic materials.

Keywords: pragmatics, culture, intercultural pragmatic breakdown, online communication

Introduction :

Foreign language teaching and learning is a complex process, for EFL learners are not only required to master the target language but ought to be abreast of its culture and the interactional context wherein it appears. This is most problematic when EFL learners are engaged in communication that is devoid of the requisite elements that render the interaction accessible, especially when it comes to online communication. Hence, cultural and pragmatic dimensions of the foreign language are to be given due significance in this regard.

Many scholars have shifted their attention from studying the structure that the speakers utter to focus on what those structures really transmit. Since many language issues cannot be understood by syntactic and semantic analysis solely, "pragmatics" becomes the new field for language study. Pragmatics, as a new linguistic area, has been the focus of language study during the second half of the twentieth century. Atamna quoted Levinson when saying that pragmatics is "the study of the ability of language users to pair sentences with the context in which they would be appropriate"¹. As a result, context has become the basis of any pragmatic study. Culture and communication have recently found a common ground within foreign language teaching compared to the times when scholars focused on the linguistic side more than anything. García-Carbonell and Rising acknowledge that language has always been regarded as one of the challenges to intercultural communication; however, with the rise of globalisation and the spread of supra-English, the linguistic obstacles have been diminished².

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EFL learners, despite being equipped with a pragmatic competence, their interactions with people belonging to different cultures are subject to breakdowns. This issue that has favoured the integration of culture in the teaching-learning process has given birth to the development of the “intercultural competence”. The requisiteness of both pragmatics and culture within the same scope has impelled scholars to investigate what is called the “intercultural- pragmatic competence”. In this regard, EFL learners, as part of online interactions with native speakers, find themselves in the middle of an intercultural communicative breakdown and fail to understand the pragmatic meaning of what has been transmitted, which can have its aftermath. Hence, this piece of research aims to ascertain the intercultural pragmatic breakdowns faced by learners and the causes behind them. It is noteworthy that there were only few attempts to study these hindrances, and that the Algerian syllabus does not put much emphasis upon enhancing EFL learners’ pragmatic competence. It does not even unmask how the latter can be related to modern technologies in general and mediated communication in particular.

This research addresses two main questions:

1. What are the intercultural pragmatic breakdowns that take place in learners’ online interactions with natives?
2. What are the reasons behind the pragmatic problems that learners encounter during online intercultural communication?

To answer the above-stated question, this article employs a purely quantitative research design that is based on administering one quantitative tool of investigation (a questionnaire) to second-year students of English at Khenchela University. Since the main objective of this research is to explore the problems that learners face when having online interactions with natives, the questionnaire can help to gain insights into these problems and their causes.

The present study is not only important for foreign language learners in terms of communication but also in the educational arena. This research is an amalgamation of the disciplines of culture, pragmatics, didactics, and computer-mediated studies. This research paper can be a further step towards developing learners’ intercultural pragmatic competence as a crucial aspect of communicative competence, especially with contemporarily new world of technology in both the academic and non-academic areas. Within the rise of a good linguistic description through a pragmatic analysis of these problems, this inquiry raises teachers’ awareness about the issue and consequently incites them to find out solutions. This can be done through including pragmatic and cultural studies within the syllabi along with the embracement of mediated communication in EFL classes. These interactions are specifically tackled because they link a pair of individuals who belong to different cultural backgrounds and make their contribution more significant; consequently, more pragmatic breakdowns are to be detected

1-Literature Review

Pragmatics has recently become an important recourse for scholars when it comes to language analysis. Many theories and approaches have been developed in regard to this matter, especially in relation to intercultural communication. In point of fact, researchers have considered pragmatic competence a critical element for a successful interaction between natives and non-natives.

1-1- Pragmatics Defined

Pragmatics is a field of study that explores how people deal with language when communicating at a personal level. “Pragmatics is the study of language use in

interpersonal communication, it investigates the choices of the speaker/writer, interpretations of the hearer/reader and constraints which apply in social interaction”³. Henceforth, pragmatics analyses the impact of language use on participants in communication. As pragmatics expands to a number of other fields within linguistics, it is closely related to semantics (the study of meaning) and sociolinguistics (the study of language in relation to social factors). Considering the area of emphasis in the field of pragmatics, three subgroups can be identified:

- Pragmalinguistics is more concerned with the linguistic side of pragmatics. It deals with aspects of context as part of language structure.
- Sociopragmatics holds the idea that social factors in communication determine usage.
- Applied pragmatics refers to practical breakdowns of interaction⁴.

Pragmatics is concerned with communication between people; it includes intentions and interpretations. Silalahi quoted Crystal when mentioning that “Pragmatics studies the factors that govern our choice of language in social interaction and the effects of our choice on others”⁵. Simply put, pragmatics examines the utterance, what this latter implies as it is related to the speakers’ intentions, and the effect of the words’ choice on the hearer. Abel notes that “Pragmatics can be a technique to comprehend how meaning can be made in some texts, especially if these texts incorporate several meanings that are mostly implicit”⁶. Pragmatics deals with the deep intended meaning without focusing on the semantic meaning which, in some cases, misleads the reader/listener to understand what is really meant.

Based on the previously mentioned definitions, pragmatics can be defined as the implied (deep) meaning that listeners/readers can understand when words are put into the appropriate contextual, societal, and cultural framework. Therefore, it states the relationship between the language and the way speakers/writers perform actions through appropriate language use.

1-2- Intercultural Pragmatic Competence

Intercultural communication takes place when the members of the conversation belong to variant cultures and share different views of the cultural, societal, political, and economic standards. Porter and Samovar have quoted Kangu, who explained that “Intercultural communication occurs whenever a message producer is a member of one culture and a message receiver is a member of another”⁷. This communication is intercultural since it gathers different interlocutors with variant cultural backgrounds. They have further defined the notion of communication as “a dynamic transactional behaviour-affecting process in which sources and receivers intentionally code their behaviour to produce messages that they transmit through a channel in order to induce or elicit particular attitudes or behaviours”⁸. Simply put, whenever a conversation arises between persons from different cultures, the message holds variant transmitted linguistic and cultural features.

In communication across cultures, the interlocutors have to decode the intended message in split seconds based on personal experiences and the grids they have learnt in their home cultures. The term "grid" refers to the framework of understanding the verbal and non-verbal cues related to a particular culture (Arent, 2009)⁹. Since the concept of intercultural communication is complex and dynamic, specialists have designed variant models that help understand the concept as it develops through time.

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) requires not only what learners know about the target language/culture but also about their own culture and its effects on

behaviours, thoughts, and perceptions. It moves from the cultural competence that involves the knowledge of a culture's "factual knowledge history, mores, folkways, and values of a society" to intercultural competence. This latter consists of the same variables with the additional requirement that an individual has to be able to use this knowledge in combination with linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competencies (Lim & Griffith, 2016)¹⁰. In this regard, teachers who possess intercultural awareness and intercultural competence will eventually be more able to integrate cultural practices in their teaching process (Cetinavci, 2012)¹¹.

On account of measuring the intercultural communicative competence (ICC), other scholars have suggested another crucial criterion to enhance the learners' ICC. Critical thinking is a key element to achieve intercultural communicative competence as it allows participants to analyse, evaluate, and act upon communication cues including words, gestures, and other paralinguistic features. Critical thinking can help individuals understand each person's role in a conversation and adjust to its situational demands. Through adopting critical thinking, students will be able to understand the relevant and irrelevant cultural aspects in order to communicate appropriately and effectively within the conventional, social, and cultural boundaries (Lim & Griffith, 2016)¹².

Students may experience certain negative feelings about the target culture; they may not understand the real aim behind being exposed to a new culture. Some learners experience fear of losing their identity and still prefer being tied to it. Some others may accept the progress but do not really know how to prevent themselves from falling in the fallacy of assumptions. Sometimes, the intended message cannot be decoded because the students do not reach a remarkable level of understanding the different linguistic and cultural systems. If this issue cannot be controlled by the students themselves or by their educators, learners will find themselves in a middle of intercultural pragmatic breakdowns (Lewthwaite, 1996)¹³. In 1983, however, these breakdowns have been mainly discussed by Jenny Thomas in her book *Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure*, as she has clearly used the two concepts interchangeably.

1-3- Online Communication and Pragmatic Competence:

Mediated interpersonal communication is the interaction where social media platforms are committed to facilitate the exchange of information between the parties of the conversation. This real time exchange takes place through using different types of media like telephones, computers, and video conferencing. Many scholars have studied what may happen when persons are interacting via online typed messages, and how the lack of visual cues affects the message being transmitted. Hence, this type of communication leads to less personal forms of interaction than in face-to-face contexts¹⁴.

Many experiments have taken place to investigate the way people tend to treat mediated sources. Bailenson and Yee have showed, through a series of experiments, that people have a tendency to treat media interfaces as if they are social actors. For example, people become polite to computers under certain conditions in order to conform to a social norm. In one study, participants have performed a learning task on a computer. Then, they have evaluated the event, either on the same computer or on a different one. Participants give more positive ratings when they conduct the evaluation on the same computer that has administered the learning task than when they are assigned to a different computer. Basically, when people use media to conduct interpersonal interactions, they are combining processes that occur within face-to-face interpersonal interactions with new processes that are unique to utilising various kinds of technology¹⁵.

There are different characteristics that feature online communication. These are what make the process of engaging in online communication a good way to improve one's language and social and communicative skills. These features are listed as follow:

- **Online interaction is a dynamic process:** It means that communication between individuals is continuous and occurs in an uninterrupted flow of ideas. The communicators influence one another; what one individual says is affected by and affects what the other says. Every online interaction is “a point of arrival from a former encounter and a point of departure for a future encounter”¹⁶.
- **Online communication is contextual:** Online conversations do not take place in isolation. They are always surrounded by variant circumstances and situations that form their setting.
- **Online interaction is unrepeatable:** The interplay is exclusive; neither the conversations, emotions, thoughts, nor the relationships can be re-experienced or will ever recur in the same way again. Individuals change with every contact they make¹⁷.
- **Online interaction is irreversible:** This type of communication is irrevocable. The impact of what has been said cannot be obliterated. The conversation can neither be started, erased, nor be substituted by a more convenient one. Once a stimulus is set, it becomes a part of a behavioural sequence. This principle of irreversibility stands for the reality that the messages being sent are not to be taken back. Once the message is out, it is out and there is no chance to fix or take the words back. Therefore, Obe and Ayedun have emphasised the fact that the interlocutors must think twice before delivering any message¹⁸.
- **In Online interaction it is not possible to revoke online messages:** Online messages are virtually impossible to erase, they remain on servers forever even after deleting them. This includes emails and social media entries including Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and LinkedIn. The effect of the message can be diminished but their existence is permanent. Indeed, the online service Social Intelligence stores a dossier on every prejudice, stereotype, insult, or derogation advanced¹⁹.
- **Online communication is complicated:** Communication in general is a complex process since language embodies verbal and non-verbal cues that vary from one culture to another, let alone when this interaction is online. This kind is more complicated as both parties rely solely on verbal cues, and they cannot detect what the other party really means. Theorists note that whenever communication occurs, there are at least six "people" involved: (1) who they think they are. (2) Who they think the other person is. (3) Who they think the other person thinks they are. (4) Who the other person thinks s/he is. (5) Who the other person thinks they are. (6) And finally, who the other person thinks they think s/he is²⁰.
- **Online interaction is learned overtime:** Time is a crucial factor in online interactions. Gamble and Gamble²¹ explain that as time passes by, the interlocutors discern what is appropriate in an interpersonal communication, and what is not. One of the attributes of this latter is that the persons who take part in this interaction become familiar with the fashion words affect their interlocutors, and how they are afflicted by the former's words. Henceforth, individuals adopt the necessary adjustments.
- **Online communication is inescapable:** Online communication is not optional. Many scholars have claimed that people cannot do but communicate, and even their attempts to not share something is a communication in itself. This attribute highlights the fact that the conventionalists tend to judge one another by means of behaviours and not by means of their intents²². Alternatively, people are not mind readers, and even if they pretend so, they may never reveal what minds are more likely to think about.
- **Online interaction is characterised by wholeness and nonsummativity:** The wholeness of an online interaction denotes that it functions as an integrated entity. Not only are the participants given due consideration, but also the anomalous ways in which they influence one another. In addition to being characterised by wholeness, online relations are featured by nonsummativity. The nature of the whole relationship must be

investigated; it cannot be understood by exploring only the sum of its parts. Otherwise stated, the operation as a whole is distinctive from the sum of its separate parts²³.

2-Methodology:

2-1- Research Design:

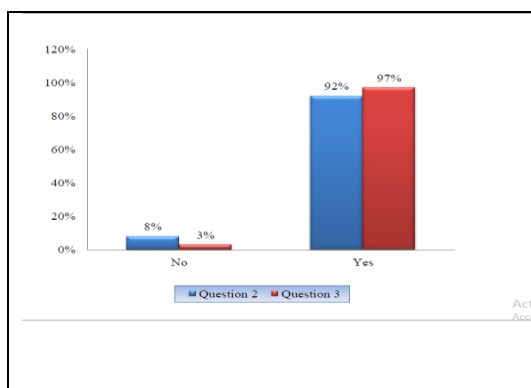
In this study, a quantitative approach was employed by means of using one quantitative tool of investigation. This selection serves the main goal of the research since it provides a descriptive, systematic, and analytical study of the sample's responses. It is motivated as well by the nature of the research questions that requires relying on statistical data.

2-2- Questionnaire Selection and Description

The selection of the questionnaire is inspired by the urge to reveal the variant causes of the problems that students undergo during an online interaction with natives. The sample size of the population is 74 second-year students studying English at Abbes Laghrour University. They represent the whole population of second year students. The participants are chosen due to their involvement into the cultural and the linguistic context. At this stage, they do not have full mastery of more complicated language conceptions. This is a plausible reason for the possibility to encounter variant pragmatic problems when communicating with native speakers. This data gathering tool constitutes of 14 questions that are arranged into two main sections. The whole questionnaire is deliberated in the form of different types of questions as part of closed and open-ended interrogatives. different types of questions were used including rating scale questions, multiple choice questions, ranking questions, and dichotomous questions (see appendix) to ensure that the respondents do not get bored when answering the questionnaire. The electronic questionnaire has been created in Google forms where the researcher has conserved the sample's anonymity to guarantee the concept of objectivity. The link has been published in the second-year Facebook group and sent to the learners' personal messenger accounts via private messages. The first section comprises five questions that all target the learners' background and perceptions as far as foreign language, culture, and communication are concerned while the second section addresses EFL learners' intercultural pragmatic breakdowns and is an attempt to unmask the variant reasons behind them.

2-3- Questionnaire Findings:

- Second-year students demonstrate positive attitudes towards foreign language, foreign culture, and intercultural communication. This is demonstrated by students' answers to question question 1, question 2, and question 3.



-Most of the students (92%) have indicated that English is their first choice, and therefore, second-year students are interested in studying English, and they wish to improve it throughout the years. According to question two, the majority of students (97%) are also interested in learning and knowing a new culture, which explains why students are interested in

<p>Figure1. Q1 and Q2: Learners’ Attitudes about the English Language and Culture</p>	<p>English.</p>
<p>Figure 2. Q3: Learners’ Openness to Communication with Natives</p>	<p>This question manifests that learners are very open to having conversations with people belonging to other cultures. Hence, if there is in problem in learners’ communicative competence, it is not because of the lack of interest in the foreign language and culture, for 64% of the whole population have maintained this openness to communicating to others.</p>

Second-year EFL learners anticipate maintaining online conversations with natives as a way to increase their language and culture knowledge as online communication has proved its efficiency for them. A considerable number of them have asserted that after a number of online conversations, they have noticed an improvement in their language use. This is demonstrated by students’ answers to question 7.

<p>Figure 3: Q4: Learners’ Attitudes about the Efficacy of Communication with Natives</p>	<p>Question four interrogates the learners’ perspectives about whether communication with natives is helpful for learning a foreign language. Eighty-nine percent respond positively. This indicates that they are aware of the significance of conducting conversation with natives. On the other hand, 11% take the in-between side “Maybe” and consider that they are not totally sure about the effectiveness of interaction with natives and learning their language.</p>
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- Low language proficiency, most specifically lack of vocabulary, is the chief reason behind EFL learners’ breakdowns whether it is online or face-to-face communication alongside the lack of authentic materials. It is important to take into account that a fair number has announced that they infrequently expose themselves to genuine and natural language use.

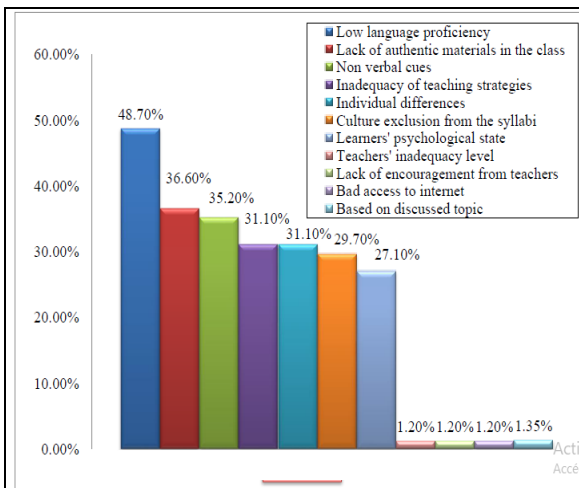
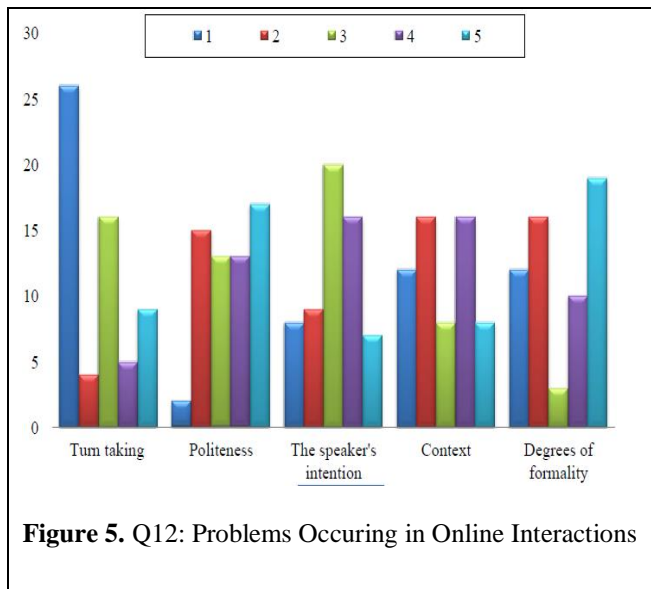


Figure 4: Q11: Reasons behind the Failure of Online Communication

Question 11 whose aim is highlighting the reasons behind the failure of online communication with natives illustrates that low language proficiency is the most prevalent reason among the proposed ones (48.7%), followed by the lack of authentic materials in the classroom (36.6%) and the absence of verbal clues (35.2%). The inadequacy of teaching strategies and individual differences come in the fourth position with a percentage of 31.1%. The following reason is the exclusion of culture from the teaching syllabi (29.7%), followed by the learners' psychological state with a rate of 27.1%. Down in the line, the respondents have mentioned other reasons including teachers' inadequacy level, lack of encouragement from teachers, or external factors like bad access to the internet. A few participants (1.35%) have clarified that the reasons vary depending on the topic discussed.

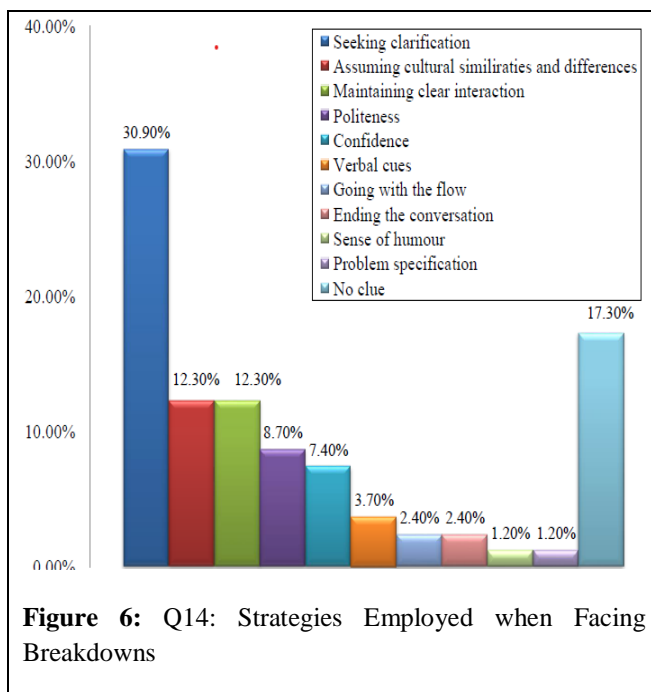
- The majority of learners encounter different types of problems when communicating online. The results show that turn taking is the most common problem that takes place between EFL learners and native speakers. This is because learners are used to face-to-face conversations or group interactions which are less organised compared to online communication. This fact makes this type of interactions more problematic.



In order to grasp the most common problems encountered, learners are given five choices of the problems that may take place during their online interactions and are asked to re-order them from the most frequent problem to the least frequent one (question 12). Based on the findings, the participants agree to rearrange them as follow: turn taking, politeness, the speaker’s intention, context, and then degrees of formality.

Figure 5. Q12: Problems Occuring in Online Interactions

- Solicitation of explanation, attempts for clarity, and embracement of cultural differences present the most used strategies to handle misunderstanding in mediated communication.



When facing breakdowns, learners use different strategies. Endeavour for understanding, demanding clarification from the person him/herself, or searching for pieces of information from other sources like Google or dictionary is the most ordinary technique with a percentage of 30.9%. However, the use of cognate, alternative, and common terminology along with assuming cultural differences are other tactics to approach the issue (12.3%), whereas 8.7% is the percentage attributed to politeness as a reliable strategy.

Figure 6: Q14: Strategies Employed when Facing Breakdowns

Conclusion:

Since online communication is becoming part of our life, EFL students and teachers can always take advantage of it to improve language proficiency and pragmatic competence. the findings of the questionnaire that was administered to EFL students reveal that EFL students are still lagging behind when interacting with native speakers, especially due to lack of vocabulary and lack of knowledge about turn-taking techniques. The findings also emphasise the significance of integrating pragmatic and cultural matters in EFL classes and

utilising online communication as a functional and applicable method to ameliorate the students' language proficiency and cultural fluency.

Footnotes :

- ¹Atamna, E. (2008). *An ethnography based culture integrated approach to teaching English at the university* (doctoral thesis). *Mentouri University Constantine*, p.86.
- ² García-Carbonell, A., & Rising, B. (2006). Culture and communication. *Georgia: College of management Georgia institute of technology Atlanta, Georgia, US*.
- ³ Hickey, R. (n.d). Pragmatics. Retrieved April 6, 2020, from <https://www.uni-due.de/ELE/Pragmatics.pdf> Husain, M.S. (2012). Dyadic communication, p.1.
- ⁴ Hickey, R. (n.d). Pragmatics. Retrieved April 6, 2020, from <https://www.uni-due.de/ELE/Pragmatics.pdf> Husain, M.S. (2012). Dyadic communication.
- ⁵ Silalahi, P. V. (2016). A highlight on pragmatics. *Parafrese: Jurnal Kajian Kebahasaan & Kesastraan*, p.86.
- ⁶ Abel, A. K. (2014). Pragmatic analysis of the use of English language in selected billboard adverts in Nigeria.
- ⁷ Kangu, J. M. (2012). *The importance of intercultural communication: for achieving integration of refugees from Sub-Sahara Africa into the Norwegian society* (Master's thesis). Retrieved October 23, 2019, from <https://vid.brage.unit.no/vid-xmlui/handle/11250/162197>, p.24.
- ⁸ Kangu, J. M. (2012). *The importance of intercultural communication: for achieving integration of refugees from Sub-Sahara Africa into the Norwegian society* (Master's thesis). Retrieved October 23, 2019, from <https://vid.brage.unit.no/vid-xmlui/handle/11250/162197>, p.25.
- ⁹ Arent, R. (2009). Bridging the cross-cultural gap: Listening and speaking tasks for developing fluency in English.
- ¹⁰ Lim, H. Y., & Griffith, W. I. (2016). Developing intercultural communicative competence in foreign language learning. *Sociology and anthropology*.
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- ¹⁸ Obe, J., & Ayedun, V. (2008). Introduction to mass communication.
- ¹⁹ Gamble, T. K., & Gamble, M. W. (2013). *Interpersonal communication: Building connections together*. Sage publications.
- ²⁰ Obe, J., & Ayedun, V. (2008). Introduction to mass communication.
- ²¹ Gamble, T. K., & Gamble, M. W. (2013). *Interpersonal communication: Building connections together*. Sage publications.
- ²² Obe, J., & Ayedun, V. (2008). Introduction to mass communication.

²³ Gamble, T. K., & Gamble, M. W. (2013). *Interpersonal communication: Building connections together*. Sage publications.

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Appendix: The Questionnaire

This questionnaire aims at discovering the reasons behind the pragmatic problems that EFL learners encounter during their online intercultural communication with native speakers.

You are kindly requested to answer the following questions taking into consideration the instructions provided. Your names and level are not required, for the study is only interested in your views regarding the research. Thank you for your cooperation.

Part One: Personal Background

1. Is studying English your own choice?

Yes No

2. Are you interested in learning a new culture?

Yes No

3. Are you open to communication with people from a different culture?

Definitely to some extent not really not at all

4. Do you rely solely on what teachers offer about the target culture in the classroom?

Yes No

If no, how often do you prefer using English authentic materials (books, films, songs, and documentaries...) to learn about the target language and culture?

Always sometimes occasionally rarely never

5. Have you ever been to an English speaking country?

Yes No

If yes, what difficulties have you encountered?

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.....

Part Two: Intercultural Pragmatic Problems

6. On a scale of ten, rate the extent to which interaction with people from different cultures can affect your awareness about their language and culture.

Little effect 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 High effect

7. Do you think that communication with natives is helpful to learn a foreign language?

Yes Maybe No

8. Have you ever had an online interaction with a native speaker?

Yes No

If yes, did you encounter any problems during the conversation?

Yes No

9. How do you feel if misunderstanding takes place in your conversation with a native speaker?

Not bad at all quite bad extremely bad

10. On a scale of ten, rate the degree of misunderstanding occurrence during a conversation.

Rarely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Always

11. In your opinion, what are the reasons behind the failure of online communication with natives? You can choose more than one option.

- a. Lack of authentic materials in classrooms
- b. The exclusion of culture teaching from the syllabi
- d. Low language proficiency
- e. Inadequacy of language teaching strategies
- f. Individual differences
- g. The students' psychological state
- h. Lack of exposure to non-verbal clues

Others.....
.....

12. Rank each of the following pragmatic problems in order of occurrence in an online conversation with 1 being the most frequent problem and 5 being the least frequent problem.

- a. Turn taking
- b. Politeness
- c. The speaker's intention
- d. Context
- e. Degrees of formality

13. Did you feel any improvement in your language use after a number of online conversations?

Yes cannot decide no

14. What strategies do you opt for when intercultural breakdowns take place during your online conversations?

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