International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Studies

Developing Pragmatic Competence in Second Language Acquisition Through Nonverbal Communication in English and Yoruba Intercultural Contexts

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Abstract

Pragmatic competence, the ability to use language appropriately within specific socio-cultural contexts, is a critical yet often neglected component of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). While linguistic accuracy is prioritized, the nonverbal channels of communication—proxemics, kinesics, oculesics, and haptics—are fundamental to conveying and interpreting meaning, especially in intercultural interactions. This paper argues that effective SLA must integrate the explicit teaching of culturally-specific nonverbal cues to foster true pragmatic competence and avoid pragmatic failure. Utilizing a qualitative case study methodology, this research conducts a comparative analysis of nonverbal communication norms in English (representing a low-context, typically Western culture) and Yoruba (representing a high-context, Nigerian culture) communicative contexts. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with 15 participants from each culture and systematic observation of naturalistic interactions. The findings reveal profound differences in the use of eye contact, personal space, touch, and gestures, which can lead to significant misinterpretations. For instance, perceived deference in Yoruba eye contact can be misconstrued as dishonesty in English contexts, while standard English proxemics can be interpreted as coldness or aloofness by Yoruba interlocutors. The study concludes that nonverbal communication is not a peripheral but a central pillar of pragmatic competence. It recommends a paradigm shift in SLA pedagogy towards a more integrated approach that explicitly incorporates metacultural discussions, ethnographic tasks, and scaffolded practice of nonverbal behaviors to prepare learners for successful intercultural communication.

1. Introduction

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has historically been dominated by a focus on grammatical competence—the mastery of vocabulary, syntax, phonology, and morphology. While this linguistic foundation is indispensable, it represents only a fraction of what is required for successful communication. The ability to use this linguistic knowledge appropriately in real-world situations, known as pragmatic competence, is what transforms a language learner into an effective communicator (Kasper & Rose, 2002) [10]. Pragmatic competence involves understanding not just what is said, but what is meant, taking into account the social status of interlocutors, cultural norms, context, and implicit shared knowledge.

However, a significant portion of meaning in human interaction is conveyed not through words, but through nonverbal communication (NVC). Birdwhistell (1970) [3] estimated that 60-70% of social meaning is derived from nonverbal behavior. This includes proxemics (use of space), kinesics (body movement, gestures, posture), oculesics (eye contact and gaze), haptics (touch), chronemics (use of time), and vocalics (paralanguage like tone and pitch). In intercultural encounters, where shared linguistic and cultural ground is often limited, the reliance on and potential for misinterpretation of these nonverbal cues is magnified exponentially. A gesture of agreement in one culture may be an insult in another; a comfortable interpersonal distance in one context may be perceived as invasive or standoffish in another.

The problem this research addresses is the systemic under-representation of nonverbal aspects of pragmatic competence in mainstream SLA pedagogy. Language learners are frequently taught what to say but not how to say it, nor what nonverbal behaviors accompany speech in the target culture. This omission sets learners up for pragmatic failure, a breakdown in communication where the listener derives a meaning different from what the speaker intended (Thomas, 1983) [14]. Such

failures can range from mild amusement to serious offense, hindering personal, academic, and professional relationships.

This paper posits that for SLA to be truly effective, it must adopt an integrated approach that explicitly teaches the nonverbal dimensions of pragmatics within their cultural frameworks. To ground this argument, the study employs a comparative case study of English and Yoruba cultures. English, as a global lingua franca often taught from a Anglo-American (typically low-context) perspective, provides a clear contrast with Yoruba, a major Nigerian language and culture operating within a high-context, communal framework. This contrast offers a powerful lens through which to examine the pivotal role of NVC.

This article will first review the literature on pragmatic competence and nonverbal communication in SLA. It will then detail the qualitative case study methodology employed. A subsequent discussion will analyze the findings, exploring the implications of the English-Yoruba nonverbal contrast. The conclusion will summarize the argument, and final recommendations will be offered for educators, curriculum designers, and language learners.

1.1 Research Questions
The research is guided by the following questions:
1. What are the key differences in nonverbal communication norms (proxemics, kinesics, oculesics, haptics) between English and Yoruba cultures?
2. How can these differences lead to pragmatic failure in intercultural interactions between speakers from these cultures?
3. How can SLA pedagogy be adapted to systematically incorporate the teaching of culturally-specific nonverbal cues to enhance pragmatic competence?

2. Literature Review
2.1 Pragmatic Competence in SLA
The concept of pragmatic competence emerged from Hymes's (1972) [9] notion of "communicative competence," which challenged Chomsky's dichotomy of competence (idealized knowledge) and performance (actual use). Hymes argued that knowing a language involves more than grammatical correctness; it involves knowing whether and how to use language in specific social situations. This was later formalized by Canale and Swain (1980) [6] and Canale (1983) [5], who delineated communicative competence into four components: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence.

Pragmatic competence falls primarily under sociolinguistic competence—the knowledge of the socio-cultural rules of use. It encompasses two main areas:
- Pragmalinguistics: The linguistic resources for performing speech acts (e.g., the formulas for apologizing or requesting: "I'm sorry" vs. "My apologies").
- Sociopragmatics: The social perceptions underlying the choice of speech act strategies (e.g., knowing when to apologize, to whom, and how profusely based on social power and distance) (Leech, 1983; Thomas, 1983) [12, 14].

Despite its recognized importance, teaching pragmatics remains a challenge. It is often seen as subtle, complex, and difficult to assess. Instruction tends to focus on easily identifiable speech acts rather than the nuanced, continuous stream of nonverbal behavior that accompanies them.

2.2 Nonverbal Communication as a Core Component of Pragmatics
Nonverbal communication is not merely an accessory to speech; it is integral to it. It serves multiple functions (Knapp et al., 2014) [11]:
1. Repeating: e.g., pointing in a direction while saying "over there."
2. Complementing: e.g., smiling while giving a compliment.
3. Substituting: e.g., shrugging shoulders to say "I don't know."
4. Regulating: e.g., making eye contact to signal you want to speak.
5. Contradicting: e.g., saying "I'm fine" with a sad tone and facial expression, creating a mixed message.

In intercultural settings, the rules governing these functions are culture-bound. Hall's (1966, 1976) [7, 8] foundational work on proxemics and high-context vs. low-context cultures is crucial. Low-context cultures (e.g., Anglo-American German, Scandinavian) tend to be direct, explicit, and verbal-centric. Meaning is vested primarily in the words spoken. High-context cultures (e.g., Japanese, Arabic, Yoruba, Nigerian broadly) are more indirect and implicit. Meaning is embedded in the context, including the relationship between speakers, the physical setting, and nonverbal cues. For learners from a high-context culture acquiring a low-context language (or vice versa), this fundamental difference in communication style is a major source of pragmatic failure.

2.3 Nonverbal Communication in Yoruba and English Cultures: Existing Research
While extensive research exists on East-West nonverbal communication contrasts (e.g., between Japanese and American cultures), the specific comparison between Anglo-English and Yoruba cultures is less documented, though insights can be drawn from broader African and Nigerian communication studies.
- Oculesics (Eye Contact): In many Western cultures, direct eye contact is associated with honesty, confidence, and engagement. Avoiding it can signal dishonesty or shiftiness (Andersen, 1999) [2]. In contrast, in many African cultures, including Yoruba culture, prolonged direct eye contact, especially with a superior or elder, is often considered disrespectful and challenging. Deference is shown by lowering the gaze (Meyer, 2015) [13]. This fundamental difference can lead to severe cross-cultural misjudgment.
- Proxemics (Personal Space): Anglo-American cultures typically maintain a larger personal bubble (approx. 1.5 to 4 feet for social conversations). Yoruba culture, like many collectivist cultures, operates with significantly closer proximity. What is considered a normal, friendly distance for a Yoruba speaker may be perceived as intrusive by an English speaker, who may then back away, in turn appearing cold and distant to the Yoruba interlocutor (Hall, 1966; Adegbija, 1989) [7, 1].
- Haptics (Touch): Cultures vary widely in touch norms. Yoruba culture is generally a high-contact culture. Touch between same-sex friends is common and signifies warmth and friendship. In more conservative Anglo contexts (e.g., in the UK or US), touch is less

frequent and more regulated, particularly between males (Meyer, 2015) [13]. Inappropriate touch can lead to significant discomfort.

- Kinesics (Gestures and Posture): Gestures can be particularly problematic as many are culture-specific. For example, the thumbs-up gesture is positive in English cultures but offensive in parts of the Middle East and West Africa. While some gestures may be shared, their frequency and exact meaning can differ. Furthermore, posture, such as how one sits or greets an elder, is deeply inscribed with cultural meaning in Yoruba culture, often signaling respect or its lack.

This literature reveals a clear gap. While broad differences are noted, there is a need for focused, empirical research that directly contrasts these nonverbal systems within the framework of SLA to generate practical pedagogical insights. This study aims to fill that gap.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design
This study employed a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2018) [15]. This approach was deemed most appropriate as it allows for an in-depth, multi-faceted exploration of a complex real-world phenomenon-nonverbal communication-within its authentic cultural contexts (English and Yoruba). The case study design facilitates a rich, descriptive analysis ideal for understanding the "how" and "why" of potential pragmatic failures.

3.2 Participants
A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit 30 participants:

- Group 1 (English Culture): 15 native speakers of English from the United Kingdom and United States, aged 28-55. All had at least a university degree and had experienced professional or social interactions with individuals from West African cultures.
- Group 2 (Yoruba Culture): 15 native speakers of Yoruba from Nigeria, aged 25-60. All were proficient in English but identified Yoruba as their first language and primary cultural identity. All had lived in an English-speaking country or had extensive professional interaction with native English speakers.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality.

3.3 Data Collection Methods
Data was collected through two primary methods to ensure triangulation and enhance validity:

1. Semi-Structured Interviews: Each participant underwent a 45-60 minute interview. The interview protocol was designed to elicit narratives and perceptions about intercultural encounters. Sample questions included:
   - "Can you describe a time when you felt confused or uncomfortable during a conversation with someone from the other culture (English/Yoruba)? What was happening nonverbally?"
   - "How do you typically show respect to an elder or superior in your culture, both verbally and nonverbally?"
   - "What is considered a comfortable distance for a conversation with a friend? With a stranger?"
   - "How important is eye contact when you are speaking? When you are listening?"

2. Structured Observation: Naturalistic interactions in semi-public settings (e.g., university common rooms, international student events) were observed where native English and Yoruba speakers were engaged in conversation. An observation schedule was used to note specific nonverbal behaviors (duration of eye contact, physical distance, instances of touch, types of gestures) and the apparent reactions of the interlocutors.

3.4 Data Analysis
All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) [4]. The process involved:

1. Familiarization: Repeated reading of transcripts.
2. Coding: Generating initial codes from the data (e.g., "eye contact avoidance," "close proximity discomfort," "misinterpreted gesture").
3. Theme Development: Collating codes into potential themes (e.g., "The Respect Paradox: Oculesics and Power Distance").
4. Reviewing Themes: Checking if themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire dataset.
5. Defining and Naming Themes: Refining the essence of each theme.

Field notes from observations were analyzed to corroborate and illustrate the themes emerging from the interview data, providing concrete examples of the behaviors described by participants.

4. Discussion
The analysis of the data revealed several prominent themes highlighting the stark contrast between English and Yoruba nonverbal norms and their direct impact on pragmatic competence.

4.1 The Oculesics of Respect and Deceit
The most frequently cited source of confusion pertained to eye contact. English participants consistently interpreted averted gaze from Yoruba interlocutors negatively. One American participant stated:

- "I was giving feedback to a Nigerian intern, and he wouldn't look me in the eye. He kept looking down at the table. It made me feel like he wasn't listening, or that he was being evasive and perhaps not being entirely truthful about the mistake."

Conversely, Yoruba participants expressed stress when forced to maintain eye contact with authority figures. A Yoruba teacher explained:

- "Back home, a student looking an elder in the eye for too long is 'arinfin' [disrespectful/ rude]. We are taught to look at the chest or the shoulder to show respect. When I first came here [UK], my supervisor thought I was insecure because I did this. I had to consciously learn to stare, which still feels very strange and aggressive to me."

This represents a classic sociopragmatic failure. The same behavior (averted gaze) is mapped onto entirely different sociopragmatic meanings (deference vs. dishonesty) based on culturally specific rules. An L2 learner of English from a Yoruba background must therefore learn not just the English language, but the English cultural meaning of eye contact.

4.2 Proxemics: The Dance of Distance and Coldness
The data on personal space revealed a clear pattern of

mutual misattribution. English participants frequently described Yoruba conversational distance as "invading my space," leading them to physically retreat. This retreat was then interpreted by Yoruba participants as a sign of rejection or coldness.

- "My colleague from Lagos always stands so close when we talk, I can feel him breathing. I have to step back to feel comfortable, but then he just moves closer again. It's a bit of a dance. It makes me hesitant to start a conversation," (English participant).
- "The British people I meet, they always stand so far away, like you have a disease. It makes it feel like they don't want to be friends, like they are keeping you at a distance on purpose," (Yoruba participant).

This "dance" is a real-time manifestation of clashing proxemic norms. The pragmatic competence required here is metalinguistic awareness: understanding that space is culturally relative. Without this awareness, learners attribute intentional negative meaning to a deeply ingrained cultural habit.

4.3 Haptics and Kinesics: The Ambiguity of Touch and Gesture

Observations and interviews confirmed differences in haptics. Yoruba participants, particularly males, were observed engaging in more frequent and prolonged touch (e.g., hand on shoulder, holding arm during conversation) with same-sex friends. This was identified as a normal sign of camaraderie. English males in the study were noticeably less tactile, with interactions characterized by brief, punctuated touch like a pat on the back.

A notable example of a kinetic misunderstanding involved a gesture of emphasis. A Yoruba participant, while making a point, flicked his hand outward with the fingers spread. He intended to emphasize his argument. His English interlocutor later confessed to finding the gesture "flippant" and "dismissive," slightly undermining the speaker's point. This highlights that even seemingly minor kinetic acts are interpreted through a cultural filter.

4.4 Implications for SLA Pedagogy

These findings underscore that teaching language without teaching its accompanying nonverbal grammar is insufficient. A learner may produce a grammatically perfect apology in English but deliver it with a direct, unwavering stare and a firm tone to an elder, rendering the apology pragmatically ineffective (or even offensive) within a Yoruba cultural framework, and vice-versa.

Pragmatic competence, therefore, must be redefined to include Nonverbal Pragmatic Competence (NPC): the ability to comprehend and produce culturally appropriate nonverbal behavior that aligns with verbal communication to achieve intended illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect in the target culture.

5. Conclusion

This research has demonstrated that nonverbal communication is not a peripheral concern but a central pillar of pragmatic competence in Second Language Acquisition. The comparative case study of English and Yoruba cultures revealed profound differences in the interpretation of eye contact, personal space, and touch. These differences are not superficial but are rooted in deeper cultural values concerning respect, individualism, collectivism, and contextual communication.

The consequences of ignoring these differences are significant, leading to pervasive pragmatic failure where interlocutors consistently misattribute intent, resulting in perceptions of dishonesty, coldness, disrespect, or aggression. These misunderstandings can create barriers to effective intercultural relationships in an increasingly globalized world.

Therefore, the goal of SLA should not be to create speakers who merely sound like natives but communicators who can navigate meaning effectively across cultures. This requires moving beyond the traditional focus on linguistic forms and embracing a pedagogy that is explicitly intercultural and integrative, treating nonverbal communication with the same seriousness as verbal grammar. The development of Nonverbal Pragmatic Competence (NPC) must become a stated objective of language teaching curricula. By doing so, we equip learners with the tools to avoid the cross-cultural "dance" of miscommunication and to engage in truly meaningful and respectful dialogue.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for SLA educators, curriculum designers, and learners:

- **For Educators and Curriculum Designers:**
1. Integrate Metacultural Discussion: Explicitly discuss cultural differences in nonverbal communication. Use comparison charts (e.g., Eye Contact: English vs. Yoruba norms) to raise awareness. Frameworks like high-context vs. low-context can be useful teaching tools.
2. Utilize Authentic Materials: Use film clips, TV shows, and recorded interactions from the target culture. Have learners observe and analyze nonverbal behaviors, focusing on how they modify meaning in different social hierarchies and situations.
3. Implement Ethnographic Tasks: Design tasks where learners must observe and report on nonverbal behaviors in their own community and, if possible, in the target language community (e.g., "How do people greet each other at a bus stop?"). This fosters active cultural exploration.
4. Scaffold Practice: Use role-plays and simulations that focus specifically on nonverbal behavior. For example, practice a job interview scenario first with "Yoruba" nonverbal rules (averted gaze) and then with "English" rules (direct gaze), followed by a debrief on the felt experience.
5. Incorporate Critical Incidents: Use narratives of pragmatic failure (like those gathered in this study) as a basis for discussion and problem-solving. Ask learners to diagnose the issue and propose strategies for avoiding it.

- **For Language Learners:**
1. Develop Cultural Curiosity: Move beyond a focus on just words. Become an observer of behavior. Pay attention to how people use their bodies, eyes, and space when they talk.
2. Practice Active Observation: Watch media from the target culture with the sound off to focus solely on nonverbal communication. Try to guess the emotional

state and relationship of the characters.
3. Adopt a Stance of Humility and Inquiry: When unsure, ask. It is better to say, "In my culture, we show respect by looking down. How is it done here?" than to persistently cause unintentional offense.
4. Tolerate Ambiguity: Intercultural communication is complex. Accept that misunderstandings will happen and view them as learning opportunities rather than failures.

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