Cross-cultural pragmatics in the Greek EFL context

Evangelia Michail
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki
michaileva@yahoo.com

Abstract
This paper focuses on the need to address cross-cultural pragmatics in the Greek EFL context. The first part discusses the Greek EFL context in detail. It is followed by a detailed review of the relevant literature on cross-cultural pragmatics. The final part presents the cross-cultural differences between the Greek and the English cultures and draws implications for pragmatics-focused instruction in foreign language classrooms.

Keywords: cross-cultural pragmatics, pragmatic failure, instruction

1. The Greek EFL context
The status of English in Greek schools is strong. Studying foreign languages is compulsory and English is the first foreign language that students start studying at the age of nine. Ever since the communicative turn in language teaching, the aim of foreign language teaching in Greece has been to develop students’ communicative competence. The same applies to all European countries, as can be seen in the way the Council of Europe’s Common Framework (CEF) for Language Learning and Teaching emphasises the importance of communicative competence (defined as consisting of sociolinguistic, linguistic and pragmatic components) as a major element in any language learning and teaching (Council of Europe 2001). Furthermore, student exchange within European Comenius mobility programs predicates the use of English as the medium of communication.

According to the CEF, intercultural awareness includes an awareness of regional and social diversity in the ‘world of origin’ and the ‘world of the target community’. In its terms, ‘intercultural skills’ include: (a) the ability to bring the culture of origin and the foreign culture into relation with each other; (b) cultural sensitivity; the capacity to fulfill the role of cultural intermediary between one’s own culture and the foreign culture; the ability to deal effectively with intercultural misunderstanding, conflict situations, and (c) stereotyped relationships.
However, students are restricted to using the English language only in the English language classroom, since English is not an official language in Greece. Moreover, no changes have been made to students’ formal assessment, which is still limited to testing their reading and grammatical skills. Rose & Kasper (2001) argue that especially in instructional contexts where formal testing is regularly performed, curricular innovations that comprise pragmatics as a learning objective will remain ineffective unless pragmatic ability is included as a regular and important component of language tests.

Finally, recently introduced revised textbooks, though comprising pragmatics as a learning objective (Pedagogical Institute 2003), present the same weaknesses as discussed in several studies exploring English language course books: they fail to be a good source of pragmatic input, providing an artificial and decontextualised presentation of the pragmatic aspects examined (Bardovi-Harlig et al. 1991; Boxer and Pickering 1995); they present learners with lists of useful expressions that may be deployed in particular situations, thus depriving them of the productivity that comes from an understanding of general principles (Murray 2009); they also present the language to be learned in dissociation from a real communicative purpose in contexts devised solely as a means of teaching language. Thus, the foreign language is represented as an artificial construct. It is not discourse; it is language put on display (Widdowson 1978). However, Yule (1996) argues, learning merely the linguistic forms of a language without learning the pragmatics associated with these forms can easily make a person a social outsider, who speaks in unexpected and inappropriate ways.

It becomes clear, therefore, that, in the Greek EFL setting, the responsibility for teaching the pragmatic aspects of language use falls on teachers. It is left to teachers to instill within their students pragmatic awareness so that they can figure out pragmatic meaning when they encounter it outside their classrooms (Eslami-Rasekh 2005). To accomplish this, teachers have to assume the role of ‘custodians of the English language and culture’ in the classroom, thus bearing the responsibility for using the few weekly hours “to teach the norms of native-speakers’ English and expose learners to contextualised examples of the target language that are linguistically flawless, if communicatively efficient” (Sifakis 2009: 235).
2. Literature review

2.1 Pragmatics

Mey (2004) defines pragmatics as essentially being about the users of language in a real-life situation, and about the conditions that enable those users to employ linguistic techniques and materials effectively and appropriately. Leech (1983) adds that pragmatics analyses only the meaning that is publicly available for interpretation. Giving the context-dependent nature of such phenomena more centrality, Levinson (1983) views pragmatics as the study of the relations between language and context that are basic to an account of language understanding, thus being of direct practical importance in applied linguistics.

Leech (1983) classifies general pragmatics into pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics. Sociopragmatics refers to the culturally-based principles or maxims that underlie interactants’ performance and interpretation of linguistic action. These include culturally-based assessments of the typical characteristics of a given communicative activity and culturally-influenced dynamic assessments of actual communicative events (Kasper 1992). Sociopragmatics conveys information concerning (a) the speech act or communicative intent of the utterance; (b) the attitude of the speaker towards the hearer (the degree of deference intended, perceptions of relative power, rights and duties, social distance, etc. existing between speaker and hearer) (Thomas 1983).

In Leech’s definition, pragmalinguistics refers to “the particular resources which a given language provides for conveying particular illocutions” (Leech 1983:11) and conveys information concerning the attitude of the speaker towards the information (newness of information, topicalisation and focusing of information, connotation, and presupposition) (Thomas 1983). According to Leech (1983: 10-11), “pragmalinguistics is related to grammar”; thus language-specific, while “sociopragmatics is related to sociology”, therefore culture-specific.

2.2 Speech act theory

Speech Act theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1979, amongst many others) captures the view of language as social action. Fundamental to this approach is the concept that language use involves the simultaneous performance of multiple acts. At one level, a speaker is performing a locutionary act, or producing a sentence with a particular sense and reference. Simultaneously, a speaker is performing an illocutionary act, or
an act in saying. The term illocutionary act refers to the specific illocutionary force or 
language function associated with the uttering of particular words in a particular 
context. At the same time, a speaker is performing a perlocutionary act, i.e. “the 
bringing about of effects on the audience” (Levinson 1983: 236).

Searle (1979) applies the notion of intentional, i.e. indirect meaning to the study of 
speech acts. He defines indirect speech acts (ISA) as utterances in which one speech 
act is performed indirectly by performing another. Indirect speech acts derive their 
force not from their lexico-semantic buildup but from the situation in which they are 
appropriately uttered. Pragmatics is interested in intentional indirectness, assuming 
that speakers behave in a rational manner and, given the universality of indirectness, 
that they obtain some social or communicative advantage through employing 
indirectness.

As Schiffrin (1994), among many others, calls it, Gricean pragmatics is a 
contemporary version of pragmatics that focuses on meaning in context. Two 
concepts are central in Gricean pragmatics. The first concept is speaker meaning, 
suggesting a particular view of human communication that focuses on intentions. 
Grice (1957) separates non-natural meaning from natural meaning (natural meaning is 
devoid of intentionality while non-natural meaning or meaning-nn is roughly 
equivalent to intentional communication), thus arguing that linguistic communication 
occurs only when a speaker intends on using language to convey certain attitudes to 
his/her hearer and the hearer recognises what these attitudes are, based upon what has 
been said. This joint accomplishment between speaker and hearer in making meaning 
is what Thomas (1995: 208) calls “meaning in interaction”, and what has been 
broadly meant by the term “meaning negotiation”.

The second concept in Gricean pragmatics is context, viewed as a cognitive 
contribution to utterance interpretation. Speech Act theory and Gricean pragmatics, 
Schiffrin (1994) argues, view context as primarily knowledge, that is, what speakers 
and hearers are assumed to know and how this knowledge can guide the use of 
language and utterance interpretation. Although a key part of such knowledge is 
knowledge of situation, both approaches fail to analyse situation; they fail to analyse 
the set of social circumstances in which utterances can be produced and interpreted as 
realisations of their underlying constitutive rules. In the same line of thought, Mey 
(2009a) adds that the situation creates the affordances by which the hearer is guided 
toward a correct interpretation of what he is hearing, and indeed of what he himself is
saying. The emphasis is placed not on describing individual speech acts but on figuring out how a particular act of language came to be used in this particular situation, in a meeting of human interactants who have a common background and try to realise a common goal (Mey 2009b).

Grice (1975) further develops the intentional aspect of meaning and introduces the term implicating, as opposed to saying. The basis for his theory of conversational implicatures is provided by a set of rules underlying communication, which Grice termed the Cooperative Principle (CP): “Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (ibid: 45). The four maxims that the CP is composed of function as guidelines for rational and efficient language use: Utterances adhering to the CP are generally truthful (maxim of quality), adequately informative (maxim of quantity), relevant (maxim of relation), and clear (maxim of manner). At the same time, Grice points out, in everyday interaction, speakers violate the maxims. Intentional non-observance of the maxims is central to Grice’s theory since it generates conversational implicatures, which convey an implicit meaning not derivable from their conventional use.

2.3 Politeness theory

Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory (1987) combines Speech Act theory and Grice’s theory of implicatures with Goffman’s ([1955]1967: 213) notion of face, defined as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact”. It is in everyone’s interest to maintain each other’s face, which can be lost, threatened and damaged through interaction with others. While the content of face will differ in different cultures, Brown and Levinson argue that the mutual knowledge of members’ face and the social necessity to orient oneself to it are universal.

However, there are certain illocutionary acts, especially those acts that by nature run contrary to the speaker’s or the hearer’s face, that may damage or threaten face. These acts are called face-threatening acts (FTA), for example, an order, a threat, a warning etc. The severity of the FTA can be assessed on the basis of the sociological variables of the relative power, social distance, and rating of imposition. Social distance is “a symmetric social dimension of similarity/difference” (ibid: 76). Relative power is the “degree to which the hearer can impose his own plans and his
own self-evaluation (face) at the expense of S’s plans and self-evaluation” (ibid: 77). The ranking of imposition is the rating of the imposition caused to an agent by a particular FTA and is determined by the situation and culture. In order to reduce the possibility of damage, the speaker may either avoid these face-threatening acts or seek to minimize the threat by employing redressive action. Brown and Levinson (1987) distinguish two types of redressive action: positive politeness and negative politeness.

Positive politeness is redress directed to the addressees’ positive face, their potential desire that their wants should be thought of as desirable. Redress consists in partially satisfying that desire by communicating that one’s own wants are in some respects similar to the addressee’s wants. The sphere of redress is widened to the appreciation of alter’s wants in general or to the expression of similarity between ego’s and alter’s wants. The linguistic realisations of positive politeness (see Table 1 below) are in many respects simply representative of the normal linguistic behaviour between intimates, where interest and approval of each other’s personality, presuppositions indicating shared wants and shared knowledge, implicit claims to reciprocity of obligations or to reflexivity of wants are routinely exchanged (Brown and Levinson 1987).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Linguistic realisations of Positive Politeness</strong></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>(Brown and Levinson 1987)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mechanism A: Claim common ground</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 1: Notice, attend to H</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 2: Exaggeration (interest, approval, sympathy with H)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 3: Intensify interest to H</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 4: Use in-group identity makers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 5: Seek agreement (e.g. sticking on safe aspects of topics / repetition)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 6: Avoid disagreement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 7: Presuppose/raise/ assert common ground</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 8: Joke</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mechanism B: Convey that S and H are cooperators</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 9: Assert or presuppose S’s knowledge of and concern for H’s wants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 10: Offer and promise</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 11: Be optimistic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 12: Include both S and H in the activity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 13: Give (or ask) reasons</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 14: Assume or assert reciprocity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mechanism C: Fulfill H’s want for some X</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 15: Give gifts to H (goods, sympathy, understanding, cooperation)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1. Positive Politeness Strategies (Brown and Levinson 1987: 103-129)*
Negative politeness is redressive action addressed to the addressee’s negative face: his want to have his freedom of action unhindered and his attention unimpeled. It is the heart of respect behaviour just as positive politeness is the kernel of familiar and joking behaviour. Negative politeness corresponds to rituals of avoidance. Negative politeness is specific and focused; it performs the function of minimising the particular imposition that the FTA unavoidably effects (Brown and Levinson 1987). Negative politeness entails the use of more formalised behavioural codes, including the use of linguistic formulae (see Table 2 below). In negative politeness, the sphere of relevant redress is restricted to the imposition itself.

### Linguistic realisations of Negative Politeness

*(Brown and Levinson 1987)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mechanism A: Be direct</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 1: Be conventionally indirect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mechanism B: Don’t presume/assume</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 2: Question / hedge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mechanism C: Don’t coerce H</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 3: Be pessimistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 4: Minimise the imposition, Rx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 5: Give deference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mechanism D: Communicate S’s want to not impinge on H</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 6: Apologise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 7: Impersonalise S and H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 8: State the FTA as a general rule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 9: Nominalise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 10: Go on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebting H</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2. Negative politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson 1987: 129-211)*

While some of these aspects of pragmatics might be universal to all speakers of all languages, others vary systematically across situations, across time and, of crucial relevance to learners from other cultures, across communities and cultures (Yates 2004). These latter aspects that vary systematically across communities and cultures will be the focus of the following section.

### 2.4 Cross-cultural pragmatics

In the normal business of communication, Widdowson (1998) argues, speakers use language to engage in social action, to enact a discourse in speech. The pragmatic
Cross-cultural pragmatics in the Greek EFL context

meaning they achieve realises that discourse and is linguistically inexplicit because it
depends on context. So when people use language appropriately, they localise it, they
key it into what is familiar in the communities they belong to. Things are left unsaid
because they are assumed to be common knowledge in the community. Members of
the community, insiders, can participate in the achievement of meaning in the
discourse process. But outsiders, who are not in the know, cannot make the necessary
contextual connection to make appropriate meaning.

According to Yule (1996), our ability to arrive automatically to interpretations of
the unwritten and the unsaid is based on pre-existing knowledge structures known as
schemata. For members of the same culture, the assumption of shared schemata
allows much to be communicated that is not said. However, for members of different
cultures, such an assumption can lead to a great deal of miscommunication. The study
of differences in expectations based on cultural schemata is known as cross-cultural
pragmatics. When the investigation focuses on the communicative behavior of non-
native speakers, attempting to communicate in their second language, it is described
as interlanguage pragmatics. Such studies increasingly reveal that we all speak with
what might be called a pragmatic accent, that is, aspects of our talk that indicate what
we assume is communicated without being said.

Cross-cultural pragmatics takes the point of view that individuals from different
societies or communities interact according to their own pragmatic norms, often
resulting in a clash of expectations and, ultimately, misperceptions about the other
group (Boxer 2002). One of the objectives of cross-cultural pragmatics is to establish
the pragmalinguistic repertoires available in various languages for the realisation of
particular speech acts and to ‘cross-linguistically identify the formal and functional
equivalence relationship of politeness expressions’ (Kasper 1990 as cited in
Ogiermann 2009). Cross-cultural pragmatics can contribute to the study of
intercultural communication by revealing the principles underlying interaction in
cross-cultural contexts, thus preventing pragmatic failure. Issues of pragmatic failure
will be discussed in the following section.

2.5 Pragmatic failure

Pragmatic failure, a term introduced by Thomas (1983), is an area of cross-cultural
communication breakdown. It addresses misunderstandings arising from the inability
on the part of the hearer to recognise the force of the speaker’s utterance. The term
cross-cultural encompasses any communication between two people who, in any particular domain, do not share a common linguistic or cultural background. According to Thomas (1983: 97), “while grammatical errors may reveal a speaker to be a less than proficient language user, pragmatic failure reflects badly on him/her as a person”. For those engaged in the teaching of English to people from other cultures, Thomas argues, pragmatic failure raises issues which make it essential to distinguish between two types of pragmatic failure.

Pragmalinguistic failure occurs when the pragmatic force mapped by the speaker onto a given utterance is systematically different from the force most frequently assigned to it by native speakers of the target language, or when speech act strategies are inappropriately transferred from L1 to L2. It is basically a linguistic problem, caused by differences in the linguistic encoding of pragmatic force, which makes it simply a question of highly conventionalised usage which may be teachable in a quite straightforward way as part of the grammar.

Sociopragmatic failure refers to the social conditions placed on language in use. It stems from cross-culturally different perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behaviour, thus being much more difficult to deal with, since it involves the students’ system of beliefs as much as their knowledge of the language in use.

Pragmatic failure, Kasper (1992) argues, may arise from pragmatic transfer, i.e. the influence exerted by learners’ pragmatic knowledge of languages and cultures other than L2 on their comprehension, production and learning of L2 pragmatic information. It can occur in both pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics, so a distinction needs to be made.

Pragmalinguistic transfer is the “process whereby the illocutionary force or politeness value assigned to particular linguistic material in L1 influences learners’ perception and production of form-function mappings in L2” (ibid: 209). Studies on pragmalinguistic transfer have focused on pragmatic routines, lexical and syntactic modification and speech act realisation strategies (Linde 2009).

Sociopragmatic transfer, on the other hand, is operative in “learners’ perceptions of contextual factors, of whether carrying out a particular linguistic action is appropriate, and of the overall politeness style adopted in an encounter” (Kasper 1992: 213). It can occur when the social perceptions underlying language users’ interpretation and performance of linguistic action in L2 are influenced by their assessment of subjectively equivalent L1 contexts (L1 pragmatic transfer) and includes the resources
used for conveying illocutionary meaning as well as the plethora of devices available for managing relationships.

3. Cross-cultural differences between the Greek and the English cultures

Every observer in a foreign land knows that societies, or subcultures within societies, differ in terms of what might be called “ethos” (Brown & Levinson 1987: 243), the affective quality of interaction characteristic of members of a society. Consequently, an adequate account of linguistic behaviour should not ignore the nature and quality of relationships and values predominant in the culture under study, since they seem to play a determining role as to what constitutes appropriate behaviour (Sifianou 1993). This is supported by a vast body of anthropological enquiry which shows that different cultures have their own systems of rationality and their own internal logic (Hirschon 2001).

Several cross-cultural studies have demonstrated that there can be important cross-cultural differences in the speech-act performance between two different speech communities. Such distinct cross-cultural differences have been found to exist between the Greek and the English interactional styles and, in particular, the way in which politeness is visualised in the Greek and English cultures (Sifianou 1992, 1993; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2002). According to these studies, there is important sociocultural relativity in speakers’ linguistic choices, as these two different cultural/linguistic groups often have differing perceptions of social reality and favour different politeness strategies.

The distinction between these two culture types is made in terms of Brown and Levinson’s (1987) culture-specific assessments of social variables: warm, positive-politeness cultures have a subjective ideal of small values for Distance, Rate of imposition and relative Power which give them their egalitarian, fraternal ethos. On the other hand, negative-politeness cultures subscribe to a subjective ideal of large values for Distance, Rate of imposition and relative Power which give them their hierarchical, paternal ethos.

As Triandis and Vassiliou (1972 as cited in Sifianou 1993) put it, for historical and geographical reasons, the Greek society attaches great importance to the distinction between δεκτικα ‘in-group’ and κσινι ‘out-group’, and both verbal and non-verbal behavior is largely determined by which group others fall into. ‘In-group’ is defined as ‘one’s family, relatives, friends, and friends of friends’ (ibid: 41). Members of the
same in-group often employ informality and positive politeness strategies, saving formality and negative politeness strategies for members of the out-group, depending on their status. Towards their in-group, Greeks behave with spontaneity and enthusiasm, expressing their feelings overtly, since they believe that this will contribute to their in-group’s improved image. Members of the same in-group feel that they have a duty to provide moral as well as financial support to each other. This giving behavior involves tangible goods as well as volunteering to do things for other members, which indicates consideration for each other’s needs. All members of the same in-group aim to retain the group bond, so they find no obvious reason for thanking or apologising, unless for something they consider very serious, since this is regarded as appropriate behaviour in similar occasions.

On the verbal level, their requests are expressed structurally more directly than in English because they are not perceived as impositions to the same extent. The Greeks show a preference for patterns which involve what Brown & Levinson (1987) call interactional “optimism”, such as imperatives and indicatives. They seem to emphasise involvement and in-group relationships based on mutual dependence rather than on independence, and on a series of shared reciprocal rights and obligations. In such a framework the idea of distance is hardly relevant and, consequently, that of imposition cannot be prevalent.

By contrast, the English seem to define their in-group differently. The distinction between in-group and out-group is less salient and the individual’s privacy and independence is of greater concern than that of closer in-group relationships. In addition, in the English negative-politeness culture, the notion of an individual’s right to freedom plays a determining role in the social structure. English cultural norms demand a more distant system of behaviour, where helping each other seems to depend on the individual’s discretion rather than to conform to a general duty.

On the verbal level, the English employ requests more sparingly, since they perceive them as impositions to a greater extent and they show a preference for expressing them more elaborately and indirectly. In the English culture, it is imperative that thanks and apologies are expressed even for minor relevant situations and even among members of the same in-group.
4. Pragmatics and Foreign Language Teaching

Obviously, cultural clashes cannot be completely eliminated, but they can be minimised by enlightened, well-planned multicultural education (Sifianou 1992). This way of foreign language teaching and learning is what Mey (2008) calls pragmatic immersion. Davies (2004) views this approach as an explanatory pragmatics, which seeks to link cultural ethos to patterns of conversational style and aims at alerting learners as to how underlying cultural values, beliefs, and assumptions influence L2 speakers’ pragmatic behavior (Ishihara & Cohen 2010).

Nunn (2006) adds that pragmatics is doubly applicable to language teaching, because classroom language teaching is an occupation which essentially uses language in a social context to promote the learning and teaching of language for use in social contexts. The classroom itself is a unique social environment with its own conventions governing these activities (Breen & Candlin 2001 as cited in Graves 2008), since instruction provides a cultural context for the language presentation (Koike & Pearson 2005). Classroom discourse mostly consists of Teacher Talk, which can be employed to present situations in which L2 users take part. According to Cook (1999), an interesting type of L2 user role is the nonnative-speaker teacher. Making some parts of language teaching reflect an L2 user would show the students that successful L2 users exist in their own right and are not just pale shadows of native speakers. Finally, Ogiermann (2009) argues, cross-cultural data can serve as pragmatic input for teaching materials.

Therefore, informed explanations by teachers can also help to provide an insider’s perspective (Ishihara & Cohen 2010) and promote an awareness of a different cultural ethos, an awareness of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behaviour in a variety of social situations in their L2. This is what links culture to pragmatic awareness in the foreign language (Kasper & Rose 2002).

References


