MEANING NEGOTIATION AND PRAGMATIC MISUNDERSTANDINGS IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: A REFLEXIVE STUDY

Antonius Ali Wutun
STKIP YPUP Makassar
aliwutun@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This reflexive qualitative study examines intercultural pragmatic misunderstandings and the processes of meaning negotiation in everyday English interactions within multicultural settings. Drawing on four real-life incidents experienced by the author, the study moves beyond identifying socio-pragmatic mismatches to analyze how interlocutors recognize, respond to, and repair breakdowns in communication. Although the interactions involved fluent English speakers, misunderstandings emerged from culturally embedded expectations surrounding reassurance, hospitality, compliments, and refusals. Guided by theories of intercultural pragmatics, politeness, and pragmatic failure, the analysis demonstrates how face concerns, contextual assumptions, and cultural value systems shape interpretation in real time. Importantly, the findings reveal that meaning is not passively received but actively negotiated through clarification, reformulation, contextual explanation, and adaptive stance-taking. These processes illustrate the dynamic co-construction of understanding across cultural boundaries. The study argues that successful intercultural communication depends not only on linguistic competence but also on interactional sensitivity and pragmatic flexibility. Pedagogically, it underscores the need to integrate pragmatic awareness, reflective inquiry, and negotiation strategies into language education. Methodologically, it highlights the value of reflexive narrative approaches in uncovering the lived processes of intercultural meaning-making often overlooked in experimental research.

Keywords: *Intercultural Pragmatics, Pragmatic Misunderstanding, Meaning Negotiation, Everyday English Communication, Reflexive Qualitative Inquiry*

INTRODUCTION

As global mobility intensifies and English increasingly functions as a shared communicative resource, intercultural interaction has become a routine aspect of everyday life (Konakahara & Tsuchiya, 2019). In such contexts, English is widely used among speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, often serving as a practical means of communication rather than a marker of native-speaker identity. However, effective communication in these settings requires more than grammatical competence; it involves the ability to interpret and negotiate meaning within culturally embedded frameworks of politeness, relational norms, and contextual expectations (Kecskes, 2020; Taguchi et al., 2021). Even seemingly daily simple expressions can carry divergent meanings across cultures, potentially leading to misunderstanding despite speakers' fluency and good intentions.

Intercultural pragmatics has consistently demonstrated that communication breakdowns often arise from differences in socio-pragmatic norms rather than linguistic deficiency (Kecskes, 2022). Such misunderstandings occur when speakers rely on culturally specific assumptions about appropriateness, facework, and relational positioning, which may not be shared by their interlocutors. In everyday interaction, these assumptions are rarely made explicit, making pragmatic misalignment both subtle and pervasive. This is particularly evident in informal social contexts, where participants draw on implicit cultural scripts to manage rapport, express politeness, and interpret intent.

Existing research has extensively examined intercultural communication through the analysis of speech acts, including requests, refusals, apologies, and compliments (Ishihara & Cohen, 2021; Spencer-Oatey, 2022). These studies have provided valuable insights into cross-cultural variation in pragmatic norms and strategies. However, much of this work has been conducted in controlled environments, such as classroom settings, experimental tasks, or survey-based designs. While methodologically rigorous, such approaches often abstract communication from its natural context, limiting their ability to capture the fluid, emergent, and interactional nature of meaning-making in real-life encounters. Furthermore, the dominant focus in the literature has been on identifying and categorizing instances of pragmatic failure—distinguishing, for example, between pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic errors (Taguchi et al., 2021)—rather than examining how interlocutors respond to and manage these breakdowns during ongoing interaction.

This reveals an important gap in current scholarship. Although pragmatic misunderstandings have been widely documented, the dynamic processes through which interlocutors recognize, interpret, and negotiate meaning in naturally occurring intercultural interactions remain underexplored. In particular,

there is limited research that examines how speakers engage in moment-by-moment negotiation through strategies such as clarification, reformulation, metapragmatic explanation, and adaptive stance-taking. In addition, the reliance on decontextualized or task-based data has often overlooked the lived, emotional, and relational dimensions of communication, especially in informal, non-institutional settings where meaning is continuously shaped by context and interaction.

Another area that remains insufficiently explored concerns the pragmatic ambiguity of everyday expressions that are often assumed to be universally understood. Prior research suggests that seemingly simple utterances may carry different interpersonal meanings across cultural contexts. For instance, expressions intended as reassurance may be interpreted as dismissive, while evaluative comments may be perceived differently depending on cultural norms surrounding politeness and sensitivity (Dubtsova et al., 2020; House, 2022; House et al., 2025). Similarly, variation in refusal strategies and hospitality practices reflects broader differences in expectations regarding indirectness, obligation, and social reciprocity (Ishihara & Cohen, 2021; Spencer-Oatey, 2021). Despite their central role in everyday interaction, such expressions have received limited attention as focal sites of analysis in intercultural pragmatics, particularly in naturally occurring, informal communication.

Addressing these gaps, the present study adopts a reflexive qualitative approach to examine intercultural pragmatic misunderstandings and processes of meaning negotiation in everyday English communication. Drawing on four critical incidents from the author's lived experiences in multicultural settings, the study investigates how misunderstandings emerge, how they are interpreted by participants, and how meaning is negotiated in interaction. The analysis is informed by frameworks in intercultural pragmatics (Kecskes, 2020; Kecskes, 2022), politeness and facework (Kiyama et al., 2012; Spencer-Oatey, 2022) and pragmatic failure, providing a theoretically grounded perspective on the relationship between language, culture, and interpretation. By focusing on naturally occurring, informal encounters, this study seeks to contribute a process-oriented understanding of intercultural communication and to highlight the importance of pragmatic sensitivity and interpretive flexibility in navigating everyday multilingual interaction.

1. Intercultural Pragmatics and Meaning-Making

Intercultural pragmatics has emerged as a significant field within applied linguistics, focusing on how meaning is constructed and interpreted across cultural and linguistic boundaries. Unlike traditional pragmatics, which often assumes shared norms among interlocutors, intercultural pragmatics emphasizes the dynamic interplay between individual intentions, cultural knowledge, and contextual interpretation. In context of socio-cognitive approach, meaning is not fixed but arises through the interaction between speakers' prior experiences and the emergent context of communication (Kecskes, 2016). This perspective challenges static views of communication and highlights the fluid, negotiated nature of meaning in intercultural encounters.

In globalized contexts, English is widely used as a medium of communication among speakers with diverse linguistic backgrounds. This use of English as a shared resource introduces variability in pragmatic norms (House, 2022; Lindsey et al., 2021), as speakers draw on their own cultural frameworks to interpret meaning. Pragmatics, therefore, plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between what is said and what is meant, as it involves interpreting speaker intention, contextual cues, and shared assumptions. However, when these assumptions are not shared, communication becomes susceptible to misunderstanding.

2. Pragmatic Failure in Intercultural Communication

A central concept in intercultural pragmatics is pragmatic failure, which refers to breakdowns in communication arising from mismatches between intended and interpreted meanings. Originally conceptualized by Thomas (2006), pragmatic failure is commonly understood as the inability of interlocutors to grasp each other's intended meaning despite grammatical correctness (McGee, 2019; Shi & Li, 2019). This phenomenon highlights that communicative success depends not only on linguistic accuracy but also on the alignment of socio-cultural expectations.

Scholars have distinguished between two main types of pragmatic failure: pragma-linguistic failure (Ghanbari, 2020), which involves inappropriate linguistic forms, and socio-pragmatic failure (House, 2022**;** McGee, 2019), which arises from misunderstanding social norms and contextual appropriateness. For example, a speaker may use a grammatically correct expression that is perceived as overly direct or impolite in a given cultural context. Such mismatches often lead to unintended impressions, including rudeness, insensitivity, or lack of respect.

Recent studies have further demonstrated that pragmatic failure is not merely an error but a complex phenomenon shaped by cultural differences (Altakhaineh et al., 2024; McGee, 2019), contextual ambiguity (Ünal, 2025), and interactional dynamics (Glaser & Martínez, 2025). In cross-cultural communication, pragmatic failure can lead to communication barriers, interpersonal tension, and even conflict, underscoring its significance in both academic and real-world contexts. Importantly, these failures are not limited to language learners; even fluent speakers may encounter difficulties when operating across different cultural frameworks.

3. English as a Lingua Franca and Pragmatic Variability

The increasing use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) has further complicated the landscape of intercultural communication. In ELF contexts, communication often occurs among speakers who do not share the same first language, leading to diverse pragmatic norms and expectations. Research in ELF has shown that speakers tend to prioritize mutual intelligibility (Boonsuk, 2026; Gooskens & van Heuven, 2021) and communicative effectiveness over adherence to native-speaker norms (Konakahara & Tsuchiya, 2019) . However, this flexibility does not eliminate misunderstanding; rather, it introduces new forms of pragmatic variability.

Studies have identified common sources of pragmatic failure in ELF interactions, including inappropriate directness, misinterpretation of politeness strategies, and breakdowns in conversational flow (Altakhaineh et al., 2024; Shi & Li, 2019). These issues often stem from the transfer of culturally specific norms into a shared communicative space, where they may not be universally recognized. For instance, what is considered polite indirectness in one culture may be interpreted as evasiveness in another.

At the same time, ELF communication is characterized by a high degree of adaptability. Speakers frequently employ strategies such as repetition, clarification, and simplification to ensure understanding. This suggests that meaning in ELF contexts is not pre-determined but collaboratively constructed through interaction. Nevertheless, the processes through which such negotiation occurs remain insufficiently explored, particularly in informal, everyday interactions.

4. Politeness, Facework, and Cultural Variation

Politeness and facework are central to understanding pragmatic variation in intercultural communication. Brown, P., & Levinson's (1987) politeness theory distinguishes between positive politeness, which seeks to build rapport, and negative politeness, which emphasizes respect for autonomy. However, the realization of these strategies varies significantly across cultures, reflecting different values, norms, and expectations.

In collectivist cultures, such as those found in many Asian contexts, indirectness and modesty are often valued as markers of politeness (Leech & Larina, 2014) . In contrast, individualist cultures may prioritize clarity and directness, viewing excessive indirectness as inefficient or ambiguous (Leech & Larina, 2014; Lindsey et al., 2021). These differences can lead to misinterpretation, particularly when speakers assume that their own cultural norms are shared by others.

Facework, as conceptualized in rapport management frameworks, further highlights the relational dimension of communication. Interlocutors continuously negotiate face concerns, balancing the need to maintain harmony with the need to convey meaning effectively (House, 2022; Kiyama et al., 2012). When these expectations are misaligned, even well-intentioned utterances can be perceived negatively. For example, expressions intended as reassurance may be interpreted as dismissive, while compliments may be perceived as inappropriate depending on cultural norms surrounding sensitivity and personal boundaries.

5. Meaning Negotiation in Interaction

Meaning negotiation is a fundamental process in communication, particularly in intercultural contexts where shared assumptions cannot be taken for granted (de Silva, 2025; Warglien & Gärdenfors, 2015). It involves the collaborative effort of interlocutors to achieve mutual understanding through strategies such as clarification, repetition, reformulation, and feedback (Solodka et al., 2021). Through these strategies, speakers are able to identify and repair misunderstandings in real time, enabling communication to proceed despite linguistic and cultural differences. In this sense, communication is not a simple transmission of information, but an interactive and dynamic process of co-constructing meaning.

Despite its recognized importance, meaning negotiation has often been treated as a general or outcome-oriented phenomenon. Much of the existing research tends to focus on whether communication succeeds or fails, rather than examining the interactional processes through which meaning is negotiated

moment by moment. As a result, there remains limited understanding of how interlocutors navigate ambiguity, respond to misalignment, and adjust their communicative strategies in real-life situations. Emerging perspectives suggest that meaning negotiation is closely tied to pragmatic competence, as it requires not only linguistic knowledge but also sensitivity to context, awareness of potential misunderstandings, and the ability to adapt dynamically during interaction.

However, investigating these processes in naturally occurring communication presents methodological challenges. Compared to controlled or classroom-based data, real-life interactions are more complex, involving emotional responses, relational dynamics, and contextual variability. This complexity may explain why naturally occurring data and reflexive, narrative approaches remain relatively underrepresented in the literature, despite their potential to provide richer insights into intercultural communication.

Within EFL contexts, a growing body of research has highlighted the complexity of intercultural pragmatics, particularly in classroom settings. Studies such as Altakhaineh et al. (2024) show that pragmatic failure can occur even among learners with strong grammatical competence, thereby hindering message interpretation and disrupting communication. Similarly, Maarif (2020) points to the difficulties of meaning negotiation in the classroom, where limited vocabulary and cultural understanding often lead teachers to rely on translation, reducing opportunities for authentic pragmatic engagement. Other studies, such as Ünal (2025), demonstrate how teachers actively navigate intercultural challenges by developing context-sensitive strategies, while Fathi et al. (2025) emphasize the role of reflective and explicit instruction in enhancing learners' pragmatic competence. In a different communicative mode, Čuhlová and Demel (2024) argue that written interaction, such as email, allows for reflection and revision, thereby minimizing misunderstanding. Meanwhile, Shi and Li (2019) underscore the importance of cultural competence, showing that pragmatic failure is often rooted in cultural differences rather than purely linguistic limitations.

Taken together, these studies provide valuable insights into the role of pragmatic competence and meaning negotiation in EFL communication. However, they largely conceptualize intercultural pragmatics within structured, pedagogical, or semi-controlled environments, where participants are supported by instructional frameworks and are often aware of communicative expectations. Consequently, there is limited attention to how pragmatic failure and meaning negotiation unfold in naturally occurring, everyday intercultural interactions, where speakers rely on spontaneous judgment, personal experience, and deeply internalized cultural scripts without pedagogical support.

Addressing this gap, the present study moves beyond the classroom to examine lived intercultural encounters through a reflective, autoethnographic lens. It focuses on how meaning is negotiated, misinterpreted, and reconstructed in real-life situations, where cultural norms are not explicitly taught but implicitly enacted. By doing so, this study reconceptualizes pragmatic failure not merely as a communicative breakdown to be corrected, but as a natural, developmental, and meaning-making process emerging from the dynamic interplay of multiple cultural frameworks. In this way, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of intercultural pragmatics as an experiential and evolving practice, complementing and extending existing classroom-centered research.

RESEARCH METHOD

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a reflexive qualitative design grounded in an autoethnographic orientation (Koopman et al., 2020) to explore intercultural pragmatic misunderstandings and processes of meaning negotiation in everyday English communication. Reflexive qualitative inquiry (Mcilveen & Queensland, 2008) is particularly suitable for examining lived experiences, as it allows the researcher to critically engage with personal encounters while situating them within broader theoretical frameworks. Autoethnography, as both method and perspective, enables the integration of personal narrative with analytical interpretation (Mcilveen & Queensland, 2008), thereby providing insight into the complex, context-dependent nature of intercultural communication.

Rather than seeking generalizable patterns, this study aims to generate contextually rich, process-oriented understanding of how meaning is constructed, misinterpreted, and negotiated across cultural boundaries. This approach is consistent with recent calls in intercultural pragmatics for more experience-based and situated analyses of communication beyond controlled or experimental settings.

3.2 Research Context and Positionality

The study is situated in informal, multicultural communication contexts, where English is used as a shared medium among speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The interactions analyzed in this study involve interlocutors from the United Kingdom, Brazil, Australia, Japan, and Indonesia. These encounters occurred in naturally occurring social situations, including casual conversations, invitations, and interpersonal exchanges.

The researcher, as the sole participant and narrator, occupies the position of a non-native English speaker with extensive intercultural experience, having lived and interacted in multiple international contexts. This positionality is central to the study, as it shapes both the interpretation of events and the reflexive analysis of meaning (Yazan, 2019). Rather than being treated as a limitation, subjectivity is acknowledged as an analytical resource, enabling deeper insight into the interpretive processes underlying intercultural communication.

3.3 Data Collection

The data for this study consist of four critical incidents drawn from the researcher's lived experiences of intercultural communication. Critical incidents are defined as specific events that reveal significant moments of misunderstanding, tension, or interpretive difficulty in interaction. These incidents were selected based on their relevance to pragmatic ambiguity and their potential to illustrate culturally grounded differences in meaning-making.

The incidents were documented retrospectively through reflective narrative accounts, supported by memory, contextual reconstruction, and, where possible, contemporaneous reflections. Each incident involves a different type of pragmatic challenge, including:

(1) expressions of reassurance,
(2) comments on physical appearance,
(3) interpretation of refusal,
(4) and expectations surrounding hospitality.

The focus is not on frequency but on the depth and analytical richness of each, allowing for detailed examination of how misunderstanding emerges and evolves within interaction.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a theory-informed thematic and interpretive approach, guided by key frameworks in intercultural pragmatics. The analysis proceeded in three stages:

1. Descriptive Reconstruction

Each incident was first approached through descriptive reconstruction, in which it was carefully rewritten as a coherent narrative account. This process involved detailing the interactional context (e.g., setting, participants, and situational background), documenting the participants' actual utterances as accurately as possible, and identifying the moment and nature of the perceived misunderstanding (Braun, V., et al, 2016)**.** By reconstructing each episode in this way, the analysis preserves the sequence of events and the immediacy of the interaction, allowing the reader to see how meaning unfolded in real time. This narrative grounding also provides a rich foundation for subsequent interpretation, ensuring that the analysis remains closely tied to lived experience rather than abstract generalization (Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022).

2. Pragmatic analysis

The incidents were subsequently subjected to pragmatic analysis using key theoretical frameworks to unpack how meaning was constructed and misinterpreted (Solodka et al., 2021). This involved examining instances of pragmatic failure, particularly distinguishing between pragma-linguistic aspects (the linguistic forms used to convey meaning) and socio-pragmatic aspects (the culturally grounded norms governing appropriate language use). The analysis also drew on concepts of politeness and facework, focusing on how participants managed social relationships, protected face, and interpreted levels of directness or indirectness in interaction (H. Spencer-Oatey, 2022). In addition, insights from intercultural pragmatics, particularly the socio-cognitive perspective, were used to understand how participants relied on their prior cultural knowledge and experiences in making sense of the interaction. This stage aimed to identify points where intended meaning and interpreted meaning diverged, revealing how misalignment across cultural frames led to misunderstanding and how such moments were negotiated in context.

3. Meaning Negotiation Analysis

The final stage examined how misunderstandings were addressed and negotiated in interaction. Particular attention was given to:

(1) clarification strategies,
(2) reformulation,
(3) metapragmatic explanation,
(4) and adaptive stance-taking.

This process-oriented analysis highlights how meaning is co-constructed dynamically, rather than statically transmitted.

4. Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure qualitative rigor, this study adopts criteria of credibility, reflexivity, and transparency (Nigar, 2020; Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022). (Nigar, 2020). Credibility is established through detailed, context-rich descriptions of each incident, allowing readers to evaluate the plausibility of interpretations (Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022). Reflexivity is maintained through critical self-awareness of the researcher's role in shaping both the data and the analysis. Analytical transparency is achieved by explicitly linking interpretations to theoretical frameworks, ensuring that the analysis is grounded in established scholarship rather than purely subjective reflection.

While the study does not aim for statistical generalizability, it offers analytical generalization, providing insights that may resonate with similar intercultural contexts. The emphasis is on depth of understanding rather than breadth of coverage.

5. Ethical Considerations

All interactions described in this study are based on personal experiences and are presented with attention to anonymity and confidentiality. Identifying details of interlocutors have been omitted or generalized to protect privacy. As the study relies on self-reflective data, issues of consent are managed through the researcher's ownership of the narrative while ensuring respectful and non-harmful representation of others.

This methodological approach enables an in-depth exploration of intercultural pragmatic misunderstandings as lived, situated phenomena. By combining reflexive narrative with theoretical analysis, the study captures the complexity of meaning negotiation in everyday communication and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of intercultural interaction.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents four real-life intercultural communication incidents as narrative vignettes. Each illustrates a moment of pragmatic tension or misunderstanding, showcasing how culturally shaped assumptions influence interpretation. The vignettes are followed by embedded reflections, drawing attention to the role of politeness, facework, and pragmatic failure in the context of intercultural interactions.

Vignette 1: "Don't Worry" – Reassurance or Insult?

Setting: A one-hour boat journey from Lembata Island to Flores, Indonesia

Participants: The researcher (Indonesian speaker) and Simon (Pseudo name/ British tourist)

During the ride, Simon and I talked about his trips to various countries particularly some specific places and its culture in Indonesia. In some moments, we talked on religious practices, a topic commonly shared in Indonesian social life. I asked questions about his faith and practice, but he seemed uncomfortable. Despite this, we continued the conversation and I invited him to visit my school in Flores. He accepted.

As the boat docked at the crowded port, chaos erupted. Bus drivers aggressively approached passengers, grabbing bags to lead them toward their vehicles. To ease Simon's visible tension, I said, **"***Don't worry***."** He immediately snapped back: *"Why? I've traveled across big countries! This is a small city".*

Shocked, I fell silent, unsure why my reassurance caused offense. I feared he might cancel the school visit. I then just tried to explain that bus drivers and helpers behaved rudely what I meant as I

could. Mr. S understood. To my relief, he still came to my school and even treated me to lunch before leaving.

In Indonesian culture, "Don't worry" is often used to show care and empathy. However, for Simon, the phrase implied doubt about his competence or travel experience, threatening his face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). This illustrates a socio-pragmatic mismatch: while my intention was emotional support, Simon perceived it as condescension or a challenge to his self-image. The phrases like "Don't worry" are pragmatically loaded and culturally sensitive, especially in egalitarian or individualist societies where autonomy is valued (House et al., 2025).

Vignette 2: "You Look Fat" – Compliment or Offense?

Setting: Casual conversation in a multicultural group (Brazilian and Australian friends) in Tokyo.

Participants: Researcher, Brazilian friend (female), Australian friend (female)

After spending two weeks in Hawai, my Brazilian friend came back and we were welcoming her in front the apartment with Australian friends. I said happily and spontanously to my Brazilian friend, "You look fat." I expressed this to show my compliment. She was just smilling. Then our Australian friend quickly warned, "You shouldn't say that to a girl."

Confused, I explained that in my culture, calling someone fat can imply health or happiness. My Brazilian friend laughed it off and said she understood my intention because we were close friends. I understand this cultural norm as I studied in cross-cultural understanding class, however, in dynamic and natural conversation I could not avoid cultural expression in my first language.

In many Indonesian and some Asian countries, weight-related compliments can imply well-being. However, in Anglo-Western cultures, such comments are often considered offensive, especially toward women, due to cultural norms about body image, gender, and politeness (Baxter, 2021). Although there was no visible offense, the pragmatic force of my speech act was shaped by different cultural frames. This interaction reveals how compliments are culturally constructed and can easily become face-threatening acts across intercultural boundaries (Ishihara & Cohen, 2021).

Vignette 3: "No" to a Drink – A Misread Refusal

Setting: Visit to a Birtish lecturer's home in Makassar, Indonesia.

Participants: Researcher, a fellow student, and the host lecturer

Our lecturer kindly offered us drinks.

Lecturer: "*Would you like some drink, Anton*?"

Me: "*Yes, thanks*."

Lecturer: "*And you?" Would you like some drink?"* (to my friend)

Friend: "*No.*"

The lecturer brought me a glass of cold drink but not for my friend. Later, my friend whispered, "Actually, I wanted one too, but I thought it's impolite to say so." I shared this with our lecturer, who smiled and replied, "You said no, so I didn't bring any for you." We all laughed. Then our lecturer got a glass of drink for him.

This vignette illustrates a classic example of socio-pragmatic failure (Thomas, 1983). In some cultures, especially those valuing humility or indirectness, refusing an offer—even when one desires it—can be seen as polite. However, in Western contexts, a direct "No" is taken literally. This moment underscores the cultural variability in refusals, politeness, and inferential meaning (Taguchi, 2022). While harmless here, such misunderstandings can strain relationships or cause embarrassment in less forgiving situations.

Vignette 4: "You Invite, You Pay?" – Hospitality Expectations in Japan

Setting: Restaurant visits in Japan

Participants: Researcher and two different Japanese acquaintances and Mexican friend

During my first week in Japan, I was invited by a Japanese family to have a meal at a restaurant. The wife said, "Anton, would you like to have dinner with us on Sunday?" I interpreted this invitation through my Indonesian cultural lens, where such an invitation—especially one extended shortly after our first meeting and scheduled several days in advance—usually signals a special occasion hosted by the inviter. In my understanding, this implied not only social warmth but also the host's responsibility to cover the meal. On the day of the dinner, we enjoyed our time together and shared a pleasant conversation.

As we were about to leave the restaurant, I began to anticipate the possibility that I might be expected to pay for my own meal. To manage the uncertainty, I positioned myself strategically by standing behind them in line, quietly observing and still hoping that they would cover the entire bill. However, after they paid for their own meals, the wife gently stepped aside, giving me space, and said in Japanese, "*Anton-san, please*." At that moment, it became clear that I was expected to pay separately. I then proceeded to pay for my meal.

This brief interaction was subtle yet meaningful. There was no explicit explanation, correction, or negotiation—only a small gesture and a polite cue that carried significant pragmatic meaning. It highlighted how expectations in intercultural communication are often conveyed indirectly and must be interpreted through context rather than words alone. The experience also underscored the importance of sensitivity to situational cues and the need to remain adaptable when navigating unfamiliar cultural practices.

Later that same week, I encountered a contrasting experience that further deepened my understanding of intercultural pragmatics. A friend from Mexico, Oscar, invited me out, saying, *"Anton, would you like to have a drink with me tonight? Let's go to a nearby bar*." Drawing on my earlier experience with the Japanese family, I approached this invitation more cautiously. I brought enough money, anticipating that I might be expected to pay for my own order. Moreover, since we were both scholarship students under the Monbukagakusho program, I assumed that the invitation was based on mutual friendship rather than a host–guest relationship, and therefore implied shared responsibility. With this understanding, I positioned myself to pay for my own drink, recognizing that similar invitations can carry different meanings depending on cultural background, personal circumstances, and relational context.

However, the situation unfolded quite differently. After we enjoyed our drinks and conversation, my friend said," I 'll pay the bill, brother". He took the initiative and insisted on paying the entire bill. His action surprised me, not because of the generosity itself, but because it contrasted sharply with my recent experience. Two seemingly similar invitations—both casual, friendly, and expressed in almost identical ways—resulted in completely different expectations and outcomes.

This experience reinforced an important insight: the meaning of everyday expressions such as "inviting someone" is not fixed or universal. Instead, it is shaped by a complex interplay of cultural norms, personal habits, and situational contexts. More importantly, it highlighted that pragmatic understanding in intercultural communication requires ongoing flexibility, attentiveness to subtle cues, and a willingness to suspend one's assumptions. Rather than relying solely on prior knowledge or generalized cultural rules, effective communication depends on the ability to interpret each interaction as unique and to negotiate meaning dynamically in real time.

This episode demonstrates the ambiguity of invitations across cultures. In Indonesian sociocultural norms, an invitation usually implies a host-guest relationship, where the inviter pays as a gesture of respect or status (Spencer-Oatey, 2019). In contrast, Japanese norms around payment can vary by region, age, or relationship. This situation highlights the role of pragmatic inference and cultural script: I assumed the Indonesian model of hospitality applied, which was not always the case in Japan. It also emphasizes the importance of anticipating cultural variability even within one country or region (Solodka et al., 2021).

Cross-Case Synthesis

Across these four vignettes, the following patterns emerged:

Pragmatic Act	Cultural Misunderstanding	Underlying Cause
Reassurance ("Don't worry")	Perceived as condescending rather than supportive	Differences in facework and autonomy expectations
Compliment ("You look fat")	Interpreted as offensive in gender-sensitive cultures	Cultural norms around body image and compliments
Refusal ("No" to a drink)	Misread as literal rather than polite hedging	Contrasting norms in indirectness and modesty
Invitation to pay	Expectations mismatched regarding who should pay after invitation	Differing cultural scripts for hospitality

The four vignettes presented illustrate that even common expressions—such as "Don't worry," a compliment on physical appearance, a simple "No," or expectations regarding who pays for a meal—can be deeply ambiguous when viewed against the backdrop of differing cultural norms. These cases contribute to an emerging body of research that situates pragmatic understanding not merely in linguistic forms but in the socio-cultural contexts from which they emerge.

The first vignette, where "Don't worry" was met with irritation by a British interlocutor, underscores a key issue in intercultural pragmatics. In many Asian cultures, including Indonesia, such expressions serve as direct reassurances intended to diffuse tension and exhibit care (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Taguchi, 2022). However, in more individualistic or egalitarian cultures, such as those in the United Kingdom, the same phrase can be interpreted as undermining a speaker's autonomy or as an unnecessary overstep, thus triggering a defensive reaction (Kecskes, 2022). This divergence is consistent with research by (Abreu, P., & Lewiński, 2024), which documents how even well-intended reassurance can be construed as condescending when cultural expectations are misaligned.

The second vignette—the use of "You look fat" intended as a compliment among close friends—demonstrates how seemingly benign remarks can carry unintended negative connotations in different cultural settings. In some cultures, being "fat" may connote health, abundance, or attractiveness, whereas in many Western contexts, such language risks reinforcing negative stereotypes around body image, particularly toward women (Abdoli et al., 2024; Ishihara & Cohen, 2021). This example supports the notion that everyday speech acts are embedded with culturally specific meanings, emphasizing the need for greater awareness of how compliments and critiques are framed and received.

The third vignette, involving a refusal of a drink at a lecturer's home, reveals the inherent pitfalls of indirect communication in intercultural settings. In contexts where indirect refusals are considered polite and indicative of humility, the literal interpretation of a direct "No" can result in unintended exclusion. Research by Taguchi (2022) emphasizes that such differences in politeness strategies—particularly the tension between directness and indirectness—can lead to pragmatic failure when interlocutors operate under contrasting cultural expectations. Here, the literal interpretation of "No" by the lecturer contrasted sharply with the intended, indirect expression of desire by the friend.

The fourth vignette highlights conflicting norms surrounding invitations and hospitality. In Indonesia, an invitation often implies that the host will pay, reflecting a cultural norm of generosity and status display. However, in Japan and other cultures with more flexible or negotiated notions of hospitality, the expectation may differ significantly ((Solodka et al., 2021; Spencer-Oatey, 2019). This variation in the understanding of social rituals illustrates how implicitly held cultural scripts drive expectations in everyday communication, leading to confusion when these scripts are not shared by all participants.

The concept of pragmatic failure highlights that breakdowns in communication often stem not from a speaker's lack of grammatical knowledge, but from a mismatch in socio-pragmatic expectations—that is, differing cultural norms about how language should be used in context. As first articulated by Thomas (2006) and further developed in contemporary research by Naoko Taguchi (2021), pragmatic failure occurs when speakers transfer their own cultural assumptions about politeness, directness, or appropriateness into another language without recognizing that these norms may not align. For example, a learner may produce a grammatically correct request, yet sound overly direct or even impolite to a native speaker because the level of indirectness expected in that context differs across cultures. Such

misunderstandings are particularly salient in EFL settings, where exposure to authentic interaction is limited and pragmatic norms are often taught in decontextualized ways. Consequently, successful communication requires not only linguistic competence but also the ability to interpret and negotiate meaning within culturally situated frameworks of use.

Politeness and facework involve managing how individuals present themselves and maintain social harmony during interaction. As explained by Brown and Levinson (1987), strategies for protecting face vary across cultures. In collectivist contexts, indirectness and deference are often prioritized, while individualist cultures may value clarity and directness, leading to differing interpretations of requests, refusals, and other everyday speech acts.

In line with the work of Istvan Kecskes (2022) and T. M. and H. Spencer-Oatey (2021), intercultural pragmatics views meaning not as fixed or fully encoded in linguistic forms, but as co-constructed through interaction. In real communicative encounters, speakers draw on diverse cultural frames, prior experiences, and contextual cues, which often leads to moments of reinterpretation, repair, and negotiation of intent. Misunderstandings, therefore, are not simply breakdowns but part of the dynamic process through which participants align meaning. This perspective highlights the value of reflective and autoethnographic approaches, as they capture the nuanced, lived complexity of communication that cannot be fully understood through decontextualized models of language use.

From a practical standpoint, the study's findings have direct implications for intercultural communication training and language education. First, they highlight the need for educators and trainers to incorporate real-life, narrative-based case studies into curricula that emphasize not only grammatical competence but also intercultural sensitivity and pragmatic flexibility. Second, these findings suggest that strategies for negotiating meaning—such as clarifying ambiguous expressions and fostering reflective dialogue—are critical for mitigating miscommunication in diverse settings. Finally, embracing an autoethnographic approach in language teaching can empower learners to critically examine their own cultural assumptions and enhance their communicative competence in global contexts (Canagarajah, 2020).

One important finding of this study is that knowledge of cultural scripts does not automatically result in natural or appropriate communication. Although learners and teachers may be familiar with target-language norms—such as making requests, refusing politely, or responding to invitations—these scripts do not operate mechanically in real interaction. In practice, language use is filtered through the lens of one's first culture, which continues to shape expectations, emotional responses, and judgments of appropriateness, often at an unconscious level. Consequently, intercultural communication involves a constant interplay between prior cultural knowledge and situational demands, where multiple cultural frameworks coexist and at times compete.

Within this dynamic, pragmatic competence is not merely the possession of appropriate expressions, but the gradual internalization of communicative practices through repeated social use. These practices become habitual and intuitive, yet they may not align with the expectations of a different cultural context. As a result, pragmatic failure can occur even among linguistically proficient speakers, not due to deficiency, but because of competing cultural logics operating simultaneously. Such moments should be understood as part of a developmental and process-oriented trajectory, in which individuals become aware of mismatches, reflect on their assumptions, and adapt their communicative behavior. In this sense, pragmatic competence evolves through the flexible negotiation and expansion of multiple pragmatic repertoires, making misunderstanding an inevitable and productive dimension of intercultural communication.

Therefore, misunderstanding should be seen as a natural and inevitable consequence of intercultural interaction. It emerges when interlocutors unknowingly express meanings that extend beyond or differ from the immediate communicative context. Rather than viewing such moments as failure, they should be understood as part of the dynamic process of negotiating meaning across cultures. This perspective highlights the importance of flexibility, awareness, and reflective engagement in developing effective intercultural communicative competence.

In summary, this discussion reinforces that intercultural interactions are profoundly influenced by unspoken cultural scripts. The autoethnographic analysis presented here enriches our understanding of pragmatic failure in naturalistic settings while offering actionable insights for educators and practitioners aiming to bridge cultural divides.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how everyday English expressions are interpreted, misinterpreted, and negotiated in intercultural communication through four autoethnographic incidents. The analysis demonstrates that seemingly routine utterances—such as reassurance ("Don't worry"), appearance-related comments, refusals ("No"), and invitations—are far from neutral. Rather, they are pragmatically dense expressions shaped by culturally embedded norms, values, and expectations that influence how meaning is constructed in interaction.

The findings show that intercultural misunderstandings arise primarily from socio-pragmatic differences rather than linguistic limitations. In all four cases, the participants were capable users of English; however, communication breakdowns occurred because they operated within different interpretive frameworks. These differences were particularly evident in areas such as facework, politeness strategies, indirectness, and culturally specific expectations governing social interaction. This suggests that communicative competence extends beyond grammatical accuracy to include the ability to interpret meaning within context-sensitive cultural systems.

A further important finding is that knowledge of cultural scripts does not automatically translate into appropriate or natural communication. While individuals may be familiar with target-language norms, such knowledge does not function mechanically in real interaction. The first culture continues to play a crucial role in shaping interpretation and response, often operating unconsciously alongside newly acquired cultural knowledge. As a result, speakers may unintentionally produce meanings that do not align with the immediate context, revealing the tension between learned conventions and deeply internalized cultural frameworks.

A key insight from this study is the processual nature of misunderstanding. Rather than viewing pragmatic failure as a final outcome, the analysis highlights how meaning is continuously negotiated in interaction. Participants employed various strategies to manage misunderstanding, including implicit adjustment, clarification, mediation, and reflective reinterpretation. These processes demonstrate that intercultural communication is not merely a site of breakdown, but also a space of collaborative meaning-making in which individuals actively work to repair and align understanding.

Methodologically, this study underscores the value of autoethnographic and reflective approaches in exploring intercultural pragmatics. By foregrounding lived experience and emotional engagement, the analysis captures the subtle and dynamic dimensions of communication that are often overlooked in more controlled or decontextualized research. Such an approach allows for a deeper understanding of how individuals experience, interpret, and respond to pragmatic challenges in real-world contexts.

At a broader level, this study invites a reconceptualization of intercultural communication as an adaptive and evolving process. Misunderstanding should not be viewed solely as failure, but as an inevitable and productive aspect of interaction that emerges from the complex interplay of linguistic knowledge, cultural scripts, and situational context. Through ongoing negotiation and reflection, individuals can co-construct shared meaning across cultural boundaries.

Therefore, this study emphasizes the need to move beyond surface-level notions of language proficiency toward a more holistic understanding of communication that integrates linguistic, cultural, and interactional competence. By illuminating how meaning is negotiated in everyday intercultural encounters, it contributes to a more nuanced and practically grounded understanding of English as a global means of communication.

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