
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Common Problems Learning English Language Function Among Bangladeshi Learners of English, and Outline Teaching Implications

Shahed Shahan¹ ✉ and Dr. Agni Connor²

¹Directorate Secondary and Higher Education

²University of Aberdeen, UK

Corresponding Author: Shahed Shahan, **E-mail:** shahanshahed1983@gmail.com

| ABSTRACT

This research aims to discover the problems Bangladeshi English language learners face due to language functions while learning the English language and explore probable solutions. To reach the goal, I used a structured small-scale interview with open-ended questions to draw a picture of real-life situational language functions. The role-play activity displays some situations of greetings, refusal, request, advice, and exclamation. The interview shows how Bangladeshi people act or express their feeling in the aforementioned particular situations. It also exhibits the difference between Bangla and English language functions through a contrastive analysis. From the analysis, it is found that Bangladeshi EFL Learners have some pragmatic problems while using different types of language functions like greetings, refusals, requests, advice, and exclamations, etc. To improve their skills in these fields, some teaching techniques and certain English language cultures and sentence structures can be introduced in the curriculum.

| KEYWORDS

Problems, language function, teaching implications.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 27 January 2025

PUBLISHED: 19 February 2025

DOI: 10.61424/jlls.v3.i1.206

1. Introduction

1.1 General Introduction

The English and the Bengali are pretty different in their culture, language structure, function, and use. The cultural variation results in different language functions/speech acts. In different cultures, different language functions act differently when used in speech. In other words, some words, phrases, or clauses denote different meanings in different cultures. These dissimilarities of language functions or speech acts between the two languages (Bangla and English) create some problems among Bangladeshi English language learners. The more contrasts/dissimilarities between L1 (first language) and L2 (second language), the more it is challenging to learn L2. On the other hand, the more similarities between L1 and L2 are evident, the easier it is to learn L2 (Hummel, 2014). This paper will focus on how this contrast in language function hinders Bangladeshi EFL learners from learning English. At the same time, this essay will also make some way out of that hindrances.

1.2 Theoretical Introduction

Here, language functions or speech acts are linguistic expressions used in different situations (Fatham, Quinn & Kessler, 1992). The situations or purposes are suggestion/advice, greetings, address, apology, request, refusal, and

so on (Kamal, 2018). In a word, it serves the purpose of daily life communication (Green, 2009). A speech act may be a single word, a phrase, or a sentence. For example, for expressing a request, we use 'please' for greetings, 'good morning' for apology, and 'I am sorry.' These language functions differ from country to country, culture to culture, and language to language. Because of this functional difference, L1 learners find L2 language learning difficult. Thomas (1983) rightly said that language functions could create communication difficulties between L1 and L2 learners. It is similar to Robert Lado's (1957) contrastive approach to learning a second language. The success of second language learning depends on the similarity and dissimilarity between two different language functions, as mentioned above. The notion of this language function is related to pragmatic ability. Pragmatic ability/competence refers to linguistic knowledge in different cross-cultural/intercultural behaviours where communication problems are dealt with through social interaction (Taguchi, 2015). The disparity of language functions hampers social interaction and communication, which causes issues in learning a second language for first language learners. There are some mismatches of language functions between Bangla and English. These mismatches create some obstacles for Bengali students in their journey of learning the English language.

Kamal (2018) says like other languages, Polish, Japanese, and Chinese, the problems of second language learning in English and Bangla arise concerning language function from range, frequency, structure, formality, and politeness, which are reflected in the expressions of apology, request, suggestion, exclamation, greetings, etc. Wierzbica (1985) displayed a contrastive view of different expressions (refusal, exclamation, suggestion, request) between Polish and English. Here, she shows that the Polish way of expressing requests, suggestions, and apologies with politeness is direct, while the English is indirect. This difference of directness and indirectness is the influence of their first language, which creates problems for intercommunication between these two languages. It also creates problems in learning each other's languages. The same issues are evident in Bangla and English, as mentioned by (Kamal, 2018). Wierzbica (1985) also shows the structural differences between Polish and English.

For request, the Polish uses direct imperative sentences, but the English frequently uses interrogative sentences, which are considered ambiguous by Polish and Bengali learners. She finds this ambiguity difficult for explicit learning of a second language. Likewise, (Osuka, 2009) shows that Japanese learners use a direct way of refusal. If they want to refuse someone, they directly say, "I cannot provide you the service." But the English indirectly say, "I'm afraid but I'm unable to offer that service right now." There is a similarity between Bangladesh and Japan in terms of refusal.

On the other hand, the English consider direct refusal inappropriate and impolite. These are the different perspectives of different expressions in different situations, which create problems in learning a second language for first language learners. Thomas (1983) has given another perspective on speech acts. He says miscommunication not only happens among L1 and L2 learners but also between two people who do not share the same linguistic and cultural background. These are classified into two *Pragmatic Failures: 1. Pragma linguistic failure, which means linguistic problem (different interpretation of words, phrases, and sentence structure) 2. Socio pragmatic failure, which shows the cultural difference. For Bangladeshi EFL learners, both problems are acute as they belong to a different culture and different languages.

- * Pragmatic failure: The inability to understand what is meant by what is said in intercultural communication. Because of this pragmatic failure, an apology might be intercepted as an excuse. Suppose someone frequently gets late to arrive at office, but when he is asked for the reason of his getting late, he says, "Sorry for late, there was a huge traffic jam." Though it seems an apology, it is actually an excuse, as it shifts responsibility to traffic jam rather than his failure to attend office on time. A real apology sound more like, "I apologize for being late. I should have started earlier. Next time, I will be careful." Now, he takes responsibility rather than showing excuse.

An example of what is meant by what is said: "It is hot in here; can you crack a window?" Here, it is meant to open not to break the window.

2. Literature Review

In 1962, J. L Austin, an Oxford Philosopher, first developed the theory of speech acts (How To do Things With Words, 1962). Later on, John Searl, an American Philosopher, elaborated on the concept (Speech Acts, 1962). Apology, greetings, promise, request, advice, exclamation are known as speech acts or language functions. These languages function or speeches act differently in different cultures and societies. A language function that is appropriate in one culture might be inappropriate in another culture. Sometimes, it expresses quite the opposite meaning. For example, you are ostensibly giving suggestions, but it might act as a threat in a different culture. That is why, sometimes, language function becomes a barrier for second language learners. 98% of the people of Bangladesh speak Bangla. For this reason, they do not need to use any common language like English in their country for communication.

There are many types of research in this area in different cultures and languages of the word, but this is relatively new research in the topic of 'common problems learning English language function among Bangladeshi learners of English, and it outlines teaching implications in Bangladesh. Although there is no good literature on this topic in Bangladesh, there are pretty similar language functions in Japan, Poland, and China concerning learning the English language. For example, in research, Ono (2002) showed that the Japanese are pretty direct regarding politeness. To request someone, they say, "Please do it." The same as Bangladeshi people do. But the English use indirect locution. They say, " Could you do it?"

With regard to showing respect, there are two situations in English: **1. Formal 2. Informal.** In formal and informal situations, English speakers use different expressions, such as using different words, phrases, and sentences. On the other hand, in Bangladesh, there are three situations: **1. Informal 2. Semi-formal 3. Formal.** But then, Bangladeshi people do not use different expressions by using different words, phrases, and sentences in three different situations. They only use '**you.**' But this 'you' has three different meanings in three different situations. Such as,

1. Informal 'you' means '**tui**'
2. Semi-formal 'you' means '**tumi.**'
3. Formal 'you' means '**apni.**'

This type of language is difficult to be reflected in English (Tsuda, 2010; Baresova, 2015). To reflect this type of expression, they need to be changed as it is not identical for the non-native (Austin, 1998). Here, the second language learners need to transfer their first language to produce a second language, which may cause **pragmatic failure** (Ono, 2002).

In another study, Weirzbicka (1985) has shown a Polish culture of repeated requests similar to Bangladeshi culture. Here, a Polish host repeatedly requests an English guest to take food.

- Please take food.
- No, I can't anymore.
- Please take.
- I am sorry.
- You must.

We see the same repeated request in Bangladesh too. This repeated request is considered a threat and force in English culture, but in Poland and Bangladesh, this repeated request is deemed to be friendly and cordial. It is a **socio pragmatic failure**. This failure may create mental distance with second language culture (Thomas, 1983). **First language learners need to be adapted to these cross-cultural expressions to achieve pragmatic language competence.**

2.1 Rationale & Objective

In a study, Taguchi (2015) finds that learners who adapt to a second language culture score higher for learning the L2. Of course, the best way to adapting cross-cultural pragmatic competence is to live in a country of native speakers. But it is not possible for all the learners. **That is why it is good to make the students acquainted with L2 culture to develop their cross-cultural pragmatic competence.** Unfortunately, there is no recognized research in Bangladesh that has found the pragmatic problems of EFL learners. For this reason, this paper will explore the pragmatic language problems of five language functions: advice, apology, request, exclamation, and refusal of Bangladeshi second language learners. At the same time, it will suggest some teaching implications of the problems.

3. Data Analysis and Discussion

The research was conducted using a single interview with an advanced EFL learner in Bangladesh. For data analysis, the interview has been segmented into five parts of 5 different expressions. Each aspect of the data is analyzed qualitatively to compare with some prior works. Finally, the whole interview has been transcribed for a clear understanding of the readers (See appendix).

3.1 Greetings

The interview starts with greetings, where the interviewer greets the interviewee by saying, 'Hi, there.' Unfortunately, the interviewee is not familiar with the phrase 'Hi, there.' In Bangladesh, 'there' means a place. That is why the interviewee could not understand the meaning of this *Fixed Expression, and she wanted to know about this 'there' because she thought 'there' is a person here (See situation-1 in appendix). This lack of linguistic knowledge causes pragmatic failure. **To avoid this failure, teachers can teach native fixed expressions in the classroom. A chapter on learning 'Fixed Expression' might be added to the Secondary School English Curriculum of Bangladesh.**

3.2 Refusal

In order to make the interview more natural and realistic, the interviewer asked the interviewee for a glass of water to find out how she responded. Naturally, like an ordinary Bengali person, the interviewee directly refused to give him a glass of water (See situation-2, line-2). She did not use any politeness, expressing words or phrases like ' I am afraid, I am not able to, I am sorry ' because, in Bengali culture, it is not necessary to use extra words to show politeness. If anyone uses ' I am afraid' to refuse someone, it indicates something terrible has happened. This mismatch of language function is a kind of pragma linguistic failure (Thomas, 1983). **Teachers can create a roleplay situation to teach the learners about native speakers' languages in particular cases. A chapter on 'Pragma Linguistic Issues' could be Introduced in the Secondary School English Curriculum of Bangladesh.**

*Fixed Expression: It denotes a group of words used together for expressing a specific idea/situation/concept. Example: Hi there, so be it, long time no see, what's up, etc.

3.3 Request

Here, we find a situation where there was a repeated request. The situation is formal. The host repeatedly requests the guest to take more food, though the guest doesn't want any more food (see situation-3, line-7,9). This repeated request for carrying more food is a culture of showing politeness and friendliness in Bangladesh. On the other hand, native English speakers consider this culture of repeated requests as a threat, force, and impolite behaviour. Wierzbica (1985) depicted the exact situation of repeated requests in Polish culture, an example of sociopragmatic failure (Thomas, 1983). **To avoid this type of failure, learners need to achieve knowledge of native speakers' culture. A chapter on "Knowing English Culture" can be incorporated in the Secondary School English Curriculum of Bangladesh.**

3.4 Advice

This section of asking for advice is also a roleplay situation where the interviewer asks for suggestions for creating a particular circumstance. The interviewee is giving advice the same way as the Bengali speakers do in providing

advice. For example, she advises by saying: I think it will not be wise to tell a lie to your parents. Instead, I suggest you tell them the truth (See situation-4, line-2). However, native speakers of English provide advice in a different way, using conditionals or integrative sentences. For example, "If I were you, I would not tell a lie to my parents" or "Is it wise to tell a lie to your parents?" In their culture, direct advice is inappropriate and impolite. On the other hand, Bangladeshi people consider using conditionals and interrogative sentences as weird and inappropriate for giving advice. **A chapter on 'Different expressions in different situations' could be Introduced in the Secondary School English Curriculum of Bangladesh.**

3.5 Exclamation

Even the way of showing exclamation is different from Bangla to English. For example, Bengali people express exclamation in a flat structure of the exclamatory sentence like How beautiful the place is! (See situation-5, line-2). On the other hand, the native speakers of English represent exclamation, sometimes, by using tag questions and negative interrogative sentences like "Terrible place, isn't it?" (See situation-5, line-7). If the second language learners do not know how to express exclamation in different ways, it may create problems in learning L2 properly because there is a contrast between L1 and L2. **A chapter on 'Language Functions' could be Introduced in the Secondary School English Curriculum of Bangladesh.**

The data analysis shows some differences between the first language (Bangla) and the second language (English). The difference is sometimes about the use of an expression, words, phrases, sentences, different structures, direct and indirect use of expressions, showing politeness and impoliteness, and sometimes using social norms and behaviours. Dissimilarities in language functions create problems for second language learners. These dissimilarities between English and Bangla influence Bangladeshi learners' learning, reflecting Thomas's (1983) inappropriate pragma linguistic transfer.

4. Teaching Implications and Findings:

From the aforementioned data analysis, we find that even the advanced learners of Bangladesh have some pragmatic problems while using different types of language functions like greetings, refusals, requests, advice, and exclamations. From the findings of the small-scale interview, I suggest learning the following items of English language teaching components. Firstly, the learners will learn the ways of greetings like the native speakers. Secondly, they may acquaint with the norms and behaviours of the second language cultures. Thirdly, they will learn fixed expressions, politeness expressing phrases, different structures for some particular circumstances of the request, apology, exclamation, etc. To learn these English language items, I suggest some activities and procedures as well. First, a teacher can show a video clip of greetings, norms, and behaviours as to how the native speakers greet and behave in different situations and ask the learners to play the role of the characters shown in the video clip practically in the classroom. Next, the teacher can give some lists of fixed expressions, and some particular situations demand useful phrases to memorize at home, with which the learners will make sentences in the next class in the form of formative assessment. Finally, the teacher will make some groups among students to discuss different language functions as peer work. The groups will explore how the native speakers act and speak when showing requests, apologies, exclamations, etc. After exploring, the learners will act on the exact situations of request, apology, exclamation, etc., like Task-Based Learning. By doing these activities, the learners will find the gap between actual uses and their own knowledge (Compernelle, 2010). I suggest including the following topics in the table in the secondary curriculum.

5. Recommendations

The topics to include in the English curriculum

Sl.	Class syllabus	Topics
1.	Class Six	Fixed Expression
2.	Class Seven	Knowing English Culture
3.	Class Eight	Different Expressions in different situations
4.	Class Nine	Language Functions
5.	Class Ten	Pragma Linguistics (All together)

6. Conclusion

From this study, we conclude that both Bangla and English have different language settings and uses, leading to different types of language functions. Because of these mismatches between the two languages in different situations, Bangladeshi learners face some problems learning English as a second language. These problems cause pragmatic failures. In order to overcome these failures, Bangladeshi EFL learners need to improve their skills in certain areas of learning English. For example, they need to achieve mastery in fixed expressions, particular phrases in particular situations, the norms and behaviours of English culture, and different structures for some specific situations like an apology, request, refusal, etc. To improve their skills in these fields, teachers can use video clips, roleplay activities, formative assessments, etc. However, the research was conducted using a single interview with an advanced EFL learner in Bangladesh. Though single interview-based research cannot ensure a concrete result, I hope it will help Bangladeshi second language learners of English find out their problems and areas to be improved.

References

- [1] Austin, T. (1998). Cross-cultural Pragmatics—Building in Analysis of Communication Across Cultures and Languages: Examples from Japanese 1. *Foreign Language Annals*, 31(3), 326-346. doi:10.1111/j.1944-9720.1998.tb00580.x
- [2] Barešova, I. On the categorization of the Japanese honorific system. *Topics in Linguistics*, 15(1). doi:10.2478/topling-2015-0001
- [3] Fathman, A. K., Quinn, M. E., & Kessler, C (1992). Teaching science to English learners, grades 4-8. United States: *National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education*.
- [4] Green, Mitchell. (2007). Speech Acts. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2009 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (Ed.). Retrieved from <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2009/entries/speech-acts/>.
- [6] Hummel, K. M. (2014). Introducing second language acquisition: Perspectives and practices. *John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated*.
- [7] Kamal, S. M. (2018). Contrastive Analysis of Various Speech Acts Events in English and Bangla. *The Millennium University Journal*, 3(1), 1-10.
- [8] Lado, R. (1957). *Linguistics Across Cultures: Applied Linguistics for Language Teachers*. United Kingdom: University of Michigan Press.
- [9] Ono, R. (2002). Speech act data and the teaching of English speaking to Japanese students [Document based presentation]. Retrieved from https://www.kaisei.ac.jp/wp-content/uploads/2017/2016_55_3.pdf
- [10] Osuka, N. (2009). Japanese learners' refusal and apology problems: A pilot study. *JALT2009 Conference Proceeding*, 216-223. Retrieved from <http://jalt-publications.org/archive/proceedings/2009/E109.pdf>
- [11] Taguchi, N. (2015). Cross-cultural adaptability and development of speech act production in study abroad. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 25(3), 333-365. doi:10.1111/ijal.12073
- [12] Thomas, J. (1983). Cross-cultural pragmatic failure. *Applied linguistics*, 4(2), 91-112. doi:10.1093/applin/4.2.91
- [13] Tsuda, S. (2010). Interpersonal functions of the polite forms 'desu/masu' in Japanese conversations. *Intercultural Communication Studies*, 19(3), 81-89. Retrieved from <https://web.uri.edu/iaics/files/06SanaeTsuda.pdf>
- [14] van Compernelle, R. A. (2010). Incidental microgenetic development in second-. language teacher-learner talk-in-interaction. *Classroom Discourse*, 1(1), 66-81. doi:10.1080/19463011003750608
- [15] Wierzbicka, A. (1985). Different cultures, different languages, different speech acts. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 9(2-3), 145-178. doi:10.1016/0378-2166(85)90023-2

Note: It is a mini project written by the author and was submitted to university of Aberdeen as part of MSc in TESOL.

Appendix. Ir = Interviewer, Ie = Interviewee
--

Hello, you are my interviewee. You will contribute to my small project. Don't worry; everything will be kept in a password-protected laptop. So, can we start our interview?

Yes, you can start our interview.

Situation-1

Greetings

1. Ir: Hi, there?

2. Ie: There? Who is there?
3. Ir: There means Hi or Hello. It is an informal and very friendly greetings for the English.
4. Ie: Interesting, [laugh] anyway, Hello.
5. Ir: we will have a conversation on different situations like request, apology, suggestion/advice, refusal, exclamation etc. Are you ready?
6. Yes.

Situation-2

Refusal

1. Ir: Before starting the interview, can you please give a glass of water?
2. Ie: No, I cannot give you water now because I have to go to downstairs for bringing water.
3. Ir: It's ok. I will drink after interview.
4. ok [happy face].

The interviewer is making the interviewee understand of a situation of request. Interviewer: You will request me to give you a pen to write with.

Interviewee: Ok.

Situation-3

Request

1. Ie: Please give me a pen. I will take notes for this interview.
2. Ir: Here, you go.
3. Ie: Thank you.
4. Ir: you are welcome.

The interviewer is making the interviewee understand of a situation of roleplay to produce a picture of request in Bangladesh.

Interviewer: We will play the role of host and guest. You will play the role of host and me as guest. Suppose I have been invited to your house for a dinner. You will request me to take some extra food. Ok?

Interviewee: ok? [ha ha ha]

5. Ie: Please, take some extra food.
6. Ir: No, I cannot eat anymore because I am not a bit hungry now.
7. Ie: Please don't feel shy. You can take a few, please.
8. Ir: No, no, trust me. I can't.
9. Ie: No, you can; you have taken a very small amount of food. So, you must take a little bit food, please.
10. Ir: Oh! [Disappointed and unhappy]

Situation-4

Suggestions

The interviewer is making the interviewee understand of a situation of advice/suggestion. Interviewer: Suppose I have failed in an examination, but I cannot tell the truth of my result to my parents because they will be angry with me. In this circumstance, I will ask advice to you, and you will suggest me. Ok?

Interviewee: ok.

1. Ir: Can you suggest me how I can tell my parents That I have failed in the last examination? I have decided that I will not tell them the truth. What do you think?
2. Ie: I think, it will not be wise to tell a lie to your parents. I suggest you to tell them the truth.
3. Ir: Really?

4. Ie: Yes.
5. Ir: Thank you.
6. Ie: You are welcome.

Situation-5
Exclamation

The interviewer is making the interviewee understand of a situation of exclamation. Interviewer: Suppose we have visited a very beautiful place where we found a very beautiful bird. Now, you will express your feeling by using exclamatory sentence. Is that clear to you? Interviewee: yes.

1. Ir: You can start expressing your feeling.
2. Ie. Ok. How beautiful the place is! And look at that, what a beautiful bird it is!
3. Ir: Can you describe it by using different structure?
4. Ie: Yes, I can also that it is a very marvelous place, and the bird is very beautiful.
5. Ir: That's good any other way?
6. Ie: Hm...hmm [thinking] No.
7. Ir: How do you consider if I say terrible place, isn't it? Isn't the bird marvelous?
8. Ie: You are asking me question. It is not exclamation.
9. Ir: sometimes native speakers express note of exclamation in this way.
10. Ie: Really? [Surprised]
11. Ie: Yes.

That is the end of our conversation. Thank you for contributing to my research.