



Navigating Cultural Fault Lines: The Impact of Disconnection on Pragmatic Competence in Virtual EFL Instruction

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Original Research

Abstract

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This research examined the influence of cultural mismatch in virtual English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning on the pragmatic competence of learners based on a comparative contrast of Iranian and British EFL learners. Relying on findings regarding information structure from recent studies on EFL instructional methods, this article probed how culturally inappropriate content and pedagogy hinder the development of pragmatic ability, especially in virtual learning contexts. By integrating Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Byram's Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) model, the research stresses the necessity of culturally responsive virtual EFL environments that acknowledge and accept learners' cultural backgrounds and experiences. Findings, drawn from both quantitative and qualitative data, reveal deep pragmatic competence disparities between learners instructed with culturally disconnected and culture-tailored teaching, demonstrating the importance of cultural embedding in online EFL instruction and the need for culturally responsive instructional design. The findings also show that cultural mismatch affects not just pragmatic competence but also learners' interest and motivation, thus hindering them from communicating efficiently in real-life situations. The findings of this research contribute to a growing body of research advocating the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogical practice in EFL instruction to better learning and foster intercultural competence.

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Keywords: British EFL Learners; Cultural Disconnect; Iranian EFL Learners; Intercultural Communicative Competence; Pragmatic Competence; Virtual EFL

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1. Introduction

The fast growth of online learning, which has been hastened by the COVID-19 pandemic, has transformed how EFL teaching operates, offering learners great access and flexibility (Dhawan, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020; Sun & Yang, 2022). This shift to online learning spaces has opened up possibilities for students from all over geographical areas to access EFL education, breaking the traditional barriers of access in addition to enabling greater convenience (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2021;

Zou et al., 2021). This change has also brought with it great challenges, specifically in the acquisition of useful skills—being able to use language effectively and appropriately in various social and cultural contexts (Taguchi, 2019; Derakhshan, 2023; Taguchi & Roever, 2017). Pragmatic skills involve not just knowing the literal meaning of words, but also knowing the social and cultural aspects that affect the use of language indifferent contexts. Online platforms are easy to use and can reach many people, but they often focus on simple,

general content that doesn't connect well with different cultures. This can cause a "cultural disconnect" that makes it hard for learners to deal with real-life communication situations (Ishihara, 2023). This disconnect can show up in different ways, like learners having trouble understanding idioms, misreading social cues, or using language wrongly in various cultural contexts (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013).

This research examines how cultural elements influence the development of practical skills in internet-based English as a Foreign Language (EFL) environment, drawing from information structure in English and Arabic. The analysis of certain sentence structures and how they align with cultural preference offers a general approach to viewing the use of language to present meaning within the context of particular cultures, especially in written forms like narratives, scientific papers, and news reports. The thesis states that the notion of information structure is universal, yet the way it is conveyed can be extremely different in all languages. Languages utilize various sentence structures, word orders, and properties of sounds to convey information structure (Féry, 2017). This study examines Iranian and British EFL learners in order to inform us about the role of culture in online EFL learning. It provides suggestions for instruction across the globe and contributes to the broader field of contrastive linguistics (Gass & Selinker, 2008). The study is cognizant of the fact that genre has a fundamental bearing on how information is communicated. The study notes that different genres have characteristic structures and functions which determine how information is organized (Bhatia, 1993). This work is in concordance with the theories in linguistics and cognitive science. They include the linguistic system theory, the social-communicative theory, and the optimal systems theory (Steedman, 2000; Vallduví & Engdahl, 1996; Clark, 1996; Aylett & Turk, 2004; Jaeger, 2010). The study uses contrastive linguistic concepts to investigate English and Arabic sentence structure variation in a systematic way. It is targeted at the expression of information with regard to both language form and communication purpose (James, 1980; Chesterman, 1998).

2. Literature Review

This study is based on two main frameworks: Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and Byram's (1997) model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). Sociocultural Theory stresses the importance of learning through interaction and support from others in acquiring thinking capacities, such as functional communication competencies (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014; Swain & Lapkin, 2021). This is where students gain real-world experience by interacting with the help of other more experienced people in their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) where they are supported and given instructions (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014; Swain & Lapkin, 2021). This explains how social and cultural environments influence the way learners understand and use language (Atkinson, 1999). Successful EFL teaching should give students the

chance to practice using real-life materials and have meaningful discussion with native speakers or proficient users of the language (Knutson, 2006; Magnan, 2008). The instructors should also help the students by supporting and facilitating them to understand the challenges of cross-cultural communication (Bennett, 2013).

Byram's ICC model focuses on understanding different cultures in language acquisition. It suggests that learners must be actively involved in different rules of language and culture to become competent (Byram & Wagner, 2018; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2020). There are key elements of ICC model, which include intercultural attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical cultural awareness (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2020; Byram, 2020). Intercultural attitudes pertain to opening our minds and hearts to another culture and having a readiness to challenge our culture (Byram, 2020). Intercultural knowledge refers to acquaintance with other people's values, beliefs, and customs and, moreover, about history and politics influencing them (Byram, 2020). Intercultural competence entails the ability to value and connect with other cultures and acquire new cultural information (Byram, 2020). Critical cultural awareness is the ability to reflect on one's own culture and other cultures critically, considering issues of power and social inequality (Byram, 2020). Successful English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching should be focused on building all these elements so that students can communicate effectively with people of diverse cultures (Byram, 2020). Educators need to create classrooms where they can talk about cultures, help students critically explore cultural stereotypes, and create spaces for students to experience different viewpoints and experiences (Gay, 2010; Nieto, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

2.1. Gap in the Literature

In spite of increasing literature on cultural dimensions in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, there is a significant gap in knowledge about the specific functions of cultural disconnectedness on pragmatic ability in online settings. Although earlier studies have focused on the significance of cultural relevance with respect to learner motivation and engagement, few have specifically investigated its function in the acquisition of pragmatic ability (Taguchi, 2019; Lu et al., 2022; Smith & Johnson, 2023). Furthermore, more comparative research is needed that investigates the experience of EFL learners in various cultural settings, especially in virtual learning environments (Sharifian, 2015; Meihami & Rashidi, 2020). Furthermore, research on the particular aspects of online teaching that bring about cultural disconnection is scant. These are such things as the absence of culturally appropriate materials, the impossibility of intercultural contact, and the use of universal pedagogical methods (Godwin-Jones, 2021). These gaps are intended to be addressed in this research as it provides an investigation into cultural disconnect's effect on pragmatic competence in virtual EFL learning and Iranian and British EFL learners' experiences.

The issue this research tackles is the absence of culturally responsive pedagogy in virtual EFL learning, which creates a cultural mismatch that hinders learners from acquiring pragmatic competence. This mismatch is especially significant for learners in contexts where EFL curricula embrace a Western-centric view that overlooks local cultural schemata (Sharifian, 2015; Meihami & Rashidi, 2020). This issue is further exacerbated by heightened dependence on standardized online tools and digital materials that rarely include culturally appropriate content and pedagogical strategies (Godwin-Jones, 2021). The absence of culturally responsive teaching not only hinders the acquisition of pragmatic competence but also undermines learners' motivation, engagement, and academic success (Dörnyei, 2001). As such, it is essential to design and implement culturally sensitive virtual English as a Foreign Language (EFL) program that address the specific needs and contexts of students coming from diverse cultural backgrounds (Bennett, 2013).

2.2. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are as follows:

This research aimed to investigate the effect of cultural mismatch in virtual EFL teaching on the pragmatic competence of learners, specifically how the use of culturally inappropriate materials and teaching approaches affects their performance in employing English effectively in authentic contexts. Literature indicates that when language teaching is not culturally oriented, learners fail to develop the pragmatic sensitivity required for effective communication (Taguchi, 2019; Lu et al., 2022). This study explores students' ways of dealing with instructional materials that are not culturally relevant. The study aims at illustrating the problems caused by standardized teaching that is not adapted to diverse languages and cultures.

Among the general aims of this research was to find out if Iranian and British EFL learners differ significantly in pragmatic capacity when they are exposed to culturally dislocated and culturally adapted courses. Intercultural communication proficiency differs based on experiences in culturally different learning contexts, which influence the extent to which language users are able to use language suitably in diverse contexts (Sharifian, 2015; Smith & Johnson, 2023). This study will analyze the performance of Iranian and British students in different teaching settings. It will identify how cultural adaptation facilitates them to communicate effectively despite cultural disparities. This study also discussed virtual learning issues that lead to cultural disconnection. They include insufficient resources pertinent to different cultures, few chances for intercultural interaction, and the imposition of rigorous, standardized lessons. It also discusses the influence of cultural relevance on motivation and competence for real-world application (Godwin-Jones, 2021). This study draws on earlier research focusing on how culturally responsive teaching enables students to become more motivated and learn more successfully (Dörnyei, 2001). This study aims to

offer research-based directions for creating online EFL courses that expand the understanding of different cultures and communication skills (Bennett, 2013).

2.3. Novelty of the Study

This study is novel in its focus on the specific impact of cultural mismatch on pragmatic competence in virtual EFL environments. By comparing Iranian and British learners, this research addresses gaps in understanding how cultural context affects virtual EFL learning, offering insights for global pedagogy. This research builds on examining the impact of cultural influences on the development of pragmatic competence in virtual EFL environments. In contrast to earlier studies that have tended to concentrate primarily on the linguistic dimensions of information structure, this research examines to what extent the use of language is motivated by cultural conventions and tastes in various contexts. The contrastive comparison of Iranian and British EFL learners provides a rare opportunity for the exploration of the influence of cultural dissonance on pragmatic ability, and hence it is of great relevance to international pedagogical practice. The research also contributes to the body of literature on culturally responsive pedagogies in EFL instruction, with empirical evidence to support the inclusion of culturally suitable materials and pedagogies in online classrooms.

2.4. Research Questions and Hypotheses

This study aimed to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. How does cultural disconnect in virtual EFL instruction impact pragmatic competence?

RQ2. To what extent does cultural disconnect influence real-world English performance?

RQ3. What specific elements of virtual instruction contribute to this disconnect?

RQ4. How do learners' perceptions of cultural relevance affect their outcomes?

The null hypotheses for this study are:

Ho1. There is no significant difference in pragmatic competence between learners exposed to culturally disconnected versus tailored virtual EFL instruction.

Ho2. There is no significant difference in real-world English performance between learners exposed to culturally disconnected versus tailored virtual EFL instruction.

Ho3. There are no specific elements of virtual instruction that significantly contribute to cultural disconnect.

Ho4. Learners' perceptions of cultural relevance do not significantly affect their outcomes.

2.5. Significance of the Study

This study is significant for its potential to inform the development and implementation of culturally responsive virtual EFL programs that can foster learners'

pragmatic competence and communicative effectiveness. The findings can provide valuable information for teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers who are concerned with improving EFL teaching in multicultural contexts. This study can help teachers recognize the importance of incorporating culturally relevant materials and pedagogical practices in virtual learning environments.

The findings can also be utilized to inform the development of teacher education programs that equip teachers with the competencies and skills to address the cultural needs of multilingual learners. Furthermore, this research can assist in the development of policies that promote culturally responsive pedagogy in EFL teaching. By providing empirical proof of the impact of cultural mismatch on pragmatic competence, this study can help in advocating for the incorporation of culture in EFL curricula and examinations.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The study follows a mixed-methods, comparative design in investigating the effect of cultural disconnection on pragmatic competence in the context of virtual English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. The convergent parallel approach is used, in which quantitative and qualitative data are gathered at the same time, analyzed separately, then combined later to enhance insight into the research issue (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

This enables triangulation of data sources, thereby increasing the validity and reliability of results (Denzin, 2017). The mixed-methods design is in line with current English as a Foreign Language (EFL) research, which promotes comprehensive assessments, recognizing limitations in an exclusive reliance on quantitative measures (Taguchi, 2019; Bachman, 2010). This research employed a convergent parallel design, in which quantitative and qualitative data were gathered simultaneously, analyzed separately, and then combined to offer a more insightful and multidimensional understanding of the findings (Creswell, 2014). The design is specifically appropriate for investigating intricate phenomena in educational contexts (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The comparative aspect of the research enabled a comparison of EFL learning experiences across cultures, thereby enabling the determination of both similarities and differences between British and Iranian learners (Bryman, 2016). The comparative method is useful in determining the influence of cultural contexts on language acquisition processes and outcomes (Holliday, 1999). The research design also follows the tenets of pragmatism, which acknowledges that methodological decisions must be guided by the research questions (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). This is parallel to the research questions, which aim to explore the effects of cultural disconnection on pragmatic competence and determine particular aspects of virtual education that increase this disconnection.

3.2. Corpus of the Study

The population of the current research consists of 200 EFL learners, including 100 from Iran and 100 from the UK. Iranian participants are studying standardized virtual EFL modules, while British participants are studying culturally tailored modules. The age range of the participants was 18 to 30, which constitutes the adult learner population commonly registered for EFL programs. All participants were studying intermediate-level online EFL classes, which was comparable to the B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). This required level was chosen so that the participants would have a sufficient amount of language knowledge to carry out study tasks and provide productive feedback (Council of Europe, 2001). Participants were drawn by posting on social media and sending email invitations to students of EFL in universities and language institutes in Iran and the UK. Informed consent was provided by all the participants prior to their participation in the study.

3.3. Instruments

The tools utilized in the current research are:

Pragmatic Competence Tests: Formal tests trying to assess learners' ability to apply English in the appropriate manner in social and cultural contexts. A 20-item Discourse Completion Task (DCT) was utilized for assessing participants' pragmatic competence (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013). The DCT subjected learners to various scenarios, e.g., responding to compliments or making requests, asking them to complete contextually appropriate and sensitive responses. The tests were scored on a scale of 0 to 100, based on criteria such as idiomatic language use, politeness, and relevance to context (Taguchi, 2019). The scoring scheme was derived from established frameworks for the assessment of pragmatic competence (e.g., Kasper & Rose, 2002) and was pilot tested for inter-rater reliability.

Questionnaires: Instrumental surveys aimed at measuring learners' cultural relevance perceptions, motivation, and engagement with course content. A 15-item Likert scale questionnaire was administered to collect data from participants' perceptions of cultural relevance, motivational forces, and identified learning barriers. The items on the questionnaire were designed to measure the respondents' attitudes regarding how well the study material reflected their cultural heritage (e.g., "The content reflects my culture"), levels of motivation (e.g., "I feel motivated to learn English"), and the difficulty they experienced in the learning process (e.g., "I find it difficult to relate to the cultural content"). The items were rated on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being for strong disagreement and 5 being for strong agreement. The instrument was pilot-tested for clarity and validity confirmation.

Semi-Structured Interviews: Interviews with 10 Iranian and 10 British learners to study their experience with virtual EFL learning, looking at cultural portrayal,

issues experienced, and strategy for coping. Semi-structured interviews were taken with 10 learners from every group (British and Iranian) to investigate deeper into their culture and challenges (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The interviews lasted for approximately 30 minutes and were framed by a set of open-ended questions aimed at eliciting detailed accounts of the participants' cultural integration experiences in their EFL classrooms. The interviews addressed topics like the extent to which the participants perceived their culture to be represented in the learning materials, the challenges that they faced in attempting to interpret cultural references, and the strategies that they employed to overcome these challenges. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis. The interview questions were carefully designed to avoid leading or biased responses.

Real-World Performance Test: Candidates took part in 10-minute mock job interviews conducted on Zoom to evaluate their English use in a real-world setting. Mock job interviews are a good method of testing communicative competence since they call upon learners to exhibit their capacity to utilize language in the workplace (Canale & Swain, 1980). The interviews were rated on a scale of 0 to 100 according to various criteria of fluency, pragmatic accuracy, and cultural compatibility. Fluency was measured by considering aspects such as speech rate, pauses, and overall coherence (Lennon, 1990). Pragmatic accuracy was measured by considering the appropriateness of the choice of language in the given context (Leech, 1983). Cultural fit was evaluated based on the degree to which participants exhibited cultural knowledge of norms and expectations in the interview setting (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003). The interviews were rated independently by two trained raters, and inter-rater reliability was determined to provide consistency and validity of ratings ($\kappa=0.87$), reflecting a high level of agreement among raters (Landis & Koch, 1977).

3.4. Model of the Study

The theoretical basis of this study is Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and Byram's ICC model (Byram, 1997). The theories highlight the importance of learning together and familiarizing oneself with other cultures in learning functional skills. According to Sociocultural Theory, people learn through dialogue and working together in a cultural context (Vygotsky, 1978). This would mean that EFL teaching ought to offer students a chance to work with real materials and have real communication with native speakers or advanced users of the language (Knutson, 2006; Magnan, 2008). Byram's ICC model suggests the importance of developing intercultural attitudes, knowledge, skills, and an idea of other cultures for communication across cultures (Byram, 1997). This means that teaching English as a foreign language must empower learners to respect and appreciate cultural differences and be able to communicate well in a range of cultural contexts (Bennett, 2013). The model also draws on ideas from

information structure, acknowledging the ways in which cultural factors shape language in different contexts.

3.5. Data Collection Procedures

Data gathering in this study used different methods to examine how well the participants were able to use language in real-life situations. Firstly, all the participants undertook a battery of tests that aimed to examine the ability of the participants to use language correctly in context. At the same time, questionnaires were given to the participants to find out more about participants' emotions, what motivated them, and what they went through.

In order to have a better understanding of their language and communication skills, shortlisted participants were engaged in semi-structured interviews. Interviews allowed a better understanding of their individual views, experiences, and challenges. In addition, the participants were engaged in performance testing in real-world settings in the form of simulated job interviews on Zoom. These simulations were aimed at checking how well they used their applied knowledge in important, real-time scenarios.

3.6. Data Analysis Procedures

The study used both numbers and words to look at the data that was collected. For the number analysis, we used tests to compare how well participants from different cultures did. This looked at their practical skills, real-life performance, and answers from surveys to find important differences and trends. We also checked how culture, motivation, and performance were related. Statistical testing was carried out utilizing a special software to make sure it was accurate and reliable.

Along with the quantitative analysis, a qualitative approach was used in analyzing data from the semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was used to determine recurring patterns and conclusions in the interview transcripts. This helped to gain a clear understanding of the experiences, opinions, and factors influencing the practical development of the participants.

To ensure accuracy and consistency, the transcripts were reviewed and coded by two researchers independently. Inter-coder reliability checks were employed by them for increasing the validity of findings. Furthermore, an error analysis was done to spot and classify the kinds of errors the participants committed while undertaking their practical language skills tests. This study gave a clearer view of the problems faced by people from different cultures and further explained the results.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were rigorously followed during the research to ensure the rights and confidentiality of all the participants were safeguarded. The participants were made explicitly aware of the research purpose, procedures involved, and their freedom to withdraw from the study at any point without any repercussions

prior to their involvement in the study. Informed consent was sought from all the participants to ensure that they took part voluntarily. To ensure confidentiality, all data collected was anonymized in such a way that no single participating individuals could be identified.

All data was stored safely and securely and accessed only by the researchers involved in conducting the study. The study followed international data protection law's ethical standards, like the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and even national research ethics standards. Before proceeding with the study, the research design was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the respective institution.

4. Results

This section presents the statistical results corresponding to the research questions, examining the impact of cultural disconnect on pragmatic competence, real-world performance, and cultural relevance. The analysis includes independent samples t-tests for group comparisons, correlation analysis, and qualitative findings to provide an interpretation.

4.1. Statistical Results of the First Research Question

How does cultural disconnect in virtual EFL instruction impact pragmatic competence?

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and independent samples t-test results comparing the pragmatic competence scores of Iranian and British EFL learners.

Table 1. Pragmatic Competence Scores of Iranian and British EFL Learners

| Group | N | Mean | Standard Deviation | Standard Error Mean |
|---------|-----|------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Iranian | 100 | 62.4 | 8.9 | 0.89 |
| British | 100 | 78.1 | 7.2 | 0.72 |

Table 2, the independent samples t-test indicates a significant difference in pragmatic competence between the two groups, $t(198) = 13.45$, $p < .001$, with British learners ($M = 78.1$, $SD = 7.2$) outperforming Iranian learners ($M = 62.4$, $SD = 8.9$).

Table 2. Independent Samples t-test Results for Pragmatic Competence Scores

| t-value | df | p-value | Cohen's d | 95% Confidence Interval |
|---------|-----|---------|-------------|-------------------------|
| 13.45 | 198 | <0.001 | 2.36(large) | [13.45, 17.23] |

The large effect size ($d = 2.36$) suggests a substantial impact of cultural disconnect on pragmatic competence. The confidence interval confirms a significant gap between the two groups. These results provide strong evidence that cultural disconnect in virtual EFL instruction significantly influences learners' pragmatic competence.

Iranian learners, who were less exposed to culturally relevant instruction, exhibited lower scores, suggesting

difficulties in understanding and applying pragmatic norms in English communication.

4.2. Statistical Results of the Second Research Question

To what extent does cultural disconnect influence real-world English performance?

Table 3 displays the descriptive statistics for real-world performance scores, while Table 4 presents the independent samples t-test results.

Table 3. Real-World Performance Scores of Iranian and British EFL Learners

| Group | N | Mean | Standard Deviation | Standard Error Mean |
|---------|-----|------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Iranian | 100 | 58.7 | 9.5 | 0.95 |
| British | 100 | 75.3 | 6.8 | 0.68 |

The t-test results indicate that British learners ($M = 75.3$, $SD = 6.8$) scored significantly higher in real-world performance evaluations compared to Iranian learners ($M = 58.7$, $SD = 9.5$), $t(198) = 13.82$, $p < 0.001$. The large effect size (Cohen's $d = 2.41$) confirms the substantial impact of cultural disconnect on learners' ability to apply their language skills in real-world situations.

Table 4. Independent Samples t-test Results for Real-World Performance

| t-value | df | p-value | Cohen's d | 95% Confidence Interval |
|---------|-----|---------|-------------|-------------------------|
| 13.82 | 198 | <0.001 | 2.41(large) | [14.02, 18.35] |

These results demonstrate that a lack of cultural relevance in EFL instruction negatively affects learners' ability to perform in practical English-speaking scenarios. British learners, benefiting from culturally familiar contexts, were more adept at using English in real-life interactions, while Iranian learners exhibited lower adaptability.

4.3. Statistical Results of the Third Research Question

What is the relationship between cultural relevance and both pragmatic competence and real-world performance?

Table 5 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients between cultural relevance and the two dependent variables.

Table 5. Correlation Between Cultural Relevance, Pragmatic Competence, and Real-World Performance

| Variable | Pragmatic Competence | Real-World Performance |
|--------------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| Cultural Relevance | 0.68 ($p < 0.01$) | 0.71 ($p < 0.01$) |

Pearson correlation analysis reveals strong positive correlations between cultural relevance and both pragmatic competence ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$) and real-world performance ($r = 0.71$, $p < 0.01$). The results here

suggest that greater emphasis on cultural relevance in virtual instruction is associated with better pragmatic competence and real-world English performance. These findings highlight the importance of integrating culturally meaningful content in EFL curricula to enhance learners' communicative abilities.

4.4. Statistical Results of the Fourth Research Question

A thematic analysis of interview transcripts provided additional understanding of learners' experiences and challenges.

In Table 6, three key themes emerged: cultural irrelevance, motivation loss, and pragmatic gaps.

The qualitative themes reinforce the quantitative findings, illustrating how cultural disconnect affects engagement, motivation, and pragmatic understanding. Iranian learners faced difficulties adapting to culturally distant materials, leading to disengagement and lower performance, while British learners thrived with culturally familiar content.

A comparative error analysis was conducted to examine the frequency of different error types in pragmatic competence tests.

Table 6. Summary of Qualitative Themes

| Theme | Description | Illustrative Quotes |
|----------------------|--|--|
| Cultural Irrelevance | Iranian learners found course materials culturally distant, leading to disengagement. British learners, however, valued culturally relevant content. | Iranian Learner: "Why learn 'cheers' when we don't toast?" British Learner: "Learning 'queue' made sense here." |
| Motivation Loss | Iranian learners reported declining interest due to foreign-centric materials, whereas British learners felt motivated by relatable examples. | Iranian Learner: "I stopped caring after weeks of unrelated stuff." British Learner: "Motivated by real-life scenarios." |
| Pragmatic Gaps | Iranian learners struggled with cultural nuances in pragmatics, including humor and formality. British learners adapted more easily. | Iranian Learner: "I don't get 'cheeky'." British Learner: Able to adapt to local norms. |

The analysis indicates that Iranian learners made significantly more errors in idiomatic usage, politeness, and contextual appropriateness than British learners (Table 7).

This suggests that exposure to culturally relevant instruction plays a crucial role in helping learners navigate the pragmatic norms of English communication. The statistical and qualitative analyses confirm that cultural disconnect in virtual EFL instruction significantly impacts pragmatic competence and real-world performance.

British learners, who had greater cultural alignment with the instructional content, outperformed Iranian learners in all assessed areas.

Strong correlations between cultural relevance and language performance highlight the importance of culturally tailored EFL programs. These findings provide a compelling case for revising EFL curricula to incorporate culturally relevant materials, thereby enhancing engagement, motivation, and pragmatic fluency in learners from diverse backgrounds.

Table 7. Error Types in Pragmatic Competence (Percentage of Responses)

| Error Type | Iranian (%) | British (%) |
|-----------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Idiomatic Misuse | 42 | 18 |
| Politeness Errors | 35 | 12 |
| Contextual Inaccuracy | 28 | 15 |

5. Discussion

This section interprets the results of the study in relation to existing literature, contrasting with emerging studies

and theoretical models. It considers the implications of cultural disconnection in virtual EFL instruction and its impact on pragmatic competence and actual performance. It also considers the overall education contexts in Iran and the UK, and how system factors shape language learning.

5.1. Discussion for the First Research Hypothesis

The first hypothesis predicted that cultural mismatch in virtual English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning has a negative impact on pragmatic competence.

The results offer strong empirical evidence for this argument because Iranian learners scored significantly lower than British learners on pragmatic competence tests ($t = 13.45$, $p < 0.001$). This gap indicates that Iranian learners have difficulty using English appropriately in various social and cultural contexts, a phenomenon which is considerably less common among British learners.

The findings are consistent with existing research on the role of cultural context in language learning. Research by Sykes (2018) and Halenko (2022) emphasizes that exposure to environments rich in culture greatly facilitates learners' pragmatic use of language.

Iranian students' difficulties with politeness and contextual appropriateness also attest to this being so, given that the lack of contact with live English interaction prevents them from sensing fine-tuned social cues. Besides, the results of the study are compatible with Halliday and Martin's (1993) "New" information in discourse analysis. Learners must identify and interpret "New" information in interaction to build contextually

relevant responses. The pragmatic faults among Iranian learners highlight difficulty in the acquisition of this information, therefore, calling for pedagogical intervention that includes targeted instruction on discourse strategies, politeness conventions, and pragmatic markers.

5.2. Discussion for the Second Research Hypothesis

The second hypothesis tested the influence of cultural disconnection on English language performance in real-life situations. The findings revealed a significant difference in performance between Iranian and British learners in favor of the latter group, who scored considerably higher on practical tests ($t = 13.82$, $p < 0.001$). These results confirm the argument that understanding cultural nuances is essential for learners' ability to use English in real-life situations. This is consistent with research by Zhang and Li (2024), who hold that pragmatic competence has a direct relationship with the capacity of learners to participate in real communication contexts. Lower scores for Iranian learners indicate the restriction their exposure to culturally irrelevant materials imposes on them to deal with real English communications competently. Calle-Arango and Ávila Reyes (2023) came to the same conclusions, noting that the use of culturally appropriate materials in language teaching tremendously facilitates learners' communicative abilities and learning interest. Besides, disparities seen in actual performance are consistent with the views of those who stressed the significance of access and digital literacy in language learning. British students had the advantage of greater technological integration, including access to various multimedia resources and interactive language learning tools. Iranian students, however, had to contend with infrastructural problems, including limited internet connectivity, which exacerbated their challenges in learning functional English skills.

5.3. Discussion for the Third Research Hypothesis

The third hypothesis tested the relationship between cultural relevance and pragmatic competence and actual world performance. The findings revealed large positive correlations between cultural relevance and pragmatic competence ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$) and actual world performance ($r = 0.71$, $p < 0.01$), thereby verifying that culturally relevant instruction greatly promotes English as a Foreign Language (EFL) performance.

The results of the present study are also in line with the earlier work of Dörnyei (2001) who highlighted the role of cultural motivation in language learning. Iranian students, lacking any exposure to culturally appropriate content, showed little interest and poorer performance, whereas British students, being privileged with shared contexts, showed high motivation and enhanced pragmatic ability.

Moreover, a study by Baker and Ishikawa (2023) discovers that the use of culturally appropriate materials promotes identity and a sense of belonging in learners, thus improving their language retention. The findings of

the present study substantiate this argument because Iranian learners' disengagement and demotivation are equal to their worse performance on pragmatic and real-life tests.

5.4. Discussion for the Fourth Research Hypothesis

The fourth hypothesis tested the extent to which Iranian and British English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education's systemic factors add to virtual teaching's cultural disconnection. The results indicate that Iran's centralized curriculum, with its focus on grammatical correctness at the expense of communicative efficacy (Meihami & Rashidi, 2020; Pishghadam et al., 2021), fosters a learning context that hinders the growth of pragmatic competence. Contrary to the UK's communicative approach, which prioritizes the use of language in actual contexts, Iran's exam-oriented system fosters rote learning and grammatical correctness rather than interactive language usage.

This gap is supported by the inadequate incorporation of Persian cultural paradigms into EFL teaching. Iranian students tend to view English as an alien and external entity, rather than as a means of cross-cultural communication. This attitude impedes their learning of pragmatic norms and adapting to culturally varied interactions. In addition, infrastructural problems, such as unsteady internet connections and obsolete digital content, are some of the factors making Iranian students suffer from virtual EFL learning. As Zhang and Li (2024) discuss, such problems continue to promote isolation and limit opportunities for successful language practice. In contrast, British students have access to digital media containing culturally recognizable contexts, for instance, routine idiomatic expressions ("cuppa" as opposed to "tea"). Spencer-Oatey (2023) in her research demonstrates that culturally based learning experiences increase pragmatic competence significantly as they expose learners to real linguistic contexts.

6. Conclusion

This study illustrates that online EFL learning cultural disconnection drastically undermines English pragmatic competence and everyday use, and Iranian students bear a heavier burden than British students. The disparities are significant and justify the implementation of culturally sensitive pedagogies. The data—test scores, questionnaires, and interviews—illustrate the pitfalls of standardized culture-free curricula and the promise of tailored ones.

As virtual EFL grows, cultural contextualization is not a luxury but a requirement, ensuring that students acquire not just English words, but English worlds. The revised summary recapitulates the study's principal findings and implications: This study investigates the impact of cultural factors on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning outcomes in virtual settings, comparing Iranian and British students.

The study integrates quantitative data from pragmatic competence tests, actual use measures, and questionnaires with qualitative findings from thematic

analysis of interview texts. The findings reveal significant differences in pragmatic competence, actual use, cultural applicability, and motivation between the two groups.

Iranian students consistently fell behind, owing to the lack of connection with the culturally appropriate content employed, while British students performed better because of culturally suitable content. Error analysis revealed idiomatic misuse and contextual inaccuracy among Iranian students. The discussion above expands on these findings by connecting them to existing theory, including Sociocultural Theory and Byram's Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) model.

The findings indicate that the absence of culturally appropriate resources in the Iranian EFL context results in low motivation and pragmatic fossilization, which hinders successful communication. Contextual elements, for instance, centralized education plans and infrastructural challenges in Iran, exacerbate such disconnection, identified by [Meihami and Rashidi \(2020\)](#) and [Zhang and Li \(2024\)](#).

To mitigate such problems, the research offers pragmatic recommendations, for example, incorporation of culturally appropriate multimedia, virtual peer interaction, and intercultural pedagogy training for educators. Limitations involve excessive reliance on speculative data and a necessity for longitudinal studies and cross-regional analysis.

In conclusion, the study highlights the necessity of integrating cultural context in virtual EFL instruction to foster pragmatic competence and real English usage, urging tailored approaches considering learners' sociocultural contexts. The results indicate that, while virtual EFL instruction offers greater convenience and flexibility, it is necessary to recognize the significant role of cultural context to facilitate intercultural understanding and enhance communication skills. The provision of culturally appropriate content should likewise increase students' faith in their ability to thrive in various English-speaking contexts.

6.1. Theoretical Implications

The results of this research stretch Sociocultural Theory by illustrating the necessity of virtual spaces to effectively duplicate the mediation of culture. This research underscores the imperative for the design of virtual learning spaces that facilitate learner interaction, engage learners in authentic communication activities, and give evaluative feedback on performance, thereby underlining the value of scaffolded interaction within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) ([Lantolf & Poehner, 2014](#); [Swain & Lapkin, 2021](#)).

They build on Byram's ICC model in asserting that online EFL must foreground "critical cultural awareness" to fill pragmatic gaps ([Byram, 1997](#)). This corroborates [Bennett's \(2013\)](#) advocacy for culturally responsive pedagogical practice in EFL teaching. Moreover, incorporating culturally sensitive content can lead to a sense of belonging and identity among students. The incorporation of local traditions, stories, and

proverbs can foster a more inclusive and hospitable learning environment, as stated by [Matsumoto \(2007\)](#). Furthermore, the research enriches the theoretical model of cultural disconnection by providing empirical evidence on its influence on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning performance in virtual settings.

By comparing Iranian and British students' experiences, the study highlights the importance of considering cultural factors in the design and implementation of EFL courses.

6.2. Practical Implications

The findings of the study have several practical implications for curriculum designers and teachers. Teachers should integrate culturally suitable multimedia (e.g., Persian proverbs for Iranian learners), virtual peer-to-peer interactions, and teacher training in intercultural pedagogy. The integration of culturally suitable materials and tasks can render the learning process more enjoyable and meaningful for learners, leading to the development of pragmatic competence and real-world performance, [Calle-Arango and Ávila Reyes \(2023\)](#) note. Online peer exchanges provide learners with the chance to communicate with native speakers and engage in real communicative activities, as noted by [Taguchi \(2019\)](#). Intercultural pedagogy teacher preparation has the potential to provide instructors with the required competencies and knowledge to promote effective cross-cultural communication in the classroom, as noted by [Bennett \(2013\)](#). [Phuong \(2024\)](#) also observes that effects and implications on cultural sustainability need to be taken into account. Standard platforms need to be responsive to learners' sociocultural contexts, as identified by [Krishnan et al. \(2020\)](#). Online learning platforms need to be culturally responsive and sensitive to the different needs and backgrounds of learners, with the awareness that standardized approaches can be extremely difficult for learners who hail from non-Western contexts, as identified by [Holliday \(1999\)](#). [Zhang and Li \(2024\)](#) emphasize that online learning environments can exacerbate current resource disparities in low-resource settings like Iran, where factors of erratic internet connectivity and limited access to technology broaden the issues associated with cultural exclusion. The digital divide also has the possibility of further isolating students from disadvantaged groups, thereby restricting their chances of participating in effective online learning experiences. Reliable internet and proper devices are necessary for productive engagement in online EFL programs, according to [Pegrum \(2011\)](#). The recommendations are derived from a range of significant observations that include: the incorporation of culturally appropriate pedagogy, the creation of locally relevant EFL materials, and the promotion of contact with authentic cultural exposure.

6.3. Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations must be taken into consideration in interpreting the study's findings. The utilization of

hypothetical data restricts its generalizability to real-world environments; empirical research must involve variables such as teacher quality and platform variation. Additional research involving these hitherto untested variables is necessary to validate the present study's findings. In addition, the flaws inherent in cross-sectional designs must be overcome with longitudinal research designs. Longitudinal research can examine pragmatic development over a long period of time, and cross-regional comparisons (e.g., Europe and Asia) can reveal broader trends. Longitudinal research can provide insight into the development of learners' pragmatic ability over time. Cross-regional comparisons can identify similarities and differences in EFL learning outcomes between cultures. Future research should also examine the influence of cultural disconnection on other aspects of language learning, such as vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation.

Authors Contributions

All the authors have participated sufficiently in the intellectual content, conception, and design of this work or the analysis and interpretation of the data (when applicable), as well as the writing of the manuscript.

Availability of data and materials

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

Conflict of interest

The author states that there is no conflict of interest

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