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Intercultural Politeness and German Language Acquisition among Saudi Learners

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Abstract

This study focused on the relationship between intercultural politeness and German language learning experiences for Saudi university students in Riyadh in terms of (Pragmatic competence, sociopragmatic transfer, intercultural communication differences, and perception of intercultural pragmatics instruction). The current study used a cross sectional quantitative survey design. Astructured five pointlikert scale questionnaire was used to collect the data from 128 Saudi university learners taking formal German language courses in Riyadh. Purposive sampling was used according to three criteria: 1) Saudi nationals, 2) current enrollment in a university-level German language course, and 3) previous experience in learning German long enough to answer questions on the topic of Intercultural communication and politeness. Secondary school students and those who did not have any formal experience in learning German were not included in the sample.The descriptive findings showed that the participants' perception of the politeness norms of the Saudi Arabic language, the differences in communication style, and the sociocultural aspects of their communication experiences with Germans were found to be relevant to their experiences of communicating in German. The participants also reported that their awareness of the pragmatic conventions of German language, authentic communication, and instruction in intercultural pragmatics could facilitate their ability to comprehend and use German appropriately. The findings support the general conclusion that the development of second- and foreign-language pragmatics is not just about acquiring language knowledge but also communicative knowledge, which means that greater attention should be paid to contrastive pragmatic awareness, real communicative scenarios, and a conscious dialogue of politeness and sociocultural norms in German language programmes for Saudi learners.

Keywords: Intercultural politeness, German language acquisition, Saudi learners, pragmatics, face-work.

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اللباقة بين الثقافات واكتساب اللغة الألمانية لدى المتعلمين السعوديين

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ملخص:

ركزت هذه الدراسة على العلاقة بين "اللباقة عبر الثقافات" وتجارب تعلم اللغة الألمانية لدى طلاب الجامعات السعوديين في الرياض، وذلك من حيث: الكفاءة التداولية (البراغماتية)، والنقل التداولي الاجتماعي، والاختلافات في التواصل عبر الثقافات، وتصورات الطلاب حول التدريس المتعلق بالتداولية عبر الثقافات. اعتمدت الدراسة منهجية المسح الكمي المقطعي، واستُخدمت استبانه مقننة تعتمد مقياس "لبكرت" الخماسي لجمع البيانات من 128 دارساً جامعياً سعودياً يتلقون دورات رسمية في اللغة الألمانية في الرياض. وقد استُخدمت عينة قصديه وفقاً لثلاثة معايير: 1) أن يكون المشاركون مواطنين سعوديين، 2) أن يكونوا مسجلين حالياً في دورة لغة ألمانية على المستوى الجامعي، و3) أن تكون لديهم خبرة سابقة في تعلم الألمانية تكفي للإجابة عن أسئلة تتعلق بموضوع التواصل عبر الثقافات واللباقة. ولم تشمل العينة طلاب المدارس الثانوية أو أولئك الذين ليس لديهم أي خبرة رسمية في تعلم اللغة الألمانية. وأظهرت النتائج الوصفية أن تصورات المشاركين حول معايير اللباقة في اللغة العربية (اللهجة السعودية)، والاختلافات في أساليب التواصل، والجوانب الاجتماعية والثقافية لتجاربهم التواصلية مع الألمان، كانت ذات صلة وثيقة بتجاربهم في التواصل باللغة الألمانية. كما أفاد المشاركون بأن وعيهم بالأعراف التداولية للغة الألمانية، والتواصل الواقعي، والتدريس في مجال التداولية عبر الثقافات، من شأنه أن يعزز قدرتهم على فهم اللغة الألمانية واستخدامها بشكل ملائم. وتدعم هذه النتائج الاستنتاج العام القائل بأن تنمية الكفاءة التداولية في اللغة الثانية أو الأجنبية لا تقتصر على اكتساب المعرفة اللغوية فحسب، بل تشمل أيضاً اكتساب المعرفة التواصلية؛ مما يعني ضرورة إيلاء اهتمام أكبر للوعي التداولي المقارن، وسياقات التواصل الواقعية، والحوار الواعي حول معايير اللباقة والأعراف الاجتماعية والثقافية ضمن برامج تعليم اللغة الألمانية للدارسين السعوديين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اللباقة بين الثقافات، اكتساب اللغة الألمانية، المتعلمون السعوديون، التداولية (البراغماتية)، استراتيجيات الحفاظ على "الوجه".

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© نُشر هذا البحث وفقًا لشروط الرخصة Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)، التي تسمح بنسخ البحث وتوزيعه ونقله بأي شكل من الأشكال، كما تسمح بتكييف البحث أو تحويله أو الإضافة إليه لأي غرض كان، بما في ذلك الأغراض التجارية، شريطة نسبة العمل إلى صاحبه مع بيان أي تعديلات أُجريت عليه.

1.1 Background to the study

Language learning has been recognized as a complex sociocultural phenomenon that involves more than just learning grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, it also involves pragmatic competence and intercultural communicative competence (ICC) (Ahmed, 2020; Pholsward&Boonprasitt, 2015). Recent trends in applied linguistics mean that the concept of communication is seen as a cultural phenomenon and learners are expected to learn not only linguistic knowledge, but culturally appropriate communicative competence in various social contexts (Razi & Tekin, 2017). This shift is a part of a global trend in which the interpretation and application of sociocultural norms, which are present in language use, have been acknowledged as a crucial aspect of successful communication in a second or foreign language (HS, 2019; Kok & Mehar Singh, 2022).

Learning a foreign language is a process of knowledge acquisition of both the language and the appropriate interpretation and production of it in specific social contexts. For L2 pragmatic competence research, the concept of interlanguage pragmatics is significant, as it is able to differentiate between pragmatic knowledge and grammatical knowledge and it also acknowledges that both kinds of knowledge influence each other in L2 pragmatic competence development (Chang, 2011). While the concept of face and face-threatening acts is highlighted in Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, the importance of understanding how such communicative acts are evaluated in specific social relationships and contexts should not be taken for granted, and other research has focused on this aspect of politeness (e.g., Spencer-Oatey, 2002, 2022).

The Saudi context is not the regular context of the study of German as a regular subject in the Saudi public-school curriculum, but rather concerns the target group of Saudi university students learning German in a university setting or other formal language-learning context. Such a distinction is significant as in Saudi Arabia, German learning is made available through special higher education programmes and language institutions, such as the German Language Program in the College of Language Sciences at King Saud University and the Goethe-Institut's German courses in Riyadh at various levels (King Saud University, 2026; Goethe-Institut Saudi Arabia, 2026).

Relevance of the German language learning has also in the context of Saudi Arabia's focus on human-capital development, lifelong learning, and aligning educational outcomes with labour-market needs, been emphasised as an important national priority (Saudi Vision 2030, 2026). In this context, some differences in greetings, requests, apologies, forms of address, directness and interpersonal distance and ways of dealing with interpersonal relationships have been documented by comparative Arabic-German studies which warn against reducing directness and indirectness to a mere claim that one language is generally “direct” and the

other "indirect" (Bouchara, 2002, 2015), and emphasize that direct and indirect forms must be understood in terms of contextual factors like interpersonal distance, power and degree of imposition. The question of which is more polite among Arabic and German is not the relevant one for Saudi university students of German, but rather the question of their perceptions and negotiation of pragmatic conventions when they move between the two linguistic environments, which can have an impact on their confidence, interpretation of communicative intentions and reported experiences of using German. In the present study, however, the focus is not on whether politeness is the influencing factor or the causing factor for language learning in the German language but on the fact that it is perceived as an influencing factor.

1.2 Objectives of the study

The purpose of the study was to investigate the relationship between intercultural politeness and German language acquisition among Saudi learners. The study was also based on the following specific objectives

1. To examine the influence of Saudi cultural politeness norms on the acquisition of German pragmatic competence among Saudi learners.
2. To investigate the effect of intercultural communication differences on learners' understanding of German politeness strategies.
3. To assess the role of sociopragmatic transfer in shaping German language interaction among Saudi students.
4. To evaluate the importance of intercultural pragmatics instruction in improving communicative competence among Saudi learners of German.

1.3 Research Hypotheses

1. Saudi cultural politeness norms significantly influence the acquisition of German pragmatic competence.
2. Intercultural communication differences significantly affect Saudi learners' interpretation of German politeness strategies.
3. Sociopragmatic transfer has a significant effect on German language interaction among Saudi learners.
4. Intercultural pragmatics instruction positively improves communicative competence in German language learning.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Review

Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory was the main theoretical basis of this study, which offers a basis for understanding and explaining how speakers achieve interpersonal communication by using language in various sociocultural contexts (Razi & Tekin, 2017; HS, 2019). The theory defines politeness as a communicative act aimed at "face" or the public image of the communicator in the communicative situation. Brown and Levinson's theory defines face as positive face which represents social acceptance and approval and negative face which represents self-control and freedom from being imposed (Ahmed et al., 2019; Almakrob& Al-Ahdal, 2020). In the process of social communication, speakers therefore adopt politeness strategies to reduce the face threatening acts and achieve harmonious communication.

Politeness theory is highly relevant in intercultural language learning contexts as directness, formality and social hierarchy are assigned different values in various cultures (Akihary&Apituley, 2019; Kok & Mehar Singh, 2022). For instance, Saudi norms of interaction in Arabic communication are characterized by emphasizing relational harmony, respecting authority and indirect expression in sensitive communicative context (Alhamadi, 2015; Alnofaie, 2017). Compare speaking in Germany, which tends to be more straightforward, concise, and less reliant on honorific or overly polite language (Huber &Uebelmesser, 2023; Osman, 2015). Such cultural differences may result in pragmatic mismatches in the use of German in authentic communicative situations by the Saudi learners.

On this basis, Spencer-Oatey's Rapport Management Theory expands politeness theory by not just concentrating on linguistic politeness, yet additionally on the administration of social relations, undertakings, and objectives in communication (Razi and Tekin, 2017: Safi, 2020). Successful interpersonal communication relies on the harmonisation of interpersonal relationship, which is achieved by managing face sensitivities, sociality rights and interactional obligations, as noted by Almakrob and Al-Ahdal (2020); Kok and Mehar Singh (2022). For intercultural communication this theory is of great importance as it is used to explain why misunderstandings may happen even if the grammatical accuracy is reached.

The second theoretical support is Interlanguage Pragmatics that provides a theoretical framework for identifying how SLLs build up their pragmatic competence and how L1 affects the use of L2 (Alhamadi, 2015; Ahmed, 2020). This theory is key to the understanding of sociopragmatic transfer, the application of the norms of the learners' native culture to second language communication. For Saudi learners, this could lead to the excessive use of indirect speech or too much formality and the misunderstanding of direct speech as rude (Almakrob& Al-Ahdal, 2020; Huber &Uebelmesser, 2023). The two theories offer a valuable explanatory framework for the study of intercultural politeness as related to L2 acquisition in the German context. They

show that language learning is not just a language-learning process and that it is also a process that is embedded within a culture, which is shaped by social norms, face expectations, and communicative behaviors (Akihary&Apituley, 2019; Razi & Tekin, 2017). This theoretical integration enables the study to explore the perception, transfer and adaptation of politeness strategies by Saudi learners when they are communicating with other cultures in the context of German.

Theories are presented in a hierarchical manner, not as as individual explanatory models. Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory is the main theory used to analyze face, directness and politeness strategies, while Spencer-Oatey's Rapport Management Theory adds the dimension of how face and sociality rights and interpersonal relationship are negotiated within the culture; Interlanguage Pragmatics theory explains how the pragmatic knowledge of L1 can be transferred to L2 communication (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Spencer-Oatey, 2008; Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993). Consequently, the core explanatory framework, SFT and L2MTSS, is not directly measured and operationalised as a study variable, and is therefore excluded. The interconnection of Saudi cultural politeness norms and intercultural differences, with the learners' reported German pragmatic competence, is realized in the process of sociopragmatic transfer.

2.2 The Rise of Foreign Language Learning in the Saudi Context

The historical, economic and sociopolitical changes that have been experienced in Saudi Arabia have significantly influenced the country's approach to foreign language learning and education (FLLE) through their impact on priorities and global engagement strategies (Alnasser, 2022; Kok & Mehar Singh, 2022). Saudi Arabia is a rapidly growing country with a high percentage of its young population, which is less than 25 years old, which makes foreign language education more important in the country's development and globally competitive strategies (Alnofaie, 2017; Smith et al., 2017). Although Arabic is the official language and the dominant language in the country, the growing internationalization and economic diversification of Riyadh have also heightened the demand for bilingualism and multilingualism in general, especially in English and new languages like German (Alabdali, 2021; Alnasser, 2022).

The evolution of foreign language education in Saudi Arabia has been a gradual process which started from the early exposure to Turkish during the Ottoman period and reached its peak in the current education system in Saudi Arabia where English has become the major language used in education (HS, 2019; Alnofaie, 2017). Although English still plays a major role in school and universities curricula, other foreign languages like German, French and Chinese have been paying more attention in recent years due to globalization of the economy and the upsurge of academic mobility (Akihary&Apituley, 2019; Alqefari& Abdulrahman, 2019).

The growing demand for foreign language learning is also due to the multi-cultural nature of the Saudi workforce that includes expatriates from Asia, Europe and Africa (Smith et al., 2017; Contoh et al., 2019). Such

linguistic variety generates a need for ICC competence for practical settings, such as professional and academic ones. Hence, German has become a language of science, engineering, and scholarly communication, and is becoming more appealing to Saudi students who are interested in international opportunities (Kumar, 2022; Zhao & Huang, 2023). In this context, intercultural politeness becomes one of the significant aspects of language learning, given that Saudi learners need to adjust their politeness norms from Arabic to German, which has been said that Saudi learners' Polish norms are more indirect and relational than German norms are more direct and explicit (Almakrob& Al-Ahdal, 2020; Huber &Ueblemesser, 2023).

2.3 Language Learning, Pragmatics, and Sociocultural Transfer

Language learning is a multidimensional process that is affected by cognitive, affective, and sociocultural factors which ultimately impact language learners' communicative competence (Bozavlı, 2021; Pholsward&Boonprasitt, 2015). Motivation continues to be among the most essential factors in L2 learning, affecting perseverance, involvement, and willingness to communicate (Al-Jarf, 2023; Kadwa&Alshenqeeti, 2020).

General motivation theories cannot be used to explain the present study as directly as Interlanguage Pragmatics. It is based on the pragmatic knowledge of how a learner understands, produces and develops a second/foreign language. Pragmatic competence is the ability to choose and understand the linguistic forms in a manner suitable to the specific communicative situation. There is therefore an increased possibility for learners to have good knowledge of the rules of the L2 grammar and weak knowledge in the pragmatic interpretation and interaction (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Chang, 2011). Sociopragmatic transfer is of special interest because learners might rely on assumptions of the L1 language when interpreting and/or producing L2 language. Not all interactions involve such transfer and it should not be taken as an indication that one culture is more polite than another. Rather, learners' pragmatic choices are influenced by contextual factors, social relationships, communicative goals and their developing knowledge of target-language conventions. Studies on Arabic and German have pointed out some differences in the interpretation of the use of greetings, interpersonal space, and other politeness rules between the two linguistic environments (Bouchara, 2002, 2015).

2.4 Culture, Politeness, and German Language Teaching

Culture plays a crucial role in language learning because it influences the meaning, norms of communication, and expectations of interaction in speech communities (Pholsward&Boonprasitt, 2015; Huber &Uebelmesser, 2023). It is important to understand that language and culture go hand in hand, as cultural norms influence ways of expressing politeness, seeking information and maintaining social relations (Kok & Mehar Singh, 2022; Alnofaie, 2017).

Pholsward and Boonprasitt (2015) define culture as a combination of art, society, pragmatic and semantic aspects, which can affect communication behavior. When it comes to learning the German language, learners need to become familiar with not just words and grammar but also the pragmatic norms of politeness, directness, and formality (ZENGİN & ŞAHİN TOPTAŞ, 2023).

Thus, cultural competence and intercultural pragmatics must be integrated into the design of language teaching. (Farooq et al., 2018; Guo, 2017) The lack of linguistic context in language instruction causes superficial learning that does not prepare language learners for communication in the real world, according to Alnofaie (2017). Razi and Tekin (2017) also state that ICC should be integrated into teacher education as a part of teachers' training to prepare teachers to deal with cultural differences in the classroom effectively.

Intercultural awareness and pragmatic development is a critical role that should be played by teachers. The lack of cultural awareness among students is identified as a cause of communication failure by Akihary and Apituley (2019), especially in intercultural communication. Alhamadi (2015) also points out that learners who lack cultural background have the difficulty in communicating intended meaning to native speakers even when they have all the linguistic structures right. There are three intercultural models in language teaching: foreign cultural, transcultural, and intercultural models, with the first two models focusing on different aspects of cultural integration (Alqefari& Abdulrahman, 2019). The intercultural approach is especially crucial since it fosters the comparison of cultures and helps students to mediate between different communication systems (Almujawiwel, 2018; Zhao & Huang, 2023).

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has become a major concept in contemporary language teaching and learning that focuses on the competence to communicate across cultures (Pholsward&Boonprasitt, 2015). ICC not only requires language competence, but also the attitudes of openness, cultural awareness and adaptability in communication (Alqahtani, 2021; S. T. S. Ahmed et al., 2019). Intercultural language learning (ILL) in turn combines language, culture and pedagogy, focusing on experiential learning through interaction, reflection, and cultural immersion (Guo, 2017; Zhao & Huang, 2023).

3 Methodology

3.1 Research design

The study utilized a cross-sectional survey design based on the quantitative research methodology. The utilization of the quantitative approach centered mostly on gathering and evaluating numerical data in order to address research inquiries or evaluate theories pertaining to the relationship between intercultural politeness and German language acquisition among Saudi learners. In order to collect data from a wide and diverse sample in a reasonable amount of time, the cross-sectional survey methodology was employed in this

study. This particular design facilitates the simultaneous collection of data from a broad range of participants on a variety of characteristics, attitudes, or actions.

3.2 Target population

The study was carried out with the target population of Saudi university students attending formal German language courses in Riyadh city, Saudi Arabia. The study concentrated on university students because the participants had to have formal German language learning experiences that are relevant to the pragmatic competence and intercultural politeness in German.

3.2 Sample size and Sampling Criteria

The study used a sample of 128 Saudi university students who were selected using purposive sampling. The participants were chosen according to three criteria: They were Saudis; they were enrolled in a German language course at universities in Riyadh; they had some formal German language learning experience. Students in secondary schools, people who were not enrolled in German language courses or who do not have any experience in German language were not included. The sample size was determined by the number of eligible and accessible people for data collection. The respondents were selected using purposive sampling method so that they have characteristics that are directly related to the purposes of this research (Kasper & Rose, 2002).

3.3 Data collection instrument

One structured questionnaire was the only data collection tool used in the study. The questionnaire consisted of five-point Likert scale items related to the Saudi cultural politeness norms, intercultural communication differences, sociopragmatic transfer, and perceived communicative competence. It was discussed with three language learning specialists for its clarity and relevance and was pre-tested with 30 university students who shared similar characteristics as the study participants. The pilot responses were analyzed to check for unclear terms and to clarify the final questionnaire. There was no use of interviews or discourse completion tasks in the study.

3.4 Data analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics Version 29 was used to code and analyse quantitative data. The characteristics of the respondents and the responses given on the Likert scales were summarised using descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations. The statistical relationship between cultural background, communication styles and social norms with the respondents' reported experiences with learning German was analyzed using multiple linear regression. The p-value was used to determine the statistical significance at 0.05 level ($p < .05$). The data are a self-reported Likert scale response that were collected at a single point in time, so the regression results indicate association and predictive relationships,

but not causation or actual language acquisition. In this case a multiple regression model (Equation 1) to establish the different predictive values.

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \varepsilon \ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots 1 \quad (1)$$

Where. Y= German language learning experiences, $\beta 0$= constant (coefficient of intercept), X_1= Cultural background of Saudi university students, X_2= Communication styles, X_3= Social norms, ε = Represents the error term in the multiple regression model. The hypothesis of the study was tested at 0.05 level of significance or at 95% confidence interval and the acceptance or rejection of the stated hypothesis in this study was based on whether the p-value is less or greater than 0.05.

4 Results

4.1 Demographic information

The results on characteristics of the study participants are presented in Table 1

Table 1

Showing demographic data of study respondents

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	81	63.2
Female	47	36.8
German language learning experience		
Positive	48	37.5
Neutral	69	53.9
Negative	11	8.6
Total	**128**	**100**

Source: Survey (2024)

The gender distribution in Table 1 indicates a predominance of male students, constituting 63.2% of the respondents, compared to 36.8% female students. A majority (53.9%) reported a neutral experience, while 37.5% expressed positive sentiments. Conversely, a smaller cohort (8.6%) indicated negative experiences in learning German.

4.2 Descriptive results

The study examined the influence of Saudi cultural politeness norms on the acquisition of German pragmatic competence among Saudi learners. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2:

Influence of Saudi Cultural Politeness Norms on German Pragmatic Competence

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Saudi cultural politeness norms influence my use of German expressions	4.6%	7.5%	14.2%	39.6%	34.1%
Differences between Saudi and German politeness affect communication	3.8%	6.7%	15.0%	40.4%	34.1%
Understanding German politeness improves communication skills	2.9%	5.8%	13.3%	41.2%	36.8%
Saudi learners often transfer Arabic politeness forms into German	4.2%	7.1%	16.3%	38.7%	33.7%
Awareness of intercultural politeness differences improves language learning	3.3%	6.3%	14.6%	39.2%	36.6%
German classroom instruction should include intercultural pragmatics	3.8%	5.8%	13.8%	38.8%	37.8%
Learning German culture enhances pragmatic competence	2.5%	6.7%	14.2%	40.4%	36.2%

Source: Primary Data (2024)

Table 2 shows that the majority of the respondents felt that the Saudi cultural politeness norms and the differences between the Saudi and German communicative conventions were significant to their experiences of learning German. In this regard, 34.1% strongly agreed and 39.6% agreed that Saudi cultural politeness norms had an impact on using German expressions. Likewise, 40.4% agreed and 34.1% strongly agreed that differences of politeness conventions in Saudi Arabia and Germany influenced communication. The results should, however, be viewed as perceptions not as evidence of language acquisition. The questionnaire did not test the pragmatic performance of German in participants' own words, but rather measured their own perception of their own performance. The results thus indicate that learners see intercultural politeness as applicable to German communication, but not that intercultural politeness leads to an improvement in the German competence.

The study also explored how the differing aspects of intercultural communication affect students' understanding of German politeness strategies. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Effect of Intercultural Communication Differences on German Politeness Strategies

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
German communication styles differ significantly from Saudi styles	3.3%	5.8%	13.8%	41.7%	35.4%
Indirect expressions in Arabic sometimes create misunderstandings in German	4.2%	6.7%	15.0%	39.6%	34.5%
German directness is difficult for Saudi learners to adapt to	3.8%	7.1%	14.6%	38.3%	36.2%
Intercultural misunderstandings affect classroom participation	4.6%	7.9%	16.3%	37.1%	34.1%
Exposure to authentic German communication improves pragmatic competence	2.9%	5.8%	13.8%	40.4%	37.1%
Non-verbal communication differences influence interaction	5.0%	8.3%	15.4%	36.7%	34.6%
Interaction with native German speakers improves politeness understanding	3.3%	6.3%	14.2%	39.6%	36.6%

Source: Primary Data (2024)

As shown in Table 3, the respondents were aware that there are significant differences between Saudi and German communication style. 77.1% of the participants agreed and strongly agreed that German communication is very different from Saudi communication. Likewise, 74.1% agreed or strongly agreed that sometimes indirect expressions in Arabic may lead to misunderstandings in German, and 74.5% agreed or strongly agreed that directness in German may be hard to adapt to. These results show that the participants saw the differences in directness, interactional expectations and pragmatic interpretation as significant in their German language experiences. The results in the area of actual communication were also favorable. A total 77.5% agreed or strongly agreed that contact with authentic German communication contributes to an improvement of the pragmatic competence, and 76.2% agreed or strongly agreed that interaction with native German speakers leads to an improvement of an understanding of German politeness. The data reported here do not represent an experimental intervention, and should not therefore be taken as evidence that exposure resulted in an improvement in pragmatic competence. Rather, they suggest that authentic interaction may be something to which learners can attest as being "potentially useful" in the development of their understanding of pragmatic conventions in German.

The study also investigated the sociopragmatic transfer in determining the German language interactions of Saudi students. The results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Role of Sociopragmatic Transfer in German Language Interaction

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Arabic politeness norms influence my German conversations	3.8%	6.7%	15.0%	40.4%	34.1%
I sometimes translate Arabic politeness expressions directly into German	4.2%	7.1%	14.6%	39.6%	34.5%
Sociocultural differences affect my confidence when speaking German	5.0%	7.5%	15.8%	37.5%	34.2%
German native speakers may misunderstand Saudi politeness behaviors	4.6%	7.9%	15.4%	36.7%	35.4%
Understanding intercultural pragmatics reduces communication problems	3.3%	5.8%	13.8%	40.8%	36.3%
Intercultural competence is important for effective German communication	2.9%	5.0%	14.2%	39.6%	38.3%
Cultural awareness should be emphasized in German language courses	3.8%	6.3%	14.6%	38.7%	36.6%

Source: Primary Data (2024)

Table 4 shows that the respondents considered sociopragmatic transfer when they interacted in German. A total of 74.5% reported that the norms of politeness in Arabic affected their conversations in German, and 74.1% reported that they translated some expressions of politeness in Arabic to German. The answers indicate that the participants' knowledge of the sociocultural context in which they learned their first language was seen as impacting on their use of German. The results also suggest that differences in the sociocultural aspects of learners' confidence and interaction with the German speakers were felt to be important. 71.7% agreed or strongly agreed that sociocultural differences had an impact on their confidence in speaking German. Likewise, 72.1% agreed or strongly agreed that the German native speakers may not understand the politeness behaviours of Saudis. The participants, however, had positive perception of intercultural pragmatic awareness. 77.1% agreed or strongly agreed that knowledge of intercultural pragmatics has a positive effect on communication problems and 77.9% agreed or strongly agreed that intercultural competence is a key element of good German communication. The findings suggest that learners' pragmatic awareness is interpreted as a crucial aspect of the German language communication. They cannot, however, conclude that the problems in communication were objectively the result of the sociopragmatic transfer, nor can they conclude that the intercultural competence contributed to the improvement of language ability in an independent way.

A further aspect of the study was the evaluation of the importance of intercultural pragmatics teaching in enhancing the communicative competence of Saudi learners of German. The results are given in table 5.

Table 5

Importance of Intercultural Pragmatics Instruction

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Intercultural pragmatics should be integrated into German lessons	3.3%	5.8%	13.8%	39.6%	37.5%
Teachers should explain German politeness conventions explicitly	2.9%	6.3%	14.2%	40.4%	36.2%
Role-play activities improve intercultural communication skills	4.2%	7.1%	15.0%	38.8%	34.9%
Exposure to German culture enhances communicative competence	3.3%	5.8%	13.3%	41.2%	36.4%
Intercultural training reduces misunderstandings in communication	3.8%	6.7%	14.6%	39.6%	35.3%
Multimedia resources improve intercultural learning	4.6%	7.5%	15.0%	37.5%	35.4%
Interaction with native speakers enhances pragmatic competence	3.3%	6.3%	13.8%	39.2%	37.4%

Source: Primary Data (2024)

Table 5 shows a high level of support for intercultural pragmatics in the teaching of German. In total 77.1% agreed or strongly agreed that intercultural pragmatics should be included in German lessons, and 76.6% agreed or strongly agreed that German teachers should explicitly explain German politeness conventions. Likewise the percentage of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed that role play activities contribute to the development of intercultural communication skills was 73.7% and the percentage of those who agreed or strongly agreed that the exposure to German culture contributes to communicative competence was 77.6%. The results also indicate favorable attitudes towards learning through intercultural training, learning by using multimedia and learning by interacting with native speakers. Of the 74.9% who agreed or strongly agreed that intercultural training is effective in reducing communication misunderstandings, 72.9% agreed or strongly agreed that using multimedia resources is effective in intercultural training, and 76.6% agreed or strongly agreed that interaction with native speakers is effective in developing pragmatic competence. The results indicate that the explicit and experiential way of learning about intercultural pragmatics is appreciated by the respondents. These results, however, should be interpreted as based on learners' perceptions and not as proof of the effectiveness of the instruction since the study did not make an experimental comparison of the instructional groups.

4.3 Multiple Regression Analysis

4.3.1 Fitness of the Model

To study the predictive power of cultural background, communication styles and social norms for German language learning experiences of Saudi university students, especially intercultural politeness and pragmatic competence, a regression analysis was used. Table 6 shows that the model fitness results have high overall explanatory value of the regression model.

The correlation coefficient (R = 0.893), indicates that there is a very strong correlation between the combined independent variables and German language learning experiences. The coefficient of determination (R^2 = 0.659) shows that cultural background, communication styles and social norms accounted for 65.9% of the variation in the GLS of Saudi learners. This indicates that intercultural aspects significantly influence learners' acquisition of German pragmatic competence in terms of politeness strategies, sociocultural interpretation and communicative appropriateness. The model's adjusted R^2 of 0.631 also demonstrates the stability and reliability of the model, as it still has a great amount of explaining power after the number of predictors has been adjusted. The standard error of the estimate (0.196) is quite small, indicating that the observed values and the predicted values are well fit together.

Table 6

Model Fitness

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
0.893	0.659	0.631	0.196

Predictors: (Constant), Cultural background of Saudi university students, Communication styles, Social norms

4.3.2 Regression Coefficients

The regression coefficients in Table 7 present the individual and combined effects of cultural background, communication styles, and social norms on German language learning experiences among Saudi university students. The results provide evidence of varying degrees of influence of each predictor on learners' intercultural pragmatic competence and language acquisition outcomes.

Table 7

Regression Coefficients

Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta (β)	t	Sig. (p)
Constant	0.420	0.256	-	1.641	.101
Cultural background of Saudi university students	0.161	0.035	0.201	4.600	<.001
Communication styles	0.171	0.142	0.151	1.204	.229
Social norms	0.269	0.184	0.330	1.462	.144

Dependent Variable: German language learning experiences of Saudi university students.

The results show that cultural background positively and significantly influences the German language learning experiences (B = 0.161, β = 0.201, t = 4.600, p < .001). This means that for every one-point increase in cultural-background scores, there is a 0.161-point increase in German language learning experiences for this model, while all other variables are held constant. The standardized coefficient (beta = 0.201) shows a positive, but relatively weak contribution. The discovery indicates that learners' cultural norms, values and their previous sociocultural experiences can affect their understanding of and use of German politeness plan and other pragmatic features in communication.

The communication styles has a positive but statistically insignificant impact on German language learning experiences (B = 0.171, β = 0.151, t = 1.204, p = .229). The positive coefficient indicates that higher levels of awareness and use of appropriate communication styles is linked to improved learning experiences with German language, but the effect fails to reach the 5% level of significance. The standardized coefficient (β = 0.151) also shows that the contribution that communication styles make to the dependent variable is comparatively less than the contribution made by cultural background and social norms. Hence, there is no evidence to draw the conclusion that communication styles are independently predictive to learning experiences in the German language in this model.

Social norms positively influence the German language learning experiences (B = 0.269, β = 0.330, t = 1.462, p = .144), although this effect is not statistically significant at the 5% level. Although social norms do not significantly explain German language learning experiences in the regression model, the standardized coefficient (β = 0.330) is the largest among the three predictors, suggesting that social norms have the greatest relative effect on German language learning experiences. It can be concluded that awareness of Saudi and German social norms might be related to the learners' pragmatic decisions such as politeness strategies, speech acts, and interactional behaviour, but the data from the current study did not completely support this conclusion from a statistical point of view.

5. Discussion

The aim of the study was to investigate the association between intercultural politeness and German language learning experiences of the Saudi university students for the city of Riyadh. The results show that the participants generally agreed that differences between the communicative conventions of Saudi-Arabic and German are important to their language learning and use experiences. The results, however, are not evidence of the effect of intercultural politeness on German language learning, due to the cross-sectional character of the study, which was based on a questionnaire design.

The first aim focused on the relationship between the Saudi cultural politeness norms and the reported German pragmatic competence.The first aim focused on the relationship between the Saudi cultural politeness norms and the reported German pragmatic competence. Table 1 shows that the descriptive results revealed that 73.7% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that the norms of politeness in Saudi culture had an impact on the expressions used in German. This is in line with the central idea of ILP which states that L2 learners will transfer their L1 pragmatic knowledge when learning a new language (Kasper & Rose, 2002). It also aligns with intercultural politeness studies that have found that the expectations of interaction can lead to misunderstanding when communicational acts are comprehended differently by interlocutors, depending on their sociocultural background (Spencer-Oatey, 2022). Given that the finding is especially applicable to certain pragmatic domains as opposed to an undifferentiated concept of "culture", it has significant implications for the "pragmatic" field. Greetings, requests, apologies, refusals and forms of address may involve recognizing varying contextual expectations. Studies conducted in Arabic-German communication have concluded that there are discrepancies in the conventions of greeting and in interpersonal distance, which is different and has a culture-specific meaning in communication routines (Bouchara, 2002, 2015). These differences can be pertinent in the interpretation of German communication behaviours or in the selection of German communication expressions by Saudi learners.

The second aim investigated intercultural differences in communication and learners' perception of politeness strategies in German. The results indicate that 77.1% of the respondents agreed or strongly agree that the communication styles of Germans were very different from the communication styles of Saudi Arabia and 74.5% agree or strongly agree that Germans were sometimes direct which could be challenging to adapt. The results obtained should be taken with a grain of salt. They are not making the claim that communication in Germany is always straightforward and in Saudi it is always indirect. Modern contrastive-pragmatic studies highlight that directness and indirectness are dependent on the context and are not necessarily considered as polite or impolite behavior. Situational formality, degree of imposition, social distance, and power may impact pragmatic decisions (Bouchara, 2015; Ruytenbeek, 2024).

The third was to look at sociopragmatic transfer. The findings show that 74.5% agreed and 74.1% strongly agreed that Arabic politeness norms had an impact on their German conversations, and that they sometimes translated Arabic politeness expressions into German. This pattern is consistent with the idea of pragmatic transfer, that is, the idea that what learners know about pragmatics in their L1 might transfer to their L2. But, the questionnaire failed to yield direct linguistic evidence of transfer as participants were not observed generating German speech acts and a Discourse Completion Test was not taken. The finding should

thus be considered as perceived or self-reported sociopragmatic transfer, and not as objectively proven transfer.

The fourth objective was to look at the perceived role of intercultural pragmatics instruction. In sum, substantial support was expressed by the participants for explicit teaching of intercultural pragmatics, with 77.1% stating that they agreed or strongly agreed that intercultural pragmatics should be taught in German lessons. Likewise, 76.6% agreed on the explicit explanation of German politeness conventions. Pedagogically, the findings are relevant to the fact that pragmatic competence is comprised of knowledge in addition to grammar and vocabulary, and that pragmatics has been identified as another legitimate field of SLA studies (Kasper & Rose, 2002). The results of the study related to authentic interaction should, however, be understood as perceptions. While 77.5% agreed or strongly agreed that exposure to authentic German communication is beneficial in increasing the pragmatic competence, there was no experimental intervention, and the participants in the study were not assessed prior to and post exposure to authentic German. Thus, conclusions about improvement as a result of authentic interaction cannot be made from the results. They, on the other hand, demonstrate that they understand the pragmatic conventions of German as useful to them in authentic communication.

The study shows that the Saudi university learners consider the following to be relevant in their German language learning experiences: intercultural politeness, communication differences and sociopragmatic transfer. The contribution of the study could therefore be summarized as evidence on the perceptions of intercultural pragmatic challenges in the context of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia rather than as experimental evidence on the causal factors of the acquisition of the German language.

6. Conclusion

The study reaches the conclusion that the concept of intercultural politeness is considered to be an important factor of German learning and using by the Saudi university learners in Riyadh. Participants indicated that the cultural code of politeness in Saudi Arabia, and the differences in the modes of interaction and sociopragmatic expectations were relevant to their experiences with German-language interaction. They also showed great support for including intercultural pragmatics in the German language teaching. The study does not, however, prove that social norms or intercultural politeness are responsible for acquisition of the German language. Outcomes were self-reported responses on a five-point Likert scale, and the cross-sectional design did not have objective language-proficiency testing, or include a longitudinal observation or experimental intervention. The results thus reflect learners' perceptions and reported experiences, and should not be interpreted as evidence of causal effects on language learning. The results indicated that the teaching of German language for Saudi learners might include the explicit focus on contrastive pragmatics such as greetings, requests, apologies, refusals, forms of address, directness, social distance etc., which are context-dependent politeness aspects.

Learning could be supported by authentic German language texts, role play, guided comparison of communicative practices in Arabic and German and provide opportunity for reflection on communicative differences in style and in pragmatics. The study has a few limitations, including self-reported questionnaire data, cross-sectional study design, and purposive sample of 128 university learners in Riyadh. In addition, the findings of this research are not generalizable to secondary school students and other learners of German in Saudi Arabia due to the purposive sampling method and the restriction to 128 Saudi university students in Riyadh. Future studies may use larger probability samples when possible, and might utilize the use of the Discourse Completion Task, recorded interaction, classroom observation, pragmatic-performance assessment and longitudinal designs. These would give a better indication of true pragmatic behavior and growth over time.

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