Sociolinguistic Over-Correction and Pragmatic Failure Among University Graduates of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in the Global Gig Economy

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Abstract
The paper examines why many graduates of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) are unsuccessful in translating their academic English into a professional career on online platforms like Upwork and Fiverr, despite Pakistan being one of the leading countries in the global gig economy. It specifically explores the issue of over-correction among these graduates, that is, the overuse of formal, archaic, and obsequious language in casual-professional communicative settings. This study employs a concurrent mixed methods research design. A Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT) was administered to 50 recent graduates from universities in KP, while the instructional content of the prescribed Functional English textbooks was analyzed. The responses of the students were compared with those of the Top-Rated freelancers on these platforms. The results of the quantitative analysis indicate that over 80% of the respondents produced high-imposition honorific expressions, Respected Sir and Humble Request, in low-stakes online communication, leading to pragmatic failure. The qualitative analysis, however, points out that this rigidity in communication style is linked to the templates in textbooks, which focus on colonial-bureaucratic letters rather than the modern digital genre. The study claims that although the graduates of KP possess structural grammatical competence, it is their digital sociolinguistic incompetence that creates a hurdle in their way to professional English career in the global arena. Finally, the study recommends a methodological shift from form-focused instruction to instrumental pragmatics in the Business Communication courses taught in the universities of KP.

Keywords: Sociolinguistic Competence, Pragmatic Failure, Gig Economy, Pakistani English, ELT in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Fossilized Formality, Computer-Mediated Communication

Introduction
Human beings in society are social animals. They share their ideas, intentions, and feelings. But language is a tool for communicating, and communication is not only a matter of linguistic (grammatical) rules. The speaker/writer has to appropriately use the language in a particular social context. The ability to create and understand the language in a context is the communicative competence of a person, which was a term used by Dell Hymes (1972). In other words, a person who knows a language not only knows its grammar but also knows how, when, and where to use it.

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Sociolinguistic knowledge of a language has been an essential aspect of communication in the age of globalization and digitalization. In the globalized world, there has been a rise in the digital economy in recent decades. The gig economy has spread all over the world, and English has become a commodity of value for the Global South. Pakistan is at the top of the freelance market in the world. The country has thousands of graduates every year, competing for remote jobs at different platforms, for example, Upwork and Fiverr. In addition to grammatical competence, to compete in the global market, one needs to have high sociolinguistic competence, that is, the ability to comprehend and produce the language appropriately in a social context (Hymes, 1972).

Pakistani graduates have a good command of the structural knowledge of English; however, there is a growing body of literature that suggests there is a huge gap between the English being taught in the classrooms and the language being used in the freelance market. There is a growing literature that the ELT in Pakistan has been focused on grammatical rather than pragmatic competence. Mahboob (2009) pointed out that there was a huge gap between what was being taught in the classrooms and what was needed in real life. A recent study conducted by the Ali Institute of Research and Skills Development (2025) reveals that the ELT in Pakistan is still focused on the grammar-translation method, and the same old literary texts are still taught in the classes, ignoring the need for sociolinguistic knowledge of language. Consequently, the learners have developed what may be called fossilized formality. It refers to the overuse of the honorifics (for example, Respected Sir and I humbly request that) that were used in the past in the colonial offices but are considered as the pragmatic failure in the offices of tech-startups of the twenty-first century (Thomas, 1983; Anwar & Kamran, 2021). The issue of the fossilized formality is more serious in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). A recent study conducted by Azhar (2025) reports that the universities in the urban areas of Pakistan are switching to the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), but the same could not be true about the universities of KP, where the teachers still need to develop their knowledge of the communicative language teaching skills, and the classes are teacher-centered. Khan et al. (2025) also report the same issue.

A few studies have been conducted to investigate the pragmatic competence of the Pakistani learners. For example, Anwar & Kamran (2021) investigated the pragmatic competence of Pakistani learners of different speech acts (for example, refusals and apologies). However, no study has been conducted to investigate the issue of sociolinguistic overcorrection in the learners of the English language in the universities of KP. The reason for choosing the population of KP for the study is that no study has been conducted in the area. In addition, there is no study that has empirically investigated how the overcorrection of learners in the English language affects their employability and professional acculturation in the gig economy. Therefore, this study was conducted to fill this knowledge gap. The study investigated the sociolinguistic overcorrection in the L2 English graduates of the universities in KP. It was hypothesized in the study that the academic achievements of the L2 English graduates in standard English create a huge gap for them to achieve success in their professional careers in the gig economy. To test this hypothesis, the study compared the pragmatic output of the L2 English graduates of KP universities with the normative pragmatic output of the successful global freelancers and attempted to identify the roots of the overcorrection in the prescribed textbooks and the ELT in the universities of KP.

Research Objectives

To address the identified gap, the present study aims to achieve the following specific objectives:
To identify the specific markers of sociolinguistic over-correction (e.g., excessive honorifics,

archaic salutations, and fossilized formality) present in the professional digital correspondence of recent graduates from KP universities.

To compare the politeness strategies used by KP graduates in simulated gig-economy scenarios (via Discourse Completion Tasks) against the norms of successful global freelancers, to quantify the extent of pragmatic failure.

To analyze the relationship between university instructional materials (syllabi and textbooks) and the fossilization of formal registers, determining whether academic success correlates with sociolinguistic rigidity.

To propose pedagogical interventions for KP universities that integrate digital pragmatics into Business English curricula to enhance the global employability of graduates.

Literature Review
Communicative Competence and Pragmatic Competence
The theoretical underpinning of the study is communicative competence, which was first proposed by Dell Hymes (1972) as a challenge to Chomsky's idea of linguistic competence. Chomsky's linguistic competence pertains to an ideal speaker-listener's knowledge of the grammar of a language, while Hymes' communicative competence includes not only the knowledge of grammar rules but also when, where, and how to use those rules. Communicative competence, thus, involves grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. Based on the theoretical framework of communicative competence, Thomas (1983) then differentiates between pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure in intercultural communication. Pragmalinguistic failure refers to the mismatch between the speaker's intended meaning and the literal meaning of the utterance, while sociopragmatic failure happens when the speaker says something grammatically correct but socioculturally inappropriate. The current study is interested in the second category of pragmatic failure because the pragmatic failure in the writings of the KP graduates manifests itself as the production of grammatically well-formed sentences that are contextually inappropriate in the digital workplace.

Politeness Theory and Face Threatening Acts
The theoretical underpinning for the analysis of pragmatic strategies employed by the participants is Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory. Brown and Levinson posit that every human being has a public self-image, which they term face. Face is bifurcated into positive face (the desire to be appreciated) and negative face (the desire not to be imposed upon). Certain speech acts like requests, refusals, and apologies inherently threaten one or both aspects of the interlocutor's face. In the gig economy, the speech acts of asking for clarification, requesting a deadline extension, refusing to do more work, and reminding the client about the payment are all face-threatening acts (FTAs). How a freelancer mitigates these FTAs directly influences the construction of a professional relationship and maintaining the client for future work. Brown and Levinson (1987) have posited a list of mitigating strategies for FTAs ranging from bald on-record to off-record. The study will investigate whether the KP graduates overmitigate the FTAs by applying more deferential and, therefore, less contextually suitable strategies than needed, which might tarnish their professional credibility.

English Language Teaching in Pakistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
ELT in Pakistan has a colonial history that has a long, problematic story. According to Mahboob (2009), English has been presented as not only a foreign language but also the language of power, governance, and social mobility. Consequently, ELT in Pakistani classrooms has traditionally focused on formal language accuracy, letter writing, and official letters rather than the communicative use of the language and pragmatics. Ali Institute of Research and Skills Development (2025) has also reported that cross-cultural communication and pragmatic failure remain one of the challenges among Pakistani English language learners. Anwar and Kamran (2021) have studied the pragmatic competence of Pakistani English language learners in performing speech acts and found that the learners transfer the L1 politeness maxims into their L2 pragmatic performance and hence, experience sociopragmatic failure. Talking specifically about

the context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Khan et al. (2025) have studied the effectiveness of ELT methods in Pakistani classrooms and reported that ELT methods used in KP ELT classes are still teacher-centered and grammar-focused. Azhar (2025) has also reported that teaching English as a second/foreign language in Pakistan's periphery poses various challenges, including a lack of resources, an outdated curriculum, and the undertraining of teachers.

The Gig Economy and Digital Pragmatics
The global gig economy has introduced new English language requirements which have not been catered to in the ELT classroom. The platforms like Upwork, Fiverr, and Freelancer operate with the casual-professional mode of communication. The casual-professional mode of communication is neither purely formal nor purely informal but a register that lies between the two and is characterized by efficiency, directness, rapport-building, and hedging as opposed to the subservient politeness inculcated in the ELT classroom in Pakistan. Pakistan currently is among the top five countries with the greatest number of freelancers in the world and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is contributing to this economy. However, the divide between the ELT classroom and the language of the market creates what might be called a pragmatic mismatch. The graduates who are taught to write Respected Sir, I humbly beg to state and submit are instead working in a chatbox where the norm is more along the lines of Hey Mike, quick update on the project. This mismatch is not a matter of style only, but an economic mismatch. Overly formal writing may signal to the client that the freelancer is not experienced or is culturally too distant.

Methodology
The current research is descriptive and quantitative in nature and follows a mixed-methods research design using methodological triangulation to assess the variables of the study. It also employs frequency analysis to identify the frequency of linguistic markers and discourse analysis to assess the pragmatic appropriateness of the data collected. The population of the study consisted of final-year students and fresh graduates of public and private sector universities of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region. The sample size of the study was 50 (N = 50) selected through purposive sampling. The selection criteria included the completion of at least one course of Functional English or Business Communication and the possession of an active profile on the freelance platform (e.g., Upwork, Fiverr), or the intention to join the digital gig-economy within six months.

Research Instruments
To access input and output, the study employed two research tools.

The Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT)
As it is not feasible to observe the negotiations of the digital freelance, a Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT) was employed to elicit specific speech acts. The WDCT contained five scenarios of high-frequency digital gig-economy interactions. The scenarios were developed along a continuum of Low Imposition (e.g., greetings) to High Imposition (e.g., asking for payment). The prompt clearly indicated that the medium was chat/instant messaging, thereby compelling the respondent to choose between the formal input they received and the informal medium they were using.

The five scenarios included in the WDCT were as follows: Scenario 1: The Low-Stakes Greeting. The respondents were asked to respond to a client's casual Monday morning message, having done multiple projects together in the past. This scenario assessed the social distance and code-switching awareness of the participants.

Scenario 2: The Clarification Request. The respondents were asked to ask for clarification from an American client who had given an ambiguous instruction. This scenario tested the efficiency and/or over-politeness of the respondents.

Scenario 3: The Deadline Extension. The respondents were asked to tell a client that the work has been delayed due to the power failure. This scenario tested the mitigation of a face-threatening act professionally.

Scenario 4: The Scope Creep Refusal. The respondents were asked to politely decline the additional

work without pay. This scenario tested the refusal strategies and assertiveness of the respondents. Scenario 5: The Payment Reminder. The respondents were asked to ask a client to make the payment that had been pending for two days already. This scenario tested the directness of the respondents in a sensitive financial matter.

Instructional Artifact Analysis
To identify the source of over-formal output, the study also analyzed the course outlines and textbooks of the relevant courses being taught at the universities of the respondents. The study coded the frequency of formal language templates (e.g., formal letter, application) as against informal/digital templates (e.g., email, memo, chat log).

Data Collection
The data collection procedure of the study included three steps. First, the pilot testing of the WDCT was done with five students to see if the scenarios were clear and culturally valid. Second, the WDCT was distributed online through Google Form to make the responses anonymous and pressure-free, imitating the real digital freelance context. Third, the same WDCT was distributed among 10 Top-Rated Upwork freelancers (i.e., freelancers having more than 95% job success rate) to create a baseline for the appropriate use of the target structures. The responses of the Top-Rated freelancers served as the yardstick to measure the responses of the students.

Data Analysis Framework
The data were analyzed within the framework of Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory. For the quantitative analysis, the responses were coded for specific formal linguistic markers, including greetings (e.g., Respected Sir, Hi), honorifics (e.g., Your Highness, Sir, Madam), and modals of hesitation (e.g., I was wondering if you could possibly…). For the quantitative analysis, the pragmatic appropriateness of each response was measured on a five-point Likert scale (1–5) in reference to the benchmark responses. A response was labeled as a pragmatic failure when the response exhibited disproportionately high formality for the digital context.

Data Analysis and Discussion
The results from the Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT) and the instructional materials are now presented to show the mismatch between the sociolinguistic competence of the KP university graduates and the pragmatic expectations of the gig economy. This section consists of the frequency count of linguistic features followed by a qualitative discussion of the pragmatic failure in each scenario.

Frequency of Fossilized Honorifics
The most striking and widespread evidence of sociolinguistic overcorrection appeared to be the over-employment of honorific terms. In Scenario 1 (The Low-Stakes Greeting), where the client opened with an informal Hey! most respondents failed to reciprocate the interlocutor's speech. More than 85% of the participants responded with Respected Sir or Dear Sir even though the client employed a colloquial greeting. Only a small fraction of the students managed to use a first-name basis (e.g., Hi Mike) compared to 100% of the Top-Rated freelancers. This suggests a high-Power Distance Index (Hofstede, 1980) embedded in the students' communicative behavior. The graduates view the client-freelancer relationship as rigidly hierarchical, that is, as a master-servant rather than a business-to-business relationship. By employing Respected Sir in a chat box, the graduate unintentionally creates what may be termed a sociopragmatic wall, giving a signal to the client that the freelancer is a stranger to modern corporate culture.

Table 1: *Formality Index: Comparison of Over-Correction Markers*

Marker of Over-Correction	Student Responses (%)	Top-Rated Freelancers (%)
Use of "Respected Sir/Madam"	85%	2%
Use of "Kindly" / "Do the needful"	60%	5%

Apologies longer than one sentence	70%	10%
Begging tone ("Humble request")	40%	0%

Analysis of Mitigating Strategies in High-Imposition Acts

In scenario 3 (The Deadline Extension), an FTA is involved where the client is being informed that the job will be late. A comparison was made of the ways in which the students and professionals mitigated the imposition of being late. While the professional freelancers produced Explanation plus Solution (e. g., Power is out, will send by 7 PM), the KP students produced Self-Humiliation plus Plea. A typical student response was: I am extremely sorry and ashamed. Please forgive me for this mistake. I request you humbly to give me time. The use of emotionally charged adjectives such as ashamed, beg, and humble recasts a professional logistics issue into a personal morality tale. Moreover, the average number of words in student apologies was 45, whereas that for professionals was 12. This violates Grice's (1975) Maxim of Quantity (be as informative as is required for the current purposes of exchange). In the gig economy, excessive text is not evaluated as being polite, but rather as being inefficient and amateur.

Register Failure in Refusals

In scenario 4 (Scope Creep), the ability of the students to establish professional boundaries was tested. The results show that an overwhelming majority of the students were unable to issue a direct refusal. Rather, they employed opting out or indirect refusal, mitigated with excessive deference (e. g., Sir, I want to do it, but it is hard). In contrast, the control group employed direct conditional structures (e. g., I can do X if you pay Y). The inability of the students to produce conditional structures indicates a basic absence of instruction in instrumental business English, which will leave them vulnerable to exploitation and poor negotiation outcomes in the global marketplace.

The Instructional Link: Textbook Analysis

In order to identify the root cause of these pragmatic errors, an analysis of the prescribed Functional English textbooks was carried out. The analysis shows a clear correlation between the input provided and the output of the students. The textbooks analyzed provided no examples of instant messaging or email threads. However, they contained a plethora of templates for formal applications, which all started with Respected Sir and ended with Your Obedient Servant. In a word, the students are not failing to learn; they are learning the wrong rules. They are applying the rules for a colonial bureaucracy (you write to a government officer) to the digital marketplace (you chat with a startup founder)

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the curricular and pedagogical lacunae in the sociolinguistic development of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) university graduates for participation in the global digital gig economy. The results show that although these graduates exhibit a high degree of grammatical competence, they experience marked pragmatic fossilization. The discourse completion task results demonstrate that graduates from KP largely adopt a formal-bureaucratic genre (excessive honorifics, forms of subjugation, and verbosity) in place of an expected casual-professional genre. This over-politeness is not just a matter of style, but a pragmatic failure resulting from a dated university education that focuses on obsolete colonial forms of correspondence rather than contemporary digital forms. This study further shows that such a pragmatic failure has real-world economic implications. In the gig economy, clients judge digital freelancers not only on their technical ability but also on their communicative style. A freelancer who responds with Most Respected Sir to a client's 'Hi, how are you' is likely to be judged as culturally distant and, consequently, less collaborative. In simple words, the politeness these graduates have been taught to produce is not perceived as politeness in the gig economy; it is

perceived as a problem. Finally, this study shows that if graduates of KP are to move from low-cost labourers to high-value partners in the global digital economy, they must dislearn academic rigidity and learn that in the digital workplace, simplicity is the new politeness.

Pedagogical Implications

From "Formats" to "Registers": As mentioned earlier, the existing Business Communication courses in the ELT departments of KP universities are limited to teaching seven parts of formal letters. The study suggests that the syllabus must be revised to a genre-based approach where the students must be taught to recognize the register of the conversation and try to adopt that register while talking or writing. In this connection, a class activity would be registering switching practice where students are given a situation and asked to write three different versions of the same message: one for a government official (formal), one for a new client (professional), and one for a colleague (casual).

Incorporating Authentic Digital Discourse: Existing textbooks used in the Business Communication courses of ELT departments of KP universities include imaginary letters rather than real ones. The study proposes that teachers should use authentic data for teaching. The syllabus may include screenshots of real slack conversation, Upwork proposal threads, or professional email threads. The purpose of incorporating this discourse is to make the students aware of the short forms, ellipses, and hedges used by competent speakers in real professional digital discourse.

Incorporating Instrumental Pragmatics: The results of the study suggest that the students face difficulty in refusing and requesting in professional discourse. They fail to say no without sounding rude and request payment without using the tone of a beggar. Therefore, the study suggests incorporating separate modules on instrumental pragmatics where students should be taught the linguistic realizations of refusing and requesting in professional discourse which would save the face of the speakers. For instance, I beg your pardon should be replaced with Could you clarify that? And I shall be very grateful. Looking forward to your response.

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