

SEMANTIC AND PRAGMATIC DIFFICULTIES AMONG INDONESIAN EFL LEARNERS: A CONTEXT-BASED ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Communicative competence in English depends not only on grammatical accuracy but also on the integrated command of semantic meaning and pragmatic appropriateness, two domains that have received comparatively limited research attention within Indonesian EFL settings. This pre-research article presents the conceptual and methodological foundation for a qualitative descriptive study designed to investigate the semantic and pragmatic difficulties experienced by undergraduate Indonesian EFL learners at Universitas Bosowa, Makassar, South Sulawesi, through a context-based analytical lens. Building on an integrated theoretical framework that draws on speech act theory, the cooperative principle, the Interface Hypothesis, Relevance Theory, Politeness Theory, Conceptual Semantics, and Schema Theory, the study is designed around three objectives: identifying the semantic difficulties learners encounter in contextual language use, examining the pragmatic difficulties learners face in interpreting and producing meaning, and analyzing how situational, social, and cultural contextual factors shape these difficulties. Data are intended to be collected through Discourse Completion Tasks, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observation, and analyzed using inductive thematic coding triangulated across instruments. Because data collection has not yet been conducted, the discussion and conclusion presented here are necessarily anticipatory. The study is expected to contribute a more integrated understanding of how semantic and pragmatic difficulties co-occur among Indonesian EFL learners, with implications for the design of more context-sensitive EFL curricula and classroom instruction.

Keywords: semantic difficulties; pragmatic difficulties; EFL learners; context-based analysis; Indonesian EFL

ABSTRAK

Kompetensi komunikatif dalam bahasa Inggris tidak hanya bergantung pada ketepatan gramatikal, tetapi juga pada penguasaan makna semantik dan kesesuaian pragmatik secara terpadu yaitu dua ranah yang relatif kurang mendapat perhatian penelitian dalam konteks EFL di Indonesia. Artikel pra-penelitian ini memaparkan landasan konseptual dan metodologis untuk sebuah studi deskriptif

kualitatif yang dirancang untuk mengkaji kesulitan semantik dan pragmatik yang dialami mahasiswa EFL Indonesia di Universitas Bosowa, Makassar, Sulawesi Selatan, melalui lensa analisis berbasis konteks. Berdasarkan kerangka teoretis terpadu yang mengacu pada teori tindak tutur, prinsip kerja sama, Interface Hypothesis, Relevance Theory, Politeness Theory, Conceptual Semantics, dan Schema Theory, penelitian ini dirancang dengan tiga tujuan: mengidentifikasi kesulitan semantik yang dialami pembelajar dalam penggunaan bahasa kontekstual, mengkaji kesulitan pragmatik yang dihadapi pembelajar dalam menafsirkan dan menghasilkan makna, serta menganalisis bagaimana faktor kontekstual situasional, sosial, dan budaya membentuk kesulitan tersebut. Data direncanakan dikumpulkan melalui Discourse Completion Tasks, wawancara semi-terstruktur, dan observasi kelas, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan pengodean tematik induktif yang ditriangulasi antarinstrumen. Karena pengumpulan data belum dilaksanakan, pembahasan dan simpulan yang disajikan bersifat antisipatif. Penelitian ini diharapkan memberikan pemahaman yang lebih terpadu mengenai bagaimana kesulitan semantik dan pragmatik saling terkait pada pembelajar EFL Indonesia, dengan implikasi bagi perancangan kurikulum dan pembelajaran EFL yang lebih peka konteks.

Kata Kunci: kesulitan semantik; kesulitan pragmatik; pembelajar EFL; analisis berbasis konteks; EFL Indonesia

A. INTRODUCTION

Achieving communicative competence in English remains a central yet elusive goal for many learners in Indonesian EFL settings. The ability to communicate effectively in English requires not only grammatical accuracy but also a deep and integrated command of how words carry meaning and how that meaning shifts across different communicative contexts. Two linguistic domains that are foundational to this capacity are semantics, which governs the study of

meaning encoded in language, and pragmatics, which concerns the interpretation of meaning as shaped by social context, speaker intention, and cultural convention. Despite their critical role in enabling authentic communication, both domains have received far less instructional and research attention in Indonesia than grammatical and phonological competence, leaving a significant gap in the understanding of how Indonesian EFL learners navigate meaning in real communicative situations (Nazri, 2025; Wang et al., 2024). Research conducted in recent years has documented a range of

semantic and pragmatic difficulties among EFL learners in diverse national contexts. From a semantic perspective, learners commonly struggle with lexical ambiguity arising from polysemy and homonymy, cross-linguistic interference that leads to inaccurate word choices, and an inability to use contextual cues to resolve meaning uncertainty (Ahmed et al., 2025; International Journal of English Language and Literature Studies, 2024; Waked, 2024). From a pragmatic perspective, difficulties with speech act interpretation, conversational implicature, and culturally appropriate language use have been found to persist even among learners who demonstrate relatively strong grammatical proficiency (Siregar et al., 2024; Nugroho & Liemantara, 2024; Sudartini et al., 2024). In the Indonesian EFL context specifically, these challenges are compounded by limited access to authentic English communicative environments, as English is predominantly encountered as a formal school subject rather than as a living medium of social interaction. Notwithstanding the growing volume of research on EFL difficulties in Indonesia, a critical and

largely unaddressed gap persists in the existing literature. Prior studies have tended to examine either semantic challenges or pragmatic competence in isolation, treating them as independent areas of inquiry. For instance, studies such as Ahmed et al. (2025) and Waked (2024) focus exclusively on lexical and semantic dimensions, while research by Siregar et al. (2024), Nugroho and Liemantara (2024), and Sudartini et al. (2024) is concerned solely with pragmatic competence and speech act performance. No study to date has investigated how semantic and pragmatic difficulties co-occur, interact, and mutually reinforce one another in the communicative experiences of Indonesian EFL learners. Moreover, existing studies have largely relied on isolated test instruments such as multiple-choice items or single-mode discourse tasks that strip language from the communicative contexts in which meaning is actually negotiated. This methodological tendency limits the explanatory power of findings and makes it difficult to understand how contextual factors situational, social, and cultural shape the nature and severity of learners' meaning-making

difficulties in practice. The present study addresses this gap by offering what is, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, one of the first integrated, context-based investigations of both semantic and pragmatic difficulties among Indonesian EFL learners at the university level. The novelty of this study is threefold. First, it treats semantic and pragmatic difficulties not as separate phenomena but as interrelated dimensions of a single, integrated meaning-making challenge an approach that more accurately reflects the nature of actual communicative difficulty. Second, it adopts a context-based analytical framework that situates learner language within real or realistic communicative contexts, enabling a more ecologically valid account of the difficulties learners face. Third, it focuses specifically on undergraduate EFL learners in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, a regional context that has been largely absent from the existing literature on EFL semantics and pragmatics, which has tended to center on learners in Java and North Sumatra. Together, these distinctive features position this study as a meaningful and original contribution to the field of EFL linguistics and

pedagogy in Indonesia. This study therefore aims to investigate the semantic and pragmatic difficulties experienced by Indonesian EFL learners through a context-based analytical lens. Three specific objectives guide the inquiry: (1) to identify the types of semantic difficulties most commonly encountered by Indonesian EFL learners in contextual language use; (2) to examine the pragmatic difficulties learners face in interpreting and producing meaning across different communicative contexts; and (3) to analyze how situational, social, and cultural contextual factors shape the nature and frequency of these difficulties. The findings are intended to yield both theoretical and practical value: theoretically, by advancing understanding of the semantic-pragmatic interface in second language acquisition within non-Western EFL contexts; and practically, by providing evidence-based insights that can inform the design of EFL curricula, teaching materials, and classroom instruction in Indonesia particularly in regions where English learning challenges have remained systematically underexplored. Semantics and Semantic Difficulties in

EFL Learning. Semantics is the subfield of linguistics devoted to the study of meaning how meaning is encoded in words, phrases, sentences, and larger units of discourse. Within the EFL learning context, semantic competence encompasses far more than the memorization of vocabulary definitions. It requires learners to grasp the full range of meaning a word may carry across different contexts, including its denotative (literal), connotative (associative), and culturally specific dimensions. This is a demanding task for Indonesian EFL learners, given that English and Bahasa Indonesia differ substantially in their lexical organization, the range of meanings associated with particular word forms, and the contextual conditions that determine which meaning of an ambiguous word is appropriate in a given situation. Lexical ambiguity stands out as one of the most persistent and consequential forms of semantic difficulty in EFL contexts. This category encompasses polysemy where one word form carries several related but distinct meanings, such as the word 'light' referring to illumination, low weight, or pale color and homonymy, where

identical word forms share no meaningful relationship, such as 'bat' (a flying mammal) and 'bat' (a sports implement). A recent study in the International Journal of English Language and Literature Studies (2024) revealed that university-level EFL learners encounter substantial difficulty when required to select the contextually appropriate meaning of polysemous and homonymous words, and that they frequently resort to L1-based guessing strategies in the absence of sufficient contextual support. This finding points to a fundamental challenge : when learners lack experience reading English in rich, meaningful contexts, they are deprived of the very resource context that fluent speakers rely on most heavily to resolve lexical ambiguity. Errors in word selection constitute another significant category of semantic difficulty, particularly in written production. Ahmed et al. (2025) investigated word choice errors among EFL undergraduates and found that semantically motivated errors those arising from the misleading similarity between L1 and L2 lexical items were among the most frequent and systematic error types. This form of cross-linguistic

interference occurs when learners incorrectly transfer the semantic boundaries of an Indonesian word onto its apparent English equivalent, producing selections that are grammatically acceptable but semantically inappropriate in the target language context. The prevalence of such errors reflects the degree to which learners' semantic knowledge remains anchored in L1 conceptual structures rather than reorganized around the distinct semantic architecture of English. Recent cognitive research has further illuminated the role of context in semantic processing, with implications for understanding EFL learner difficulties. Laurino and Kaczer (2025) employed pupillometry to demonstrate that a supportive global semantic context measurably reduces the cognitive effort required to access word meaning, particularly when the target word is ambiguous. This finding has direct relevance to the Indonesian EFL setting, where vocabulary is most frequently introduced through isolated practice word lists, translation exercises, and decontextualized drills rather than through meaningful, discourse-embedded language use. When learners encounter words

outside of coherent communicative contexts, they are denied the contextual scaffolding that normally eases semantic processing, rendering them systematically more susceptible to misinterpretation. Waked (2024) reinforces this point, demonstrating that lexical complexity and semantic ambiguity significantly impair EFL learners' reading comprehension outcomes, underscoring the urgent need for contextually grounded vocabulary and semantics instruction. Pragmatics and Pragmatic Competence in EFL Contexts. Pragmatics addresses the dimension of language use that lies beyond literal meaning how speakers deploy linguistic resources to accomplish social purposes, and how hearers reconstruct intended meaning by integrating what is said with what they know about context, social relations, and communicative conventions. Pragmatic competence therefore requires not only knowledge of linguistic forms but an understanding of when, why, and how those forms are used appropriately in socially situated interaction. Wang et al. (2024), whose comprehensive systematic review examined 42 studies on EFL and ESL pragmatic

competence, identified four principal research themes : the teaching and assessment of pragmatic competence, the relationship between pragmatic ability and general language proficiency, speech act production and comprehension, and the role of socio-cultural knowledge in pragmatic development. The breadth of this research agenda reflects the recognized centrality of pragmatic competence to effective second language communication. Among the most consequential pragmatic challenges facing Indonesian EFL learners is the tendency toward pragmatic failure producing or interpreting language in ways that violate the communicative expectations of the target language community. Siregar et al. (2024), examining pragmatic failure in Indonesian EFL classrooms, found that sociopragmatic failures rooted in misunderstanding of what is socially appropriate to say in a given situation occurred far more frequently than pragmalinguistic failures, which involve not knowing how to express a particular communicative function. This pattern reveals that the core difficulty for Indonesian learners is not a lack of linguistic resources but an

insufficient grasp of the social and cultural norms that govern English-language interaction, a gap that classroom instruction, with its emphasis on grammatical form, rarely addresses directly. The comprehension of conversational implicature the ability to infer meaning that is suggested rather than explicitly stated presents a further layer of pragmatic challenge. Nugroho and Liemantara (2024) examined how Indonesian EFL students interpreted implicature embedded in multimodal internet memes and found that most students consistently defaulted to literal, explicit readings of the text and image content, failing to retrieve the implied communicative intent behind gendered stereotypes depicted in the memes. This difficulty was traced to two interconnected factors : limited exposure to authentic English discourse outside the classroom, and the near-total absence of explicit instruction on pragmatic inference in the EFL curriculum. These findings echo Al Khadhmi's (2024) argument that pragmatic competence is inseparable from cultural competence : learners who have not been socialized into the communicative conventions of English-speaking

contexts are structurally disadvantaged when it comes to recognizing and producing implied meaning. Speech act competence represents a third major dimension of pragmatic difficulty for Indonesian EFL learners. Sudartini et al. (2024) conducted a systematic analysis of speech act representation across Indonesian high school EFL textbooks, concluding that instructional materials expose learners to only a narrow subset of the speech act types they are likely to encounter in authentic communication, providing insufficient practice in the production and comprehension of indirect requests, refusals, complaints, and other pragmatically complex acts. This instructional gap has measurable consequences : without exposure to a wide range of speech act forms and functions, learners develop impoverished pragmatic repertoires that constrain their communicative effectiveness. Conversely, Siregar et al. (2025) demonstrated that when speech act instruction is deliberately integrated into EFL pedagogy, learners' speaking performance improves significantly, pointing to clear and actionable pedagogical

solutions to what might otherwise appear to be an intractable difficulty. The Interplay of Semantics and Pragmatics in the Indonesian EFL Context. Semantics and pragmatics, though analytically distinct, are deeply and inevitably intertwined in the process of communication. Every act of meaning-making in language involves both dimensions at once : the semantic content of an utterance what its words literally mean provides the raw material from which the pragmatic meaning, what the speaker intends in this particular context, is constructed. Sorace's (2011) Interface Hypothesis lends theoretical support to this view, proposing that the semantics-pragmatics interface, the precise point at which the two domains must be jointly processed, is acquired later and remains less stable than either domain in isolation, which implies that semantic and pragmatic knowledge do not develop independently but are bound together through this shared interface : advances in one domain tend to support development in the other, while persistent gaps in either domain create compounding difficulties that undermine overall communicative competence. For EFL learners, this interdependence means

that semantic difficulties do not merely hinder word-level comprehension ; they actively impair the pragmatic inferencing process that depends on an accurate reading of lexical content. The interdependence of these two domains takes on particular significance in the Indonesian EFL context, where structural features of the educational environment constrain the development of both simultaneously. Because English in Indonesia is encountered almost exclusively as a subject of formal instruction rather than as a medium of spontaneous social interaction, learners have limited opportunities to observe how semantic choices and pragmatic intentions are coordinated in authentic communicative exchanges (Nazri, 2025). This lack of authentic exposure creates a compounding deficit: learners who cannot reliably interpret contextual word meaning are also less able to use that meaning as a basis for pragmatic inference, while learners who lack pragmatic awareness are less equipped to use communicative context as a resource for resolving semantic ambiguity. The result is a cycle of mutual reinforcement between semantic and pragmatic

difficulty that formal EFL instruction, with its predominantly form-focused orientation, rarely interrupts (Zulianingrum, 2025; Qi & Chen, 2025). Despite the scholarly recognition of this interdependence, a striking gap remains in the empirical literature : no study conducted in the Indonesian EFL context has examined semantic and pragmatic difficulties as a unified, interacting system. Existing Indonesian EFL research has addressed semantic challenges and pragmatic competence through separate lines of inquiry, employing distinct theoretical frameworks, instruments, and analytical procedures. While this disciplinary separation has generated valuable partial insights, it has also produced an incomplete picture of the communicative difficulties Indonesian learners actually face difficulties that, as this review has shown, are simultaneously semantic and pragmatic in nature and cannot be fully understood by examining either dimension alone. Furthermore, the methodological tendency in existing research to assess learner competence through decontextualized instruments such as isolated multiple-choice tests or single-scenario DCTs

means that the role of communicative context in shaping and mediating these difficulties has remained largely invisible in the data. A context-based analytical approach that treats learner language as embedded in social and situational contexts, and that investigates semantic and pragmatic difficulties as interrelated rather than independent phenomena, is therefore not merely methodologically preferable but conceptually necessary for advancing understanding of meaning-making challenges among Indonesian EFL learners. Theoretical Perspectives. To strengthen the theoretical foundation of this study, several theoretical perspectives are incorporated into the review, each offering a distinct lens through which the semantic and pragmatic difficulties of Indonesian EFL learners can be more comprehensively understood. Sorace's (2011) *Interface Hypothesis* offers a useful explanation for why semantic and pragmatic difficulties tend to persist even among learners who have achieved relatively advanced grammatical competence. The hypothesis proposes that acquiring properties internal to a single linguistic module, such as syntax or semantics alone, is

comparatively unproblematic for second language learners, whereas acquiring the *interfaces* between modules, particularly the syntax-pragmatics and semantics-pragmatics interfaces, remains persistently difficult and is often the last domain to stabilize, even in near-native speakers. Applied to the Indonesian EFL context, the Interface Hypothesis suggests that learners may demonstrate adequate command of semantic meaning and grammatical form in isolation, yet continue to struggle specifically at the point where lexical meaning must be integrated with contextual and pragmatic information to produce or interpret appropriate utterances. This theoretical lens helps explain why semantic-pragmatic difficulties are not simply a matter of insufficient vocabulary or grammar knowledge, but reflect a deeper, interface-level acquisition challenge that requires targeted pedagogical attention. Sperber and Wilson's (1986) *Relevance Theory* provides a cognitive-pragmatic account of how listeners and readers infer intended meaning beyond the literal content of an utterance. Rather than relying on a fixed set of conversational maxims,

Relevance Theory proposes that communication is governed by a single overarching principle : hearers search for an interpretation that yields adequate contextual effects for the least possible processing effort. For Indonesian EFL learners, this framework helps explain the consistent tendency, documented by Nugroho and Liemantara (2024), to default to literal readings of implicature-bearing content. Because inferring non-literal meaning demands the allocation of additional cognitive effort to weigh contextual assumptions against the speaker's utterance, learners with limited exposure to English-language discourse may lack the rich set of contextual assumptions needed to perform this inferential work efficiently, leading them to settle for the lowest-effort literal interpretation even when it is communicatively inadequate. Relevance Theory therefore complements Gricean and speech-act accounts by foregrounding the cognitive economy underlying pragmatic interpretation. Brown and Levinson's (1987) *Politeness Theory* contributes a face-based account of why learners struggle to calibrate appropriate levels of directness and mitigation in socially sensitive speech

acts such as requests, refusals, and complaints. The theory holds that every communicative act carries the potential to threaten the positive face, the desire to be liked and approved of, or the negative face, the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition, of either interlocutor, and that speakers select politeness strategies calibrated to the social distance, relative power, and weight of imposition involved in the act. Within the Indonesian EFL context, this framework is particularly relevant because Indonesian cultural norms of politeness, which are often more collectivist and indirectness-oriented than the norms assumed in Brown and Levinson's original Western-derived model, may not transfer straightforwardly onto English politeness conventions. Learners may therefore produce English utterances that are grammatically correct but socially miscalibrated, either excessively direct or excessively indirect relative to native English speaker expectations, a pattern consistent with the sociopragmatic failures identified by Siregar et al. (2024). Jackendoff's (2002) theory of *Conceptual Semantics* provides a cognitive-linguistic account of how

word meaning is mentally represented and organized in relation to conceptual structure rather than treated as a fixed, dictionary-like entry. According to this framework, the meaning of a lexical item is best understood as a structured conceptual representation linked to perceptual, spatial, and experiential knowledge, with cross-linguistic differences in lexical organization reflecting differences in how languages carve up conceptual space. This perspective offers a principled explanation for the cross-linguistic interference documented by Ahmed et al. (2025) : because Bahasa Indonesia and English partition conceptual space differently for many semantic fields, Indonesian EFL learners may transfer the conceptual boundaries of an L1 lexical item onto a superficially equivalent English word, producing selections that are conceptually motivated by L1 categorization but inappropriate in English. Conceptual Semantics thus situates lexical errors not as arbitrary mistakes but as the predictable product of mismatched conceptual-semantic mappings between the two languages. *Schema Theory*, as developed in cognitive psychology and applied to second

language comprehension by Carrell and Eisterhold (1983), explains how prior background knowledge, organized into mental frameworks or schemata, shapes the comprehension and interpretation of new linguistic input. Comprehension is understood as an interactive process in which incoming textual or contextual information is mapped onto existing schemata; when relevant schemata are absent, underdeveloped, or culturally mismatched, comprehension becomes effortful and prone to error or misinterpretation. This theory is directly applicable to the Indonesian EFL context, where learners frequently encounter English texts, scenarios, and communicative situations that presuppose culturally specific background knowledge, social scripts, or content schemata that have not been adequately developed through their predominantly classroom-based exposure to English. Schema Theory therefore complements the contextual and interface-based accounts discussed above by clarifying that semantic and pragmatic difficulty often originates not from a deficit in linguistic knowledge per se, but from a deficit in the culturally grounded background

knowledge that linguistic interpretation depends upon. Taken together, these theoretical perspectives, the Interface Hypothesis, Relevance Theory, Politeness Theory, Conceptual Semantics, and Schema Theory, enrich the theoretical foundation established by Searle's speech act theory and Grice's cooperative principle in the original framework of this study. Each theory addresses a different facet of the semantic-pragmatic difficulties under investigation : the Interface Hypothesis explains why difficulties concentrate at the junction between linguistic modules; Relevance Theory accounts for the cognitive economy underlying inferential failure; Politeness Theory explains miscalibration in socially sensitive speech acts; Conceptual Semantics explains cross-linguistic lexical interference at the level of mental representation; and Schema Theory explains how gaps in background cultural knowledge compound linguistic difficulty. Together, these frameworks support a multidimensional theoretical lens through which the data collected in this study can be interpreted.

B.METHODOLOGY

Research Design. This study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design, grounded in an interpretive epistemological framework. A qualitative orientation was selected because the central concern of this investigation understanding how Indonesian EFL learners experience and navigate semantic and pragmatic difficulties within specific communicative contexts calls for in-depth, meaning-centered inquiry rather than quantitative measurement of competence levels. Qualitative descriptive research is particularly well suited to studies that seek to characterize and explain phenomena as they naturally occur, without imposing predetermined categorical structures on the data (Wang et al., 2024; Nazri, 2025). A context-based analytical framework was applied throughout the study, ensuring that all instances of semantic and pragmatic difficulty were examined as they arose within and as shaped by the communicative contexts in which learners produced and interpreted language.

Research Participants. Participants were drawn from the

English Education Study Program (Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris) at Universitas Bosowa, Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who could provide information-rich data relevant to the research questions. Specifically, the study targeted intermediate-level EFL learners in their second or third year of undergraduate study a population chosen because learners at this stage possess sufficient productive and receptive English proficiency to engage meaningfully with extended communicative tasks while still exhibiting the kinds of semantic and pragmatic difficulties that are most analytically informative. The final number of participants was determined by the principle of data saturation, consistent with standard qualitative research methodology, whereby data collection continued until new participants ceased to yield novel analytical categories. Data Collection Instruments. Data were gathered through three complementary instruments, selected to ensure methodological triangulation and to capture semantic and pragmatic difficulties across multiple

modes of language use. The first instrument consisted of Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs), adapted to present participants with communicative scenarios varying in social distance, power differential, and situational formality, and designed to elicit both semantic choices and pragmatic responses in a controlled yet contextually grounded format. The second instrument was a semi-structured interview protocol, through which participants were invited to reflect on and describe in detail the difficulties they experienced in making and interpreting meaning in English, providing rich metacognitive data that complemented the performance data from the DCTs. The third instrument was classroom observation, conducted across multiple sessions to capture naturally occurring instances of semantic and pragmatic difficulty as they emerged in authentic communicative interactions. During the observation sessions, the researchers recorded instances in which learners appeared to misinterpret word meaning, misread pragmatic intent, or produce semantically or pragmatically inappropriate responses in real-time communicative tasks. The

combination of these three instruments controlled tasks, reflective interview, and naturalistic classroom observation ensured that the findings were grounded in multiple, converging lines of evidence and provided a comprehensive picture of learners' meaning-making difficulties across different contextual conditions (Wang et al., 2024). Data Analysis. Data analysis proceeded through thematic analysis guided by an inductive coding process, in which analytical categories were allowed to emerge from the data rather than being imposed a priori from theoretical frameworks. Semantic difficulties identified in the data were subsequently classified according to established lexical error taxonomies, encompassing errors of word choice, collocation, connotation, and polysemy resolution (Ahmed et al., 2025). Pragmatic difficulties were analyzed using an integrated theoretical framework drawing on Searle's (1979) speech act theory and Grice's (1975) cooperative principle and theory of conversational implicature. The influence of contextual variables including the situational formality of the communicative scenario, the social

relationship between interlocutors, and the cultural conventions governing the relevant communicative act was examined through systematic cross-case comparison of participant data collected across different contextual conditions. To ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis, member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with participants, and peer debriefing was employed through ongoing analytical discussion among the research team.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The theoretical framework developed in this study, integrating speech act theory, the cooperative principle, the Interface Hypothesis, Relevance Theory, Politeness Theory, Conceptual Semantics, and Schema Theory, offers a strong and well-evidenced basis for interpreting the semantic and pragmatic difficulties that Indonesian EFL learners are documented to face. The discussion that follows draws directly on this framework and on converging evidence from closely related Indonesian EFL studies to articulate, with considerable confidence, the difficulties this study is positioned to identify once fieldwork is

completed. As this article precedes the data collection phase, the patterns discussed below represent theoretically and empirically grounded expectations rather than confirmed findings of the present study; they are nonetheless firmly anchored in a substantial body of prior research on Indonesian EFL learners specifically, which lends them considerably more weight than speculation alone. With respect to the first research objective, identifying the semantic difficulties most commonly encountered by Indonesian EFL learners, the convergence of multiple independent error-analysis studies provides strong grounds for expecting that word-choice errors in this study will be neither random nor superficial, but systematically traceable to identifiable categories of semantic mismatch. Lexical error analyses of Indonesian EFL writing consistently identify semantic-level errors, including wrong near-synonym selection and calque, literal word-for-word translation from Bahasa Indonesia, as recurring and substantial categories within the broader error profile, a pattern attributable to learners mapping the conceptual boundaries of an Indonesian lexical item directly onto a

superficially equivalent English word. This pattern aligns precisely with the account offered by Conceptual Semantics, which explains such errors as the predictable product of mismatched conceptual-semantic mappings between English and Bahasa Indonesia rather than as arbitrary mistakes. It is further reinforced by Laurino and Kaczer's (2025) finding that semantic processing effort rises sharply when contextual disambiguation cues are sparse, a condition that closely describes the decontextualized, list-based vocabulary instruction still common in Indonesian EFL classrooms. Taken together, this convergence of error-analysis evidence and processing-based evidence makes it highly probable that the present study's DCT and interview data will likewise reveal calque-type and near-synonym confusion errors concentrated in scenarios offering limited contextual support. With respect to the second objective, examining pragmatic difficulties in interpreting and producing meaning, the combined lens of speech act theory, the cooperative principle, Relevance Theory, and Politeness Theory, read alongside a substantial

body of Indonesian-specific pragmatics research, points clearly toward three concentrated areas of difficulty. First, Nugroho and Liemantara (2024) found that Indonesian EFL students consistently default to literal, explicit readings of implicature-bearing content, a finding directly explained by Relevance Theory's account of hearers favoring the lowest-effort interpretation when contextual assumptions are not readily available; this study is therefore well positioned to find the same default-to-literal pattern in DCT responses to implicature-laden scenarios. Second, Chojimah's (2015) study of face-threatening acts among Indonesian university students, together with Gunas's (2024) finding that Indonesian EFL learners overwhelmingly favor conventionally indirect request strategies regardless of social distance or power differential, demonstrates a robust and well-documented tendency among Indonesian learners toward indirectness that does not always align with target-language expectations of directness in low-imposition contexts; Politeness Theory accounts for this tendency as a face-management strategy transferred from Indonesian

sociocultural norms, and the present study's DCTs, which vary social distance and imposition systematically, are specifically designed to capture this miscalibration. Third, the sociopragmatic failures documented by Siregar et al. (2024), shown to occur far more frequently than pragmlinguistic failures among Indonesian EFL learners, confirm that the core pragmatic challenge lies in social-contextual judgment rather than in linguistic form, exactly the distinction this study's interview protocol is designed to probe. The convergence of these three independent strands of evidence gives strong grounds for expecting that pragmatic failure in this study's data will likewise resolve into these three identifiable mechanisms rather than appearing as a single undifferentiated difficulty. With respect to the third objective, analyzing how contextual factors shape these difficulties, the Interface Hypothesis and Schema Theory together provide a coherent and well-supported explanation for why difficulty should vary systematically rather than randomly across communicative scenarios. The Interface Hypothesis identifies the

semantics-pragmatics interface, the precise point at which lexical meaning must be integrated with contextual inference, as the most acquisition-resistant domain in second language development, predicting that scenarios demanding this integration simultaneously will produce the highest concentration of errors. Schema Theory complements this by explaining why scenarios presupposing culturally specific background knowledge compound the difficulty further : Al Khadhmi (2024) demonstrates that pragmatic competence is inseparable from cultural competence, such that learners who lack the relevant content schemata for English-speaking sociocultural contexts are structurally disadvantaged regardless of their grammatical proficiency. This theoretically motivated prediction is reinforced by Sorace's (2011) own characterization of the semantics-pragmatics interface as a site of compounding rather than isolated difficulty, meaning that difficulty in one domain is expected to interact with, rather than remain independent of, difficulty in the other. The convergence of these theoretical and empirical sources, the Interface

Hypothesis and Schema Theory together, provides strong justification for expecting that the highest error concentrations in this study's data will occur precisely in scenarios that combine high pragmatic-inferential demand with unfamiliar cultural content. Taken together, these three discussions carry clear theoretical and practical weight. Theoretically, the strong convergence across independent strands of evidence, lexical error analysis, cognitive-pragmatic processing research, and Indonesian-specific politeness and implicature studies, justifies treating semantic and pragmatic difficulty as a single, integrated meaning-making challenge rather than as two separable competencies, directly supporting the conceptual position argued throughout the literature review. Practically, this body of evidence indicates that Indonesian EFL instruction stands to benefit substantially from contextually embedded vocabulary teaching that addresses calque and near-synonym confusion directly, explicit instruction in pragmatic inference and politeness calibration rather than reliance on incidental exposure, and the deliberate cultivation of the cultural

schemata that English-language pragmatic competence depends upon. These implications are grounded in a substantial and convergent body of prior Indonesian EFL research; the fieldwork this study is designed to conduct will serve to test and substantiate them directly within the specific population and context of Universitas Bosowa.

D. CONCLUSION

This article has laid out the conceptual and methodological foundation for a context-based investigation of semantic and pragmatic difficulties among Indonesian EFL learners at Universitas Bosowa, Makassar. The review of the literature established that semantic and pragmatic difficulties have predominantly been studied in isolation within the Indonesian EFL context, despite strong theoretical grounds, now reinforced by the Interface Hypothesis, Relevance Theory, Politeness Theory, Conceptual Semantics, and Schema Theory in addition to speech act theory and the cooperative principle, for treating them as interrelated dimensions of a single meaning-making challenge. Guided by this

integrated theoretical framework, the study is designed to pursue three objectives : identifying the semantic difficulties learners encounter in contextual language use, examining the pragmatic difficulties learners face in interpreting and producing meaning, and analyzing how situational, social, and cultural factors shape the nature and severity of these difficulties, using Discourse Completion Tasks, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observation as complementary instruments. Because the present article precedes data collection, its contribution at this stage is conceptual and methodological rather than empirical : it specifies a theoretically grounded, multidimensional lens through which the planned fieldwork can be interpreted, and it provides a clear rationale for why a context-based, triangulated qualitative design is necessary to capture difficulties that are simultaneously semantic, pragmatic, and shaped by situational and cultural context. Once fieldwork is completed, the resulting Findings, Discussion, and Conclusion sections will need to be revisited and substantiated with empirical evidence; the discussion offered in Section 4 should accordingly be read as a set of

theoretically motivated expectations rather than as confirmed results. Pending that empirical work, this study is positioned to contribute a more integrated understanding of how semantic and pragmatic difficulties co-occur among Indonesian EFL learners, with the ultimate aim of informing the design of more context-sensitive EFL curricula, teaching materials, and classroom instruction, particularly in regions of Indonesia, such as South Sulawesi, that have remained underrepresented in the existing literature.

DAFTAR PUSTAKA

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