New Zealand Studies in Applied Linguistics
2025, Vol. 31(1), [65–88]
https://doi.org/10.59690/fm90142

Why can't you help me? Pragmatic and cultural competence advice for *EAL background **WSBO

* English as an additional language
**Women who are small business owners

Anthea Fester and Sujani Thrikawala

Waikato Institute of Technology, Hamilton, Aotearoa New Zealand

Abstract

Owning a small business comes with several challenges and for those who identify as English as an additional language (EAL) migrant women who are small business owners (WSBO), some of the challenges are further exacerbated. These further challenges may be linked to the fact that they identify as female and that they are English as another language speakers. For the research project reported on in this article, a cohort of these businesswomen in Aotearoa New Zealand and specifically in the Waikato Region completed a survey and were interviewed on challenges that they faced. In the survey and interviews with the businesswomen and a group of their stakeholders, some challenges emerged that related to language and cultural competence. To provide potential solutions or management suggestions, interviews were conducted with a cohort of applied linguists who are English language teachers. The aim was to get the teachers' perspectives and advice on how the businesswomen could address several language and cultural competence situations.

Keywords: businesswomen, pragmatics, intercultural communication, English as an international language, English as an additional language, applied linguists

Background

Globally, scholars' attention has focused on the context of the ethnic minority businesswomen and there have been numerous studies on the experiences of migrant female small business owners (Aldrich & Waldinger, 1990). These have mainly been conducted in Europe, the UK and the USA (Poros, 2001; Purkayastha, 2005; Kloosterman, 2003) and many of them have predominantly focused on male entrepreneurs (Collins & Low, 2010) compared to this study that focuses on female entrepreneurs. However, Mitchelmore and Rowley (2013) highlighted the fact that

This work is licensed under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license.
Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Anthea Fester. Email: anthea.fester@wintec.ac.nz

migrant women who owned small businesses make significant contributions to the economies of the countries they reside in. Based on 80 face-to-face interviews conducted for Asian-born women entrepreneurs, Low (2008) stated that migrant women who started their business in Australia made significant economic contributions to new businesses and to job creation. However, in the Australasian region, there appears to be limited research related to the challenges and triumphs of migrant entrepreneurs (Pio, 2007), and especially those who identify as English as another language (EAL) background Women who are small business owners (WSBOs) in this region. The research reported holds significant potential for regional and national development of more support systems for EAL migrant female entrepreneurs in New Zealand as well as highlighting the need for a more intercultural communication approach in the entrepreneurial space. The overarching aim of this research project is to attempt to eradicate several barriers faced by EAL background women who want to start a business in New Zealand. Ideally systems need to be put in place to improve relationships between the EAL background WSBO and all the stakeholders. This can be achieved by enhancing their experience when conducting business in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Our understanding of the current situation is that this is the first study that builds on the prior research conducted, where the focus on both i) the direct voices of a diverse group of EAL background WSBO perspectives and ii) the voices of applied linguists (ALs) suggesting potential solutions are covered. Prior research on advice to employees and employers has been substantially covered by several researchers (Riddiford & Newton, 2010; Pio, 2007; Harris et al. 2006; Yeung & Crothers, 2016). However, the study covered in this article suggests potential practical solutions specifically related to managing pragmatic and cultural competence situations identified by the WSBO. The study also looks at the extent to which recommendations made by a group of ALs address up-to-date approaches such as intercultural communication.

Challenges faced by the migrant businesswomen

Empirical literature has discussed the challenges faces by EAL businesswomen when operating their businesses in other countries. Nahid and Shamsuddin (2001) stated that due to challenges, migrants do not get a chance to incorporate their human capital effectively into the current economic growth. Empirical evidence shows many challenges that they face, and among them language and cultural barriers are prominent (Fester & Thrikawala, 2024). Therefore, it is important to explore how language and cultural barriers could impact the business practices and the stakeholder engagement of these businesses.

English communication skills:

It is evident from research carried out over the past couple of decades (Ahmad & Khan, 2023; Ahmad, 2016; Cardona, 2015; Collier, 2010; McKay, 2002) that ensuring excellent English communication skills is vital to operate a business in an English-dominant country. This is also true in countries like Malaysia where English is either the main language or the business lingua franca (the language of choice in business). Ahmad and Khan (2023) conducted research in Malaysia and the overarching focus of the project was the crucial need for entrepreneurship education to include English communication skills. In this Malaysian-based research, participants felt that one of their biggest challenges was the need for English language education for certain skills, including, but not restricted to:

1. the ability to manage conflict, deliberate with business contacts and mediate successfully
2. clarity when participating in discussions and stating their views
3. strong communication skills that can lead to trust in business deals
4. strategies to provide feedback competently
5. building rapport with business contacts
6. building self-esteem
7. delivering oral presentations for impact.

An inability to correctly negotiate challenges can lead to confusion, mistrust, and failure to ensure success in the business world (Ahmad & Khan, 2023).

In the Aotearoa New Zealand context, previous resources and research have mainly focused on immigrants as entrepreneurs without focusing in detail on a cohort of female entrepreneurs (De Vries, 2007). Other researchers have focused on female migrants as employees in the workplace, with local employers (Pio, 2007; Pio & Singham, 2018). There have also been some studies conducted into female migrant entrepreneurs (Pio, 2007; Collins and Low, 2010). However, Pio (2007) focused on Indian migrants and Collins and Low (2010) focused on only Asian female migrants in Australia. In terms of work conducted on workplace scenarios and situations to support migrants and developing their sociopragmatic skills for employment, there has been extensive work conducted by ALs at Victoria University of Wellington on migrants as employees (Riddiford & Newton, 2010; Worktalk, 2020; Riddiford & Joe, 2010; Riddiford & Holmes, 2010). A popular resource titled *Worktalk*, is available through the government's immigration website and the website claims that *Worktalk* "is designed to help improve communication between New Zealand employers or managers and new migrant employees from other cultures" (Worktalk, 2020). Based on the above extensive research and the resources currently available, there seems to

be a paucity in the research into EAL background WSBO (entrepreneurs) in the Aotearoa New Zealand context (Fester & Thrikawala, 2024).

English as an international language, pragmatics and intercultural communication

To adopt a more balanced approach to addressing the challenges faced by the EAL businesswomen in this study, it is necessary to address research that relates to the notion of English as an international language (EIL), intercultural communication, and how these align with pragmatics. Yates (2010), states that it is crucial for women who are operating a business in a country that is not their home country to have pragmatic and cultural competence of the target country. Their personal relationships, human relationships, and business and management skills are very significant in business settings to continue their businesses (Mitchelmore & Rowley, 2013). As pragmatic and intercultural competence is essential to ensure good intercultural communication it is of pertinent relevance to this study and will be explored.

Looking at the globalisation of English, it is suitable to explore the concept EIL and how it is perceived by researchers. As mentioned by Zacharias and Manara (2013, p. vii) "With the evolving status of English, native-speaker norms should be examined and replaced by a paradigm that focuses on the recent English users and uses". This view suggests a major shift in the way we view English speakers and an angle where the ownership of the language no longer rests with those who have it as a first language. Sharifian (2009, p. 17), succinctly defines EIL as a "paradigm for thinking, research and practice" and that it does not refer to a specific English variety. It rejects the notion of a specific variety as a chosen form of English, especially as a *lingua franca* for global communication. Rather, it highlights the idea of English "with its many varieties" as "a language of international, and therefore *intercultural,* communication". This perspective or attempt to define EIL suggests an equality between all speakers of English and suggests that all speakers have a say in how and what constitutes effective communication (Young, 1996). In other words, EIL recognises the concept of *World Englishes* (Kirkpatrick, 2010, p. 28) and recognises the fact that all interlocutors must take responsibility for the success of the intercultural communication exchange.

Numerous researchers have defined the term 'pragmatics' and there appear to be certain features that resonate with these researchers in terms of the definitional boundaries for the term (Young, 1996; Levinson, 2001; Leech, 2016; Senft, 2014 & Huang, 2014). The central features seem to be that pragmatics relates to language use in specific contexts and what the objectives and intentions of the interlocutors are. Levinson (2001, p. 1) highlights the point that pragmatics works in a combinatorial effect with semantics to deliver messages and that it concentrates on the association

between the configuration of a semiotic system, in this case language, its use and the context in which it is used.

Schauer (2024, p. 10) suggests that in L2 pragmatics there is an understanding that linguistic pragmatics entails evaluating "what constitutes (in) appropriate and (im) polite language" within various cultures and contexts. This evaluation supports the work of Leech (2016), who also emphasises the need for politeness across cultures. Furthermore, the effective and appropriate use of the interaction is core to meeting the aims or success of the interaction (Schauer, 2024). Senft (2014, p.1) also echoes part of these views and suggests that "the meaning of utterances can only be understood in relation to overall cultural, social and interpersonal contexts, as well as to culture specific conventions and the speech events in which they are embedded". Taguchi and Roever (2017, p. 10) suggest that "pragmatics links forms and the ways in which they are used in a social context to perform a communicative act." These above-mentioned defining points indicate the complexity associated with what pragmatics is perceived to be as a subject or system. The complexity in trying to define pragmatics is further highlighted by Huang (2014, p. 1), who states that pragmatics "is a particularly complex subject with all kinds of disciplinary influence, and few, if any, clear boundaries". This "disciplinary influence" mentioned by Huang (2014) is also suggested by Senft (2014), a linguist who adopted an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach to his research. Senft views the notion of pragmatics as it is perceived through the lens of linguistics, as well as other disciplines, such as psychology, ethnology, sociology, political science and philosophy. The literature for this article does not lend itself to a deeper analysis of the various dimensions associated with analysing pragmatics such as, deixis, speech acts, conversational analysis and implicature. However, it does highlight the need for all parties to be engaged in establishing the boundaries for the specific pragmatic situation.

In addition to briefly defining the term pragmatics, it is timely for this article to address the notion of intercultural communication as EIL, pragmatics and intercultural communication are inextricably linked. The approach towards intercultural communication is strongly linked to linguistics, adopting the concept of EIL (see above), where all people who speak the language are seen as owning the language. In EIL, the thinking that those who have English as a first language own the language and have dominance over the language pragmatics and use is disputed.

Similarly to research into pragmatics, researchers appear to have an agreed sense that intercultural communication is complex and requires all parties to be thoroughly engaged in the communication to ensure success (Lee & Negrelli, 2025; Dang, 2025; Schauer, 2024; Neuliep, 2009; Taguchi & Roever, 2020). Some researchers acknowledge the strong link between pragmatics and intercultural communication (MCConaghy, 2022, as cited in Schauer, 2024) and Taguchi and Roever (2020).

Neuliep (2009, p. 2) adopts a different approach and raises the fact that national conflicts have often occurred because of ethnic, political and religious differences. Neuliep's view highlights the need for us to recognise and pursue intercultural communication in order to reduce the conflicts connected to ethnic, political and religious differences. Neuliep (2099, p. 2) further states that more urgent is the need for all people to feel that they are competent intercultural communicators and that it is deep-seated on an interpersonal level. This is to say, functioning competently within our "own personal, social and professional relationships" (p. 2) when communicating. This point can be interpreted to mean that it should come to us naturally and instinctively.

Notwithstanding the push for intercultural communication and the huge benefits of its implementation, there are challenges with the reality across societies, communities, as well as variations between low context and high context cultures that pose ongoing challenges. A slightly different perspective is presented by Ting-Toomey and Dorjee (2019) in discussing culture-sensitive competence, as they stress the point that the reality is that if you find yourself in a new cultural setting, there are three key aspects that you should note to ensure competence, and those are: "acquiring culture-sensitive and identity sensitive knowledge; developing flexible mind-set and open-hearted attitudes; and sharpening their communication competence capacities and skillsets" (p. 144).

Research question

The umbrella research question guiding this research project in a broader sense is: *How might we better support EAL background* WSBO *in the Waikato Region, Aotearoa New Zealand?*

The present focus is on the sub-question: *What advice around identified pragmatic and cultural challenges would a group of applied linguists provide to these EAL background WSBO?*

Context and participants

For the part of the research reported here, the background or lead-up had three phases. As these phases all involved research participants, ethical approval was needed, and this project received ethics approval from the Wintec (Waikato Institute of Technology) ethics committee for all the phases of the research project.

To understand the context and findings reported in this article it is necessary to give some background to the other phases in the broader study. In the first phase of our

study, we collected data from EAL background WSBO and a variety of their stakeholders. We used both questionnaire and interviews to collect data from the participants. Based on the analysis of initial data we identified numerous challenges faced by the EAL background WSBO, such as linguistic, cultural, business management, gender discrimination, and miscommunication (Fester & Thrikawala, 2024). These findings aligned with prior literature (Low, 2008; Nahid & Shamsuddin, 2001). However, that literature did not address the contextual and local differences that we have found with our data.

In the above-mentioned initial phase of our study, it was evident that challenges of pragmatic and cultural competence are more vital than other challenges. Therefore, part of our study concentrated on gaining feedback from the stakeholders who interact with the businesses of the EAL background WSBO. The findings in the first phase and second phase led to us focusing the third phase on conducting interviews with a cohort of experienced English language teachers who are ALs and who have worked in the Waikato region in the last ten years. Some of these ALs had EAL and some had English as their first language.

Methodology and design

The core purpose of this article is to share some of the advice offered by a group of ALs to the cohort of businesswomen on trying to manage self-identified pragmatic and cultural challenges. To answer the research question mentioned above, this study adopted a qualitative research method by adhering to the exploratory research design (Gupta & Woldemariam, 2011). It involved understanding the advice and perspectives of a group of experienced ALs. We used semi-structured in-depth interviews as the data-gathering tool for this phase of the research. Interviews are predominately used in social and cultural studies to understand the interpretations, experiences and spatialities of social life (Dowling et al., 2016; Cohen, et al, 2018. Also, Cohen, et al (2018) suggested that individual interviews will help to explore complex research problems as they help to build rapport and trust with the participants more so than other methods.

There are several envisioned phases for this project, and a mixed method was used to collect data for the first phase to provide possible solutions to societal problems (Klein, 2018; Leavy, 2016; Lawrence et al., 2022). As mentioned above, we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews, and we also used an online questionnaire to collect data from a cohort of EAL migrant-background women who are small business owners in the Waikato region. This mixed approach allowed participants to express their views in two different ways. It also helped the researchers to capture a wide range of participants voices in different ways (Adamson et al., 2011). For the questionnaire we had 18 respondents and for the semi-structured interviews we had 17 participants.

The second phase of this study was executed to collect data from business support or supply services accessed by the women small business owners who have EAL. For the second phase, data was gathered through semi-structured interviews. We had nine respondents in this second phase.

Following on from those two initial stages, this research publication is focused on the third phase of the study where a group of ALs and English language teachers were interviewed to provide potential pragmatic and cultural competence advice to support communication (Fester & Thrikawala, 2024) for the cohort of EAL businesswomen. The quotes in the scenarios (See Appendix A, EAL background businesswomen voices) that were presented to the ALs in the interviews were all taken from some of the businesswomen's responses when they were interviewed in the first phase of the larger study (see above). However, the ALs were given freedom to express their views beyond the topic, and they were able to deviate from the predetermined themes as these were semi-structured interviews (Drever, 1995). As highlighted above, this paper reports the findings of the third phase of the research project which is the interviews with the ALs.

For the businesswomen in the first phase of the study, the findings revealed that most of the participants ranked their English language abilities in all four skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) relatively high in the survey with more than a third ranking these as *Excellent* or *Good*. However, when they were interviewed, it became evident that they faced several language and cultural challenges related to operating their businesses in a largely English-speaking business environment (Fester & Thrikawala, 2024). They requested advice from the researchers on managing these challenges, as these challenges could be impacting on their business (especially how they negotiated their way around employees and suppliers). In addition to the pragmatic language barriers, the cohort of businesswomen also indicated that they faced some cultural competence challenges. This request from the businesswomen persuaded the researchers to extend our study to provide some potential advice (solutions) for them.

Acting upon the responses and requests from the cohort of businesswomen owners who are EAL, the third phase of the present study conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with six ALs. In the findings section when quotes from the six ALs are used, we use the coding I1, I2, I3 and so on to refer to each of thew six ALs. Purposive and convenience sampling approaches were applied to select ALs for this study (Perry, 2005; Wu, 2011) as they can potentially provide more informed perspectives on the possible solutions or advice to EAL businesswomen (Palinkas et al., 2015). The semi-structured interviews with the ALs were primarily focused on asking about potential solutions or advice to the EAL background WSBO on managing some of the

communication challenges that they identified. Each interview session with participants lasted between 30 and 40 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or online via Zoom. As stated above, these ALs were presented with the quotes or scenarios from the interviews with the businesswomen where these businesswomen identified challenges that they faced. All the interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and then transcribed to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the data. After the transcribing we used thematic analysis to devise the various themes and subthemes based on the interviewees' responses.

Findings

The table in Appendix A has a selection of quotes that were taken from interviews with the EAL background WSBO that relate to communication. As mentioned in the methodology, these quotes came from the interviews with the cohort of businesswomen from phase 1 of the study. These quotes were presented to the ALs and the key responses to five scenarios are discussed in this findings section.

Situation 1: English language barrier

In Situation 1 (see Appendix A for this study—quotes from EAL businesswomen) an EAL-background businesswomen indicated that English language ability is a barrier to communicating. Two of the six AL participants that were interviewed suggested that the businesswomen could consider getting mentors or professional bilingual practitioners in their business areas to guide them. In fact, the ALs said that as the business sector is quite specific, this advice could be given to all businesspeople not just EAL businesswomen. They said that the businesswomen should get a mentor, saying that:

> It would probably be worth having someone in, like a mentor-type role checking their work. (I2)

> Get a bilingual professional practitioner to get prepared, because they can communicate in their mother tongue. (I3)

The AL interviewee 1(I1) focused on direct practical advice about buying time while interacting, stating that responding immediately while engaging in an interaction can often be very challenging to the EAL businesswomen. The suggestion made was:

> There are ways in which an interaction where you can buy time, you know, to have an ability to process erm back channelling ... it's also that listening skill of deciphering, translating from the L1 to English and then seeing it. (I1)

Other participants focused on the process and time related to learning suitable business language and AL interviewees 3 (I3), 4 (I4) and 6 (I6) said that:

> I guess, once you start doing business, probably gradually you'll pick up a lot of lexical items, which are usually in that specific context. You'll become confident in preparing documents like that and communicating ideas more confidently. (I3)

> So there's a kind of, possibly a process of othering that's going on, being proficient in English will boost your confidence, and will have all sorts of knock-on-effects, which is always important. (I4)

> It's not just the English language competence, it's also cultural knowledge and also, customs and how they operate business ... people see things differently, they have different perspectives. Because of the different backgrounds and cultures and language. (I6)

An interesting comment by I4 appeared to suggest a different perspective to being asked to prepare a business plan saying that "immediately associating a lack of confidence to prepare a business plan with an English proficiency type issue. I couldn't actually really see English ability being the only real concern in any of them … it's around confidence and thinking". I5 went on to say that this business plan knowledge would be a challenge for speakers of English as a first language as well. So, it was not necessarily a challenge that speakers of other languages face, but rather a general challenge to anybody in the business sector.

It is evident that the advice from the ALs suggests that support in the form of mentors for these women would be beneficial, and also, learning more around English business content connected to lexical items and using techniques like back channeling to allow them to have more control of interactions. The comments by AL Interviewee 5 (I5) highlights possible challenges related to different cultural backgrounds and therefore having varying perspectives. What needs to be focused on is the reality of these different cultural exchanges and the notion of intercultural communication. It should not only be the diverse cultures of the EAL businesswomen that should be addressed, but also the diverse perspectives of all interlocutors in an EIL environment, regardless of whether they have English as a first language or not.

Situation 2: Academic English and employer

For Situation 2 (see Appendix A), the EAL businesswoman (who had completed a New Zealand university degree) said that her English was not good, but she found that with

certain stakeholders, like in the banks and with suppliers, there were often people who spoke her first language. So, she got around the language barrier that way. However, the AL respondents had some interesting advice and views on this comment. They said that the EAL-background businesswomen should not rely on the fact that an essential stakeholder would be able to communicate with her in her first language. Advice included a suggestion that this businesswoman needs to have more connections with diverse people outside of the business and in everyday settings. The person also needs to improve their English because they may not always have somebody who spoke their own language. Also, I3 raised the point that the person would constantly be feeling less confident and nervous when they are expected to communicate fully in English and suggested that people might treat you with less respect "if you don't speak English in a largely English-speaking country" and added that "I would encourage her to learn more English" (I3). There was an element of empathy shown by the AL around this situation as I3 also did not have English as a first language. There are other interesting suggestions made by the cohort of ALs around the *Academic English and employers' situation* that can be viewed in Appendix B.

Situation 3: Perception of victim with English language miscommunication

For Situation 3 (see Appendix A), I6 gave advice on adopting a positive and proactive response to miscommunication situations. The suggestion was that these EAL businesswomen consciously note down the specific miscommunication incident, reflect on it, learn from it, and see it as a potential error and use the learning to address similar scenarios in future. I6 suggested:

> Pay attention to the reaction that you get when, you know, and your uses of language and then pick up miscommunications, can, I think, can be quite a powerful learning kind of moment as well, as long as you're going to reflect on it ... as a potential error and you know, or you've done something linguistically pragmatically kind of wrong. (I6)

A useful approach suggested by I3 was for both parties in the dialogue to take responsibility for the miscommunication:

> It's a mutual two-way thing, when, whenever miscommunication happens, I guess it requires both parties involved to do something to get over that barrier. (I3)

This point strongly supports the intercultural communication view that all interlocutors need to work on making an interaction work and they all need to take responsibility for the miscommunication.

Reflecting on, changing and learning from miscommunication were suggested for managing miscommunication. In addition, another point that was raised was the reality that miscommunication is a two-way thing and that the other party (often the English first language speaker) might be responsible and need to work on avoiding miscommunication. For this situation, 'Perception of victim with English language miscommunication', other suitable additional comments made by the AL cohort can be viewed in Appendix C.

Situation 4: Direct questions and politeness

In Situation 4 (Appendix A), the EAL businesswomen stated that employees or support service workers thought that they (the businesswomen) were abrupt or rude because of the way they made their requests. This was evident when the businesswomen used the question "Why can't you help me...?" to the supplier, and the supplier thought she was rude as the question was too direct. The particular businesswoman added to this comment by saying "I'm come from a country that we don't use 'pleases', 'thank yous'. We use it on voice to, to make the different". Several of the comments made by the AL participants focused on the need for these businesswomen to know about pragmatic politeness in the Aotearoa New Zealand business context, highlighting the essential role that small talk plays prior to requesting something. Another piece of advice was that these businesswomen needed to use hedging or tentative language to soften their questions. I3 said that the language used by the businesswomen would be perceived to be challenging and abrupt in the Aotearoa New Zealand business context. In addition, I1 felt that in Kiwi-to-Kiwi negotiation the "relationship is really relational, compared to transactional", like in some Asian countries. A follow-up comment was: "actually, to be successful here, you really need to blend those two, that banter, that small talk that everyone really does here, then that's when it can really open up other opportunities" (I1).

Evaluating what is happening around you and learning and then using hedging, the focus on how relationships are established with certain language, tones and Kiwi interactions were highlighted. Appendix D shows other key points raised by the AL cohort relevant to the 'Use of direct questions and politeness'.

Situation 5: Concepts of manners (*please* and *thank you*)

Situation 5 (Appendix A) covers one EAL background businesswomen's challenging experience trying to negotiate with the use of a simple *please* and *thank you* for displaying manners in interactions. The ALs highlighted certain features of managing this politeness in the business sector and these included intonation practice, tone and the crucial nature of getting it correct. I3 suggested aiming towards, "being a little more polite than you think might be necessary and is never a bad idea". In addressing

the concept of manners, I6 raised an interesting perspective saying that this businesswoman needs to think more deeply about interactions in English and how politeness is manifested:

> So this is someone clearly who hasn't, hasn't reflected deeply on English and hasn't been instructed as well. They think that, you know, it's all about *please* and *thank you* and it's not... And *please* can be quite rude, you know, if used in an incorrect [way], *please*, you know that...So it's all about intonation and, and it well, it's in those other linguistic things like indirectness".(I1)

Overall, the need for the EAL background WSBO to commit to deeper reflection with suitable actions around pragmatic and cultural responses in the Aotearoa New Zealand business environment is crucial for success. In providing advice to the EAL background WSBO, there were some additional comments made by the AL cohort that can be viewed in Appendix E.

Discussion

The main purpose of our study was to gather pragmatic and culture related advice from a cohort of ALs (six) who were either working in or had worked in the Waikato Region. This advice was to be shared with a group of female small business owners who have English as another language and who had participated in semi-structured interviews in an earlier phase of the same overarching study. In these interviews, the businesswomen shared some challenges that they face, and they asked the researchers to provide them with advice on managing similar situations in the future. To enable us to gather this advice, we presented the ALs with a set of scenarios that came from the businesswomen when they shared experiences and challenges with the project researchers. When the researchers conducted the first phase of the bigger study and interviewed the EAL background women with small businesses, they asked us for advice on certain perceived pragmatic and cultural challenges. That led to the interviews with the ALs.

Based on the given scenarios, a point raised by the ALs was the need for the EAL background WSBO to reflect more deeply on their interactions with stakeholders, to be aware of their interaction patterns and why these could be perceived to be abrupt and impolite. The ALs said that the businesswomen also need to be cognisant of varied stakeholder perspectives and the difference between their cultural responses and those expected in many situations in Aotearoa New Zealand. This association was evident, as several of the aspects that the EAL businesswomen faced challenges with (see Appendix A) were included in the list that the participants in the Ahmad and Khan (2023) study felt needed to be included in entrepreneurship education for better

communications skills in English (see *Background* above). As far as the researchers are aware, this advice in the local Aotearoa New Zealand context has not been addressed anywhere else. Also, the findings in the study reported here had some additional variations that could be perceived to be pertinent to the cohort and be region specific. These cultural tendencies include the practice of engaging in small talk before conducting business. It also includes the point that Kiwi business interactions are often perceived to be relational interactions rather than transactional. However, the advice given by these ALs could be perceived to be following a deficit model and suggests that there would be no give and take in the interaction patterns where stakeholders from diverse cultures were involved.

We have discerned several key factors that are pertinent for this project and deserve to be addressed here. One line of enquiry is to take an intercultural competence approach into account when analysing the ALs' responses to the scenarios. It became evident that out of all the responses to the five scenarios presented to them, only two of the ALs gave some advice that suggested that communication is a two-way interaction and that all interlocutors are responsible for the success of the delivery of the message. As suggested by I3, the simple message that communication is a two-way thing means that both ends of the interaction (receiving and giving) have a role to play in making communication work. We also need to acknowledge the rich contribution EAL background small business owners can add to the sector. Following the lead of researchers such as Sharifian (2009) and Zacharias and Manara (2013) on supporting English as an international language, the researchers recognise the value of this positive and inclusive approach to all speakers of English. However, based on the interviews with both the EAL businesswomen and these ALs, it became evident that there might be a mainly intrinsic view that it is the EAL businesswomen who must ensure that the line of communication is successful. The idea that all interlocutors need to take responsibility for the success of the interaction was raised by Interviewee 3 and Interviewee 6 (see the findings above). ALs may be aware of IEL and intercultural competence as theoretical constructs but suggestions around implementing these concepts as advice for the EAL businesswomen was not always clear. In fact, several of the pieces of advice provided by these ALs seem to suggest that the businesswomen need to adjust completely and that they need to ensure that clear communication happens between them and their stakeholders.

Another line of enquiry is posited when we look at Situation 4 above where the focus was on direct questions, and the negative response of the product supplier. In this interaction the supplier made the businesswoman feel that she was rude and impolite. However, if suppliers aim to continue to do business with EAL businesswomen, they also probably need to have a better understanding of intercultural communication and their client base. As reinforced by Sharifian (2009) and Kirkpatrick, (2010) EIL and the notion of *World Englishes* negates the older deficit model where English is

somehow owned by only those who have English as a first language. This also echoes the views that the responsibility rests on both interlocutors to ensure that the communication engagement is equal and that all parties need to ensure that messages are shared and received successfully. It was interesting to note that two of the AL participants also identified as EAL speakers and yet they seem to have firm comments (see I3 and I4) that suggested that the burden of communication rests mainly with the EAL businesswomen. As the businesswomen asked the researchers of this project for advice on how they can improve their communication, it would appear that they also hold the view that the burden of delivery within most communication messages rests with them.

Looking at research conducted in Aotearoa New Zealand that is connected to the project reported here, the work of Riddiford and Newton (2010) and Riddiford and Holmes (2010) provided advice to employers working in Aotearoa New Zealand. However, these projects fall short on addressing advice specifically to EAL businesswomen who have their own businesses and is probably not as useful for entrepreneurs compared to employees.

Adopting an intercultural competence approach to advice provided to these businesswomen would be ideal. Current theory certainly promotes a more inclusive IEL view but based on the requests from these businesswomen, they recognise that they are trying to fit into a culture where English is so dominant. Therefore, if they want their businesses to thrive, they feel that they need to shift their interaction patterns. Taking the work of researchers such as Lee and Negrelli (2025), Dang (2025), Schauer (2024) and Neuliep (2009) into account, it would be a strength for Aotearoa New Zealand business sector, if the mindsets of stakeholders in the business world could change to embrace intercultural competence. It would be beneficial to create a business world where EIL is adopted, and all interlocutors work at making communication successful for all participants to benefit.

In saying that, another current perspective worth exploring that is of relevance is that of researchers such as Ahmad and Khan (2023), Cardrona (2015) and Collier (2010), who have explored the essential need for those conducting business in English dominant countries to have excellent English. The advice provided by the ALs in the study reported here, where the participants suggest that the businesswomen should spend more time on learning business English and that they should get mentors or shadow other businesswomen, comes across as presenting a deficit model in contrast to a positive intercultural competence model. A question that should probably be asked is whether the business sector in the Waikato region is ready to move on and adopt an intercultural competence best practice model with a growing diverse business sector? In other words, on the ground in the Waikato region, small business owners and their stakeholders may not be at a stage where they are open to a move to a more

empowering communication model for an industry that has many businesspeople who are from EAL backgrounds. So, there is no denying that these potentially opposing views, the push for intercultural competence and the need to include strong business English language suggest a continuous grapple in the small business sector.

Conclusion

This current study explores an existing research gap in the literature by identifying the advice and feedback given by a group of ALs to a cohort of EAL background WSBO on how to better manage specific pragmatic and cultural challenges that they face. In the Aotearoa New Zealand context, there has been substantial research conducted by several researchers (Pio, 2007; Pio & Singham, 2018; Riddiford & Homes, 2010; Riddiford & Joe, 2010; Riddiford & Newton, 2010) who all provide useful advice to migrants related to employment in different settings. However, to reiterate, the findings shared in this article add to the body of advice and adopt a more intercultural competence approach where the emphasis is on all parties engaging in an interaction taking responsibility to ensure the success of the exchange. In the above-mentioned previous research, neither the direct voice of ALs, nor the adoption of an intercultural communication approach were overtly mentioned or evident. The current research was able to provide the basis for an agenda for a future with a more intercultural competence approach and a shift in the thinking of the small business sector connected to a more diverse stakeholder group.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to our participants for providing insight into this research. Also, thanks to our research assistants for their efficient work.

Funding

We would like to thank Waikato Trust for having faith in our project and providing the valuable funding that allowed us the time to focus on our research project.

References

Adamson, J.L., Brown, H., & Fujimoto-Adamson, N. (2011). Archiving self-access: Methodological considerations. *Asian EFL Journal*, *13*(2), 11-33.

Ahmad, I.S. & Khan, Z.F.Y. (2023). English language skills and becoming a global entrepreneur: Lessons for entrepreneurship education. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, *22*(6), 195-211.

Ahmad, S. R. (2016). Importance of English communication skills. *International Journal of Applied Research, 2*(3), 478–480.

Aldrich, H.E. & Waldinger, R. (1990) Ethnicity and entrepreneurship. *Annual Review of Sociology, 16*, 111–35.

Fester, A., & Thrikawala, S. S. (2024). Challenges facing women who are small business owners and have English as an additional language in the Waikato region, New Zealand: An explorative inquiry. *Scope: (Work-based Learning), 6,* 51-61. https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.6006006

Cardona, J.T. (2015). Effective oral communication skills in business: An action research on course-content enrichment of English 14 of BSBA students of the college of business, entrepreneurship and accountancy at the Cagayan State University, Andrews Campus. *International Journal of Advanced Research in Management and Social Sciences, 4*(11), 242-253.

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research methods in education*. Routledge.

Collier, S. (2010). Getting things done in the L1 and L2: Bilingual immigrant women's use of communication strategies in entrepreneurial contexts. *Bilingual Research Journal, 33*(1), 61-81. https://doi.org/10.1080/15235881003733365

Collins, J. & Low, A. (2010). Asian female immigrant entrepreneurs in small and medium-sized businesses in Australia. *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development, 22(1)*, 97-111.

Dang, N.G. (2025). Promoting intercultural competence in EFL contexts: Insights from Vietnamese university teachers. *IAFOR Journal of Education*, 13*(1)*, 149-170.

De Vries, H.B. (2007). *The influence of migration, settlement, cultural and business factors on immigrant entrepreneurship in New Zealand* [Doctoral thesis, University of Canterbury, New Zealand]

Dowling, R., Lloyd, K., & Suchet-Pearson, S. (2016). Qualitative methods 1: Enriching the interview. *Progress in human geography*, *40*(5), 679-686.

Drever, E. (1995). *Using semi-structured interviews in small-scale research.* Edinburgh: The Scottish Council for Research in Education.

Gupta, D., & Woldemariam, G.S. (2011). The influence of motivation and attitude on writing strategy use of undergraduate EFL students: Quantitative and qualitative perspectives. *Asian EFL Journal, 13*(2), 34-89.

Harris, R., Tobias, M., Jeffreys, M., Waldegrave, K., Karlsen, S., & Nazroo, J. (2006). Racism and health: The relationship between experience of racial discrimination and health in New Zealand. *Social Science & Medicine, 63(6)*, 1428-1441.

Huang, Y. (2014). *Pragmatics* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Kirkpatrick, A. (Ed.). (2010). *The Routledge handbook of World Englishes*. Taylor & Francis Group.

Klein, J.T. (2018). Learning in transdisciplinary collaborations: A conceptual vocabulary. In D. Fam, L. Neuhauser, & P.T. Gibbs (Eds.), *Transdisciplinary theory, practice and education: The art of collaborative research and collective learning* (pp. 11–22). Springer International Publishing.

Kloosterman, R.C. (2003). Creating opportunities. Policies aimed at increasing openings for immigrant entrepreneurs in the Netherlands. *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development, 15*(2), 167-181.

Lawrence, M. G., Williams, S., Nanz, P., & Renn, O. (2022). Characteristics, potentials, and challenges of transdisciplinary research. *One Earth, 5*(1), 44–61. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.oneear.2021.12.010

Leavy, P. (2016). *Essentials of transdisciplinary research: Using problem-centered methodologies*. Routledge.

Lee, J & Negrelli, K. (2025). Students on the move: Assessing intercultural competence of American study abroad sojourners in Japan and Korea. *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education.* 17*(2)*, 159-178.

Leech, G.N. (2016). *Principles of pragmatics*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315835976

Levinson, S.C. (2001). *Pragmatics*. https://pure.mpg.de/rest/items/item_66467/component/file_66468/content

Low, A. (2008). Economic outcomes of female immigrant entrepreneurship. *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business, 5*(3-4), 224-240.

McKay, S.L. (2002). *Teaching English as an international language: Rethinking goals and perspectives* (pp. 6-7). Oxford University Press.

Mitchelmore, S., & Rowley, J. (2013). Entrepreneurial competencies of women entrepreneurs pursuing business growth. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development, 20(1)*, 125-142.

Nahid, A., & Shamsuddin, A.F.M. (2001). Immigration and the unemployment benefit programme in Australia. *Applied Economics, 33*, 1587-1597.

Neuliep, J.W. (2009). *Intercultural communication: A contextual approach*. Sage.

Palinkas, L.A., Horwitz, S.M., Green, C.A., Wisdom, J.P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research, 42*(5), 533-544.

Perry, F. (2005). *Research in applied linguistics: Becoming a discerning consumer*. Erlbaum.

Pio, E. (2007), Ethnic entrepreneurship among Indian women in New Zealand: A bittersweet process. *Gender, Work and Organization*, *14*(5), 409–432.

Pio, E., & Singham, M. (November, 2018). *Inclusive workspaces: Diversity and public policy.* The Policy Observatory, AUT. https://thepolicyobservatory.aut.ac.nz

Poros, M. V. (2001). The role of migrant networks in linking local labour markets: the case of Asian Indian migration to New York and London. *Global networks, 1*(3), 243-260.

Purkayastha, B. (2005) Skilled migration and cumulative disadvantage: The case of highly qualified Asian Indian immigrant women in the US. *Geoforum, 36(*2), 181–96.

Riddiford, N. & Holmes, J. (2010). Professional and personal identity at work: Achieving a synthesis through intercultural workplace talk. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, *10*(1), p.1-17. https://doi.org/10.36923/jicc.v10i1.494

Riddiford, N. & Joe, A. (2010). Tracking the development of sociopragmatic skills. *TESOL Quarterly,* 44*(1)*, pp.195-205.

Riddiford, N. & Newton, J. (2010). *Workplace talk in action: An ESOL resource.* School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies, Victoria University of Wellington.

Senft, G. (2014). *Understanding pragmatics*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203776476

Schauer, G. (2023). *Intercultural competence and pragmatics.* Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-44472-2_1

Sharifian, F. (Ed.). (2009). *English as an international language: Perspectives and pedagogical issues*. Multilingual Matters.

Taguchi, N., & Roever, C. (2020). *Second language pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.

Ting-Toomey, S. & Dorjee, T. (2019). *Communicating across cultures*. The Guilford Press.

Worktalk (2020, March). *Tools and resources to develop inter-cultural capability*. https://www.ethniccommunities.govt.nz/resources/inter-cultural-capability-resource-hub/tools-and-resources-to-develop-inter-cultural-capability/#:~:text=Worktalk%20is%20designed%20to%20help%20improve%

20communication%20between,to%20support%20New%20Zealanders%E2%80%99%20collective%20social%20cohesion%20efforts.

Yates, L. (2010). Pragmatic challenges for second language learners. *Pragmatics Across Languages and Cultures, 7*, 287-308.

Yeung, S. & Crothers, C. (2016). Patterns of perceived discrimination in New Zealand and their social contexts. *New Zealand Sociology, 31(7)*, 205-226.

Young, R. (1996). *Intercultural communication: Pragmatics, genealogy, deconstruction*. Multilingual Matters.

Wu, H.J. (2011). Anxiety and reading comprehension performance in English as a foreign language. *Asian EFL Journal*, *13*(2), 273-307.

Zacharias, N.T. & Manara, C. (2013). Preface. In N.T. Zacharia & C. Manara (Eds.), *Contextualising the pedagogy of English as an International Language: Issues and tensions* (p. vii). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Appendix A. Comments from EAL background WSBO participants

Nature of challenge	Comments from EAL background WSBO participants
English ability and processing	**SITUATION 1: English language barrier** *Is English language a barrier – Yes, definitely, just because, er, when you … so for banks sometimes they will ask you to prepare a proposal or business plan. We can prepare business plans. You can speak English, but you can't think in English. You can't dream in English. So, when you want to convert that to the language, you will have the difficulty putting your ideas into words* (P2). **SITUATION 2: Academic English and employer** [Participant 3 completed a degree where half the qualification was delivered in her home country and half in a New Zealand university – she said that the academic English is different] *Actually, I don't think my English is good. I never been to the like test…. Nowadays even in like supplier or in the bank they also have like Asian people over there right … it's not, they're not all Kiwi or local, right. So, you can easily find our [language] representative, you know. Like if you really have any special requirements of the language* (P3)

	SITUATION 3: Perception of victim with English language learning *I think if people cannot communicate, they cannot think they are a victim, they should go and improve their English because staying here we can. I always tell people don't sit here and say they are victims, go … and there is a lot of public speaking courses … because certain words you can use people get offended* (P7)
Possible pragmatic and cultural challenge	**SITUATION 4: Direct questions and politeness** [About interacting with suppliers] *They said that, they thought that I'm so rude to them like, when I was asking the question, direct question. Why can't you help me?* (P8) **SITUATION 5***:* **Concepts of manners (please & thank you)** [About interacting with suppliers and employees] *I'm come from a country that we don't use 'pleases', 'thank yous'. We use it on voice to, to make the different* (P8)

Appendix B. ALs responses on Academic English and employers

Applied Linguists' collated direct responses to Situation 2: **Academic English and employer**

… be doing something where she has more connection with people in an everyday setting (I2).

doing things like … night classes where they're going and learning cooking with Kiwis, or learning how to change tires and cars, something where it's more of an everyday scenario with native speakers in a non-academic context (I2).

... trying to improve their English would be necessary (I2).

... they can't always rely on support finding a supplier or a banker who can speak their mother tongue (I2).

... you will find people who will treat you with less respect when you don't speak English in an English-speaking country. And for, for her own benefit, I would encourage her to learn English ... (I3).

... not the case every day, everywhere (I3).

... kind of constant feeling of uncomfortable and not confident, and nervous...(I5).

Appendix C. ALs responses on the perception of victim with English language miscommunication

Applied Linguists' collated direct responses to Situation 3: **Perception of victim with English language miscommunication**

This person (businesswoman who shared the quote) probably comes from a place of privilege, probably has had opportunities, the access to education, higher education, and so there's that norms that they have, and of access. So, if I can do it, why can't others without really examining their, their positionality, their class ... You're not really considering, like the time factor or other people who have children, or all of these different barriers to actually access these free things. It's not really free when people are time poor, or have all of these family expectations. I don't really haven't in a conversation with people that actually describe themselves as victims, you know, they described as a really difficult situation of not being able to find jobs or access things or navigate different systems or understand different information that's out there (I1).

Definitely, whoever, whoever chooses to live in this country or study or work in this country should really aim at improving their English. (I3).

She's somebody who's very much like, you know, if I want something, I go and I work for it. I think that's a beneficial attribute to have or a beneficial perspective to have, as long as you don't apply it too much to other people ... without knowing their circumstances, it can be quiet, it can, it can lead to only very partial understandings of people's realities, and maybe more judgement than people deserve, which is not good for you or for them, (I4).

… I'd invite them to bring their miscommunications if they'd had any experience in the community, let's talk about it, you know, and it's kind of unpack what happened.
folding into quite demanding kind of intonation. And I said, Oh, yeah, now I can see what what's happened here, you know, and kind of unpacked it for him. It was that intonation.

sounded quite demanding. If he sorted out that, you know, that would have covered a multitude of sins there. (I6)

Appendix D. ALs responses on direct questions and politeness

Applied Linguists' collated direct responses to Situation 4: **Direct questions and politeness**

And so when you just get straight to it, when you don't do that small talk, the bit you do before you get into a request is really crucial … Kiwi to Kiwi, the negotiation, the relationship is really relational. Whereas in a lot of Asian countries, it's transactional … actually to be successful here, you really need to blend those two, that banter, that small talk that everyone really does here, then that's when it can really open up other opportunities. (I1)

… what native speakers do in a similar situation, sort of that hedging tentative language … just because you can say that in your own language, doesn't mean that you can in another language … that hedging learning, that, how to kind of soften whatever it is that you're asking. (I2)

… give them a lesson on pragmatics … that is very direct, you know, that is a challenging tone … interpreted as being aggressive (I3)

… it's totally a pragmatic politeness adjustment … I use a lot more, I think, conditional kind of, I use a lot more … I dance around things a lot more here, I'm a lot less direct … now we have to kind of construct politeness in ways that are quite layered. And that takes an extended amount of time to sort of sink into and feel comfortable with, and, and to just come out with like, it takes a long time. (I4)

In Western culture, people think indirect requests is more polite than direct requests … use a lot of like markers *please, thank you, can you please*, *would you please* ... so indirect and direct request is a pragmatic aspect. So you got to be really careful when you interact with people to give better impression, or to build a better relationship … but everyone needs to learn about how to politely interact with other people. It's not just in English. (I5)

… that the person is saying is assuming the other person's unhelpful … probably an attitudinal thing ... that positive negative politeness, directness. She's just trying to be direct. (I6)

Appendix E. ALs views on concepts of manners

Applied Linguists' collated direct responses to Situation 5: **Concepts of manners (please & thank you)**

> But the 'please' comes in a different way … understand how it's done on your own and then and find the equivalent in English because again, it's very different. We use it on voice. So yeah, intonation practices, you know, is really crucial. (I1)

> At first probably more consciously trying to add it to, to, to her conversations later on, it will become natural. Tone matters a lot in English as well. I do think she needs to realize that your tone when speaking English matters as well. (I3)

> … being especially, if you're not from here, kind of being a little more polite than you think might be necessary is never a bad idea. I'd approach a situation like this by being quiet calm, always be calm. If you raise your voice, if you yell, absolutely don't yell in the workplace. That's a very big rule. Don't raise your voice (I4).

> But in English, you are interacting in English and that's what they use. And if you don't use [politeness], you will be interpreted as rude. So, you have no choice. (I5)

> So, this is someone clearly who hasn't, hasn't reflected deeply on English and hasn't been instructed as well. They think that you know, it's all about *please* and *thank you* and it's not. And *please* can be quite rude, you know, if used in an incorrect, *please*, you know that … So it's all about intonation and stuff here as well, and it, well, in those other linguistic things of indirectness. It's all about *please* and *thank you*. That's their kind of rational explanation, but maybe that's not what they actually do as well. This politeness theory ... voice and yeah, grammar and stuff. (I6)