CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE CURRENT STATUS IN YEMEN

Introduction

Learning and teaching English language is an essential component of the curricula at different levels of education in Yemen. English has become necessary given its widespread use throughout the world. Since the beginning of the new millennium, English has grown in international importance achieving a status of English as international language “EIL”. According to House (2002b), the establishment and international spread of English has been promoted by four main factors, namely; the worldwide extension of the British Empire, the political and economic rise of the United States to world power status after the Second World War, the unprecedented development in information and communication technology and the recent economic development towards globalization and internationalization.

Taking into account this importance of the use of English as a means of international communication, learning and teaching it has become a focal necessity in society. However, in order to make learners become communicatively competent in English language there is a need for a shift from the previous theoretical framework of the 1960s that considered language a formal system (Structural Linguistics and Transformational Generative Grammar) towards a more communicative perspective. In this sense, researchers of various linguistic disciplines, such as sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, discourse analysis and ethnography of speaking, attempted to relate language to extralinguistic factors and explore the nature of communication. This change was supported by the introduction of pragmatics as a new area of study within linguistics that favoured a focus on the interactional and contextual factors of the target language (TL) (Alcaraz, 1990).

The growing importance and increasing amount of attention paid to the learners’ development of pragmatic knowledge have given rise to a new area of research known as interlanguage pragmatics (henceforth ILP). ILP is an interdisciplinary area belonging to two different disciplines, namely, second language acquisition (SLA) and pragmatics. As a part of pragmatics, ILP has been defined as the branch of a second language (SL) research that studies how nonnative speakers (NNSs) understand and carry out linguistic action in a TL and how they acquire L2.
pragmatic knowledge. This means that the area of concern is the use in both directions; production and comprehension of the learners’ inter-language from a pragmatic standpoint and the process of acquisition of the pragmatic categories. According to LoCastro (2003), ILP is the area within pragmatics that is most relevant to teachers since a deep knowledge of it may allow them to design course materials and syllabi that are not only grammar-based but are also built around pragmatics and discourse.

Generally speaking, pragmatics is doubly applicable to language teaching, because classroom language teaching is an occupation that essentially promotes the learning and teaching of language for use in social contexts. The classroom is the ideal place where learners learn to interpret language use. Instruction can help learners understand when and why certain linguistic practice takes place. It can help learners to better comprehend what they learn (“What does this formula mean?”) and to better interpret it (“How is this used?” “What this intends to accomplish?”). English Language teaching (ELT), then, must now increasingly consider the ever-increasing variety of contexts in which speakers across the globe are learning and using English. Dendrinos (2001) claims that English lessons in English as a foreign language (henceforth EFL) context must endow students with the capacity to move freely from their L1 to L2 and vice versa. She claims that learners of English will not be monolingual users of the newly acquired language, as they will have to act as interpreters or simply report in one language on information they will have processed in the other. Therefore, language classrooms must necessarily provide the conditions for them to practise these skills, rather than focus on an artificially monolingual communicative setting.

In this regard Yemeni, as well as other Arab learners of English, encounter problems in both speaking and writing. This fact has been clearly stated by many researchers, e.g., Abdul Haq (1982), Harisson, Prator and Tucker (1975), Abbad (1988) and Wahba (1998). The students in Yemeni Universities learn English in a setting where the native language (NL) is Arabic. The only way to learn English is through formal instruction i.e. inside the classroom where the language teachers are not NSs of English. There is little opportunity to learn English through natural interaction in the TL. This is only possible when students come across NSs of English who come to the country as tourists but this rarely happens. Since English is not used in daily situations, Mudhish (2006) admits the weakness of the Yemeni learners of
English “in spite of the low proficiency level in English of most applicants, they are accepted into the departments in Yemeni Universities. English Departments accept high school graduates without taking into consideration their proficiency and whether or not they will be able to manage”. However, in Yemeni universities there is some kind of entrance exam that the students need to pass in order to join the English Department.

Developing the learners’ pragmalinguistic knowledge of the TL. English in this context, is an essential component in a second language or foreign language (SL or FL) learning/teaching process. It is necessary to understand and create language that is appropriate to the situations in which it is functioning, because failure to do so may cause users to miss key points that are being communicated or have their messages misunderstood. Worse is the possibility of a total communication breakdown and stereotypical labelling of SL users as people who are insensitive, rude or inept (Thomas, 1983). It is widely demonstrated that competent learners have to follow all the socio-pragmatic norms and conventions of the TL community. Violation or ignorance of these norms is bound to create some serious communication problems and widen the social gap between the interacting individuals and groups, leading to pragmatic failure. Miscommunication can have a negative impact on human relations. It defeats the purpose of FL or SL learning, reinforces racism, discrimination and hatred between nations. To avoid such miscommunication and its negative impact on human relations, applied linguists in general and FL syllabus designers in particular, need to address the issue of appropriate speech act behaviour more carefully and more systematically. It is now widely believed that there could be a short cut to learning appropriate speech rules of the TL rather than mingling in the target culture.

1.1 Why English Language

English is the language of technology, science and communication in most of the countries across the globe and most of the literature is available in English. It is the NL of many countries in the world and the SL in some other countries like India, Pakistan and South Africa. Additionally, English is now used as a lingua franca (ELF) almost all over the globe and being able to speak English gives an edge over those who are monolingual. The fact that English has become the international language should not be seen as a reflection of intrinsic merit in the linguistic system. It is a
historical incident. Other languages have been imposed or spread through the military, cultural, and economic supremacy of their speakers but never before has the spread of a single language been so wide or so deep. The success of the British colonial empire and the subsequent rise of American industrial and technological power have combined and interacted to create a situation in which English, alone, has come to be accepted as the tool and the symbol of the modern technologically advanced society by the whole world.

Globalization also plays an important role in the need and spread of English. In fact, English language is the dominant medium of communication between different societies and from all over the world gains its importance from these actual needs to make the world a small village. Not only does English have some 300 million NSs, it is now regularly used as an additional language by at least as many NNSs throughout the world. Nearly 40 nations use English in an official capacity within their own borders and an untold number of others require it to be learnt as an SL or FL by school children. As Conrad and Fishman (1977) point out growing school age populations coupled with a growing percentage of that population in fact enrolled in the secondary school amounts to a demand for English instruction which is growing at a substantially greater rate than the population itself...in Asia...the percentage of age appropriate population in secondary school doubled in the decade 1960-1970, a fact doubly significant for these purposes since over all 97% of that secondary school enrolment is in English classes (p.14).

Generally speaking, English language has been recognized world-wide by the international community because of its wide-spread use. With respect to international interaction, it is fair to say that a working knowledge of English is imperative whether the matter at hand is diplomacy, commerce or science. These days it is usually taken for granted that meetings at the international level would be held in English. The fact that English has been accepted widely and by such vast numbers does not imply that it serves the same function for all groups. Thus, although the net effect is that a single language has gained worldwide provenance, it is certainly not the case that it is used in the same way everywhere. Hardly does one find such a society as not using English in its day-to-day communication through press and television.

The knowledge of English is therefore essential in almost all branches of education and research. It helps in establishing cultural, economical, political and
commercial relations with the rest of the world owing to its real role of communication among different nations. Robert Burch Field, editor of Oxford English, cited in Crystal (2003), has said, “Any literate educated person on the face of the globe is deprived if he does not know English”. This spread worldwide has given English the following five main privileges outlined by some scholars (Coulmas, 1992; MacCallen, 1989; Kachru, 1991; and Crystal, 1997) cited in Zughoul (2003). These five privileges or trends are

1. English is the most taught FL all over the world, and it is the most preferred lingua franca in international circles. It is also in more contact with more languages than any other language in the world.

2. The contact of English with other languages has produced more pidgins than any other contact of any other FL with other languages of the world.

3. Over the last 50 years, English has become the best known source of borrowing and loanwords for the other languages of the world. English has been shown as the most important loaning language.

4. In third world countries, English is the language of “higher communication” in the fields of science and technology, government and the law. In industrialized countries, English is reserved for special and specialized patterns of communication in science and technology on one hand and in finance and tourism on the other.

5. English is the target of linguistic change and transformation in language communities all over the world.

Related to these functions English has been privileged to serve is the work of Graddol (1997) who specified twelve international domains of English. These domains are really interesting for they are often quoted by different scholars without the documentation of the details provided and quantified by Graddol depending mainly on the work of Crystal (1997). These domains are:

1. English is the working language of international organizations and conferences. Crystal (1997) reports that about 50% of the international organizations now use English as one of their working languages. 40% use French and fewer than 10% use Arabic, Spanish or German. English is also a major language of financial institutions.

2. English is now the “international currency of science and technology”.
3. English is the language of international banking, economic affairs and trade.
4. It is the language of advertising for global brands.
5. It is the language of audio-visual cultural-products (e.g. film, TV, popular music).
6. It is the language of international tourism.
7. It is the language of tertiary education.
8. It is the language of international safety (e.g. “air speak”, “sea speak”)
9. It is the language of international law.
10. It is a “relay language” in interpretation and translation.
11. It is the language of technology transfer.
12. It is the language of internet communication.

1.2 English Language Status in Yemen

Building a language competent society has become an indisputable national priority among the major developing and developed nations of the world. In the context of the twenty first century, which brings in its wake new challenges of communication, a majority of these countries have been making a sustained, vigorous and concerted move to boost the language competencies of their learners, learning English as an SL or FL. Consequently, upon the ever-increasing awareness of the pivotal role English plays as the language of wider communication in the present age of informatics and cyberspace, marked by rapid and unprecedented strides in communication technology, such efforts have gained substantial momentum.

The primary objective of teaching / learning an FL, English in this context, is to produce in the learners what is called ‘functional competence’, ‘pragmatic competence’, or ‘communicative competence’ that implies a general ability on the part of the learners to use the FL in a variety of domains. A closer scrutiny of the English language teaching / learning process in Yemen is of potential significance to weigh up the pros and cons of that process. However, it will reveal the crucial disappointing weakness of the TL learners. It is believed that the English graduates in Yemen, where Arabic is the NL, face difficulties in using English language for communication. When engaged in an authentic communicative situation, they often lack some of the vocabulary or language items they need to get their meaning across. As a result, they cannot keep the interaction going for an extended period of time. The
source of this failure comes as a result of the weakness of school graduates in English who come to join the universities as English language majors and English language learners in general. It is the aim in this section to address the different areas of difficulties and disadvantages that Yemeni learners face in their endeavour to learn English as an FL.

The weakness of English language learners and English language department majors / graduates more specifically, has been attributed to various factors. The most noticeable factors are; lack of knowledge on the part of school graduates when they join the university, school and English language department curricula, teaching methodology, lack of well trained English language teachers, lack of the TL environment and the learners’ motivations when they come to join the English department. Yemeni school graduates face different difficulties with English. They continue to make basic and frustrating errors in pronunciation, spellings, morphology and syntax. They fail to express themselves efficiently either in academic or in common everyday situations. This results from the failure to use English appropriately and correctly either in the classroom or outside it when they are required to do so. Mukatash (1983) attributed the students’ failure in using English as a tool of self-expression to achieve their communicative goals to the study plans and methods of teaching. Sulieman (1983) argued that the continuing dissatisfaction with the performance of Arab students in English courses suggests a lack of fundamental standards in curriculum design, testing and oral communication skills, the development of productive skills, teaching / learning strategies at university level, etc.

Stepping back to the situation in school and going through the textbooks prescribed for different grade levels will help to illustrate the situation. The most recent textbook series titled CRESCENT since 1997 may be taken as a case in point. The series has been prepared and published by Oxford University Press for ELT in the Arab world. Unfortunately, despite their merits, these books have many shortcomings, which render them unsuitable for most Yemeni learners of English. These are not properly graded for teaching vocabulary and structures and do not take into cognizance the entry behaviour or the ‘Schema’ (background knowledge) of the learners for whom they are intended. There are not enough communicative activities to encourage the learners to participate in language games involving productive and receptive language skills. The books abound in words like ‘Air-hostess’, ‘Otter’ and ‘Emergency’, which most learners are not likely to encounter in their immediate
environment. This is sure to hinder their ability to make profitable use of teaching materials and achieve an effective transfer of language skills. Moreover, if reading is seen as ‘a psycholinguistic guessing game’, the learners can hardly activate their guessing strategies and efficiently manipulate the relevant grapho-phonetic, syntactic and semantic systems to monitor their comprehension strategies. This is due, primarily, to their low lexical competence.

Any teaching–learning context squarely depends on 3 M’s: Men, Methods and Materials. No set of instructional materials can be expected to yield the desired results unless a cadre of competent teachers capable of adopting an appropriate teaching methodology handles these materials. In other words, teaching English communicatively requires a specialized group of teachers who have not only an adequate level of linguistic competence as good users of the language themselves, but have a well equipped repertoire of professional strategies to teach English as a ‘skill’ and not as a ‘content’ subject. According to Davies et al. (1984, pp. 7-8) “The very obvious lack of English proficiency among teachers which leads to the total failure to provide communicative input, i.e. to offer a model of spoken English which is always a little above the students’ level and at the same time contains a message which the students wish to be understood”. Unfortunately there is a lack of well-trained and efficient teachers of English in Yemen. Moreover, most of the English Language teachers employed in Yemen have come from different countries such as Iraq, Sudan, and Egypt etc. They come from different educational backgrounds with insufficient qualification as English language teachers.

Examining the curricula of the English Department in the Yemeni Universities, one finds that they are heavily dominated by the literature component. In the departments of English, either in the faculty of education or arts, the components of the syllabus namely, language and linguistics show a lack of balance in the curriculum. Around one-third of the bachelor degree courses in the English departments are taught in Arabic. Social studies, Islamic studies, Education and Arabic are included in courses that would be better and helpful if they are taught in English rather than Arabic. The remaining of the courses may not be enough to help those graduates communicate freely and effectively in the TL. Halliday, et al. (1984) while discussing ways of learning an FL says

In Nigeria, English is used in almost all the teaching in high schools.

This has two important results. In the first place, the quantity of
classroom experience that each pupil receives is much greater outside the English lesson than within it. Some people have said that if the English language lessons were removed entirely from the schools in Nigeria, little or no effect would be noticed on the ability of the pupils on English when they come to leave schools. But, in the second place, class teachers other than those who are trained in English influence the children. If those teachers of English are not very good, the pupils will suffer. All those who teach subjects in the foreign language need to be able to perform well in it themselves (p. 18).

If this is the situation in high schools, then it should be advisable to use English in teaching all the courses at the university level.

Unfortunately, English in Yemen is used only as an academic subject when it is taught in schools or universities. Students are not involved in real-life situations which enable them to use the language more successfully. English or any other language cannot be acquired without real practice. Halliday et al. (1984) suggest, “Oral mastery depends on practising and repeating the patterns produced by a native speaker of the foreign language. It is the most economical way of thorough learning a language… when one has such a control of the essentials of a language, he can almost automatically produce the usual patterns of that language” (p. 16). English Department graduates do not have enough practice in English; they use Arabic most of the time even after becoming English language teachers. English is used only when they encounter a situation where English as a medium of interaction is inescapable and this hardly ever happens.

Motivation also plays an important part in improving and developing the learners’ communicative ability in English. Most of the Yemeni graduates in the English departments are instrumentally motivated to learn English and well aware of the utility of knowing English. Their main stimulus for learning English is instrumental, i.e. to achieve a goal, e.g. a career. Attitudinal studies conducted on Arab students have consistently shown that Arab learners of English are instrumally motivated to learn English. Of course, there are some learners who are integratively motivated, but they are in a minority. According to Seedhouse (1996: 69), those with integrative motivation have a genuine interest in “the target speech community” which the learner is “aspiring to become a member of”. Majority of the Yemeni
English learners join the English Department because it will be easier for them to get a job with a BA in English than with any other specialization.

To sum up, the researcher’s experience as a teacher of English as an FL in schools and Thamar University in Yemen leads to the belief that English language graduates, where Arabic is the NL, face difficulties in using English for communication. When engaged in authentic communicative situations, they often lack some of the vocabulary or language items they need to get their meaning across. As a result, they cannot keep the interaction going for an extended period of time.

The weakness of Yemeni English language learners in general, and English language department majors/graduates in particular, has been attributed to the following factors:

- Lack of knowledge on the part of school graduates when they join the University: The transition from an introductory school level to a more advanced university level is as difficult as passing from lack of knowledge to an introductory level. That is because of the inadequate mastery of the four skills; namely, speaking, listening, writing and reading.
- School and English language Department curricula: The curricula of the English Department are heavily dominated by the literature component. The other component of syllabus i.e., language, stands out as weak.
- Teaching methodology: The teaching methods currently in use are rather outdated and do not in any way encourage the communicative use of the language. The grammar-translation approach is still in use, and the use of the NL (Arabic) makes the task harder for them to cope with the TL.
- Lack of the TL-like environment: Lack of the TL exposure as spoken by its native speakers is a crucial reason behind the English majors’ weakness. Arabic is the language of instruction for the other content subjects. Students get very little input in English and this greatly affects their performance as they hardly use it for communication even among themselves.
- The learners’ motivation: Students are instrumentally motivated to learn English. The main stimulus for learning English is to achieve a goal, e.g. a career. The majority of English majors join the English Department because it will be easier for them to get a job with a BA in English than in any other specialization, and
• Teaching the TL to large groups of students: Students are made to sit in heavily packed and overcrowded classrooms where the environment is not receptive. So it is virtually impossible for them to get any personal attention or seek clarifications.

1.3 English Lingua Franca Research at the Level of Pragmatics

Seidlhofer (2004) emphasizes the importance of distinguishing English use that involves no L1 or L2 speakers of English from that which does and attempts to describe it independently. In defining this kind of English, she chooses the term English as an ELF and cites Firth’s (1996) definition “ELF is a contact language between persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common national culture, and for whom English is the chosen foreign language of communication” (p.211). Crystal (2003) refers to the need for a lingua franca

Since the 1960s, English has become the normal medium of instruction in higher education for many countries and is increasingly used in several contexts where the language has no official status. Some advanced courses in the Netherlands, for example, are widely taught in English. If most students are going to encounter English routinely in their monographs and periodicals, it is suggested – an argument which is particularly cogent in relation to the sciences- then it makes sense to teach advanced courses in that language, to better prepare them for that encounter. But these days there is also a strong lingua franca argument: the pressure to use English has grown as universities and colleges have increasingly welcomed foreign students, and lecturers have found themselves faced with mixed – language audience (p.112).

Crystal (2003) highlights the role of ELF “In the meantime, English continues to be the chief lingua franca of the Internet- a position which during the 1990s began to be acknowledged in the popular media”. For example, in April 1996 The New York Times carried an article by Michael Specter headed ‘World, Wide, Web: 3 English Words’, in which the role of English was highlighted

To study molecular genetics, all you need, is to get into the Harvard University Library, or the medical library at Sweden’s Kardinska Institute, in a phone line computer. And it turns out a solid command
of the English language, because whether you are a French intellectual pursuing the cutting edge of international film theory, a Japanese paleotainst curious about a newly discovered set of primordial fossils, or an American teen-ager concerned about Magic Johnson’s jump shot, the Internet and World Wide Web really only work as great unifiers if you speak English (p.117).

To date most ELF research has involved spoken data in an attempt to focus on language removed from the standardizing influence of writing as well as to capture aspects of negotiation of meaning and mutual intelligibility crucial to understanding ELF. Major categories of research have focused on language level, speakers’ lingua cultural backgrounds and language domain (Seidlhofer, 2004). There has been more work at the level of pragmatics with studies by (Firth, 1996; House, 1999, 2000; Lesznyak, 2004; Meierkord, 2002; and Wagner and Firth, 1997) cited in Burt (2005), examining telephone calls to and from international business based in Denmark, classroom discussion in Germany, an international students meeting in the Netherlands, dinner conversation in the UK and further telephone calls to and from international business based in Denmark respectively. While most of the results show that ELF talk is robust, consensus-centred, and unlikely to contain frequent misunderstandings, there have been some contradictory findings and Seidlhofer (2004) suggests results may be skewed by the tendency of the violation of pragmatics norms not to lead to unintelligibility. Seidlhofer also mentions the possibility that research findings are a function of the type and purpose of the given interaction.

Firth (1996) prefaces his study by highlighting the assumption in conversation analysis that the interlocutors have a shared, stable level of linguistic competence and claiming that this assumption does not reasonably apply when the data collected is from subjects for whom English is used as a lingua franca, “a contact language between persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common national culture, and for whom English is the chosen as an FL of communication” (p.240). The purpose of the study is to examine the nature of conversational competence and to determine if the assumptions and findings of conversational analysis are applicable in ELF talks as they are in monolingual L1 English talk. The data is a corpus of recorded business telephone calls involving the manager of two Danish international trading companies and their international clients. Firth is careful to avoid using the terms foreign talk or inter-language talk, conceptualizing his subjects as English users rather
than deficient learners lacking native-like competence. Analysis of the data indicates a large amount of consensus–oriented linguistic behaviour. First, there is evidence of the “let it pass” phenomenon, whereby an unclear item is allowed to pass in conversation as it is assumed it would become clear or irrelevant later on. This phenomenon is not exclusive to ELF talk but it is a very common feature of ELF interaction. One problem with evidence of this behaviour is that it is sometimes difficult to determine if the hearer did, in fact, let it pass or simply did not catch the problem. Second, there is evidence of the hearer drawing attention away from the interlocutor’s in correct forms: “Faced with the other party’s marked lexical selection and unidiomatic phrasings; the hearer behaves in such a way as to divert attention from the linguistically infelicitous form of the other’s talk. This commonly precludes... doing ‘other-repair and candidate completions’” (p.245). Last, similar to monolingual talk where one’s interlocutor’s wordings and grammatical constructions are often incorporated into one’s own talk, the subjects sometimes incorporated their interlocutor’s unidiomatic and marked usage into their own. Firth concludes that ELF speakers “Can learn and use known (and also non-standard) resources as they become known-in-common during the talk itself” (p.247).

Despite the potential for the frequent use of marked or incorrect forms and the possible differences in the interlocutor’s level of linguistic competence, the findings indicate that ELF talk is robust and consensus–oriented, resulting consistently in successful communication. One final difference of note between ELF talk and monolingual L1 English talk is that ELF speakers’ tend to display awareness of their lack of shared, stable linguistic competence. Their perceived or actual competence is often made relevant in talk, implicitly, for example, by laughing at one’s own non-standard marked usage, or explicitly, for instance by asking “How do you say it in English?”

A different take on the findings that ELF talk is robust and consensus–oriented is presented by House (2000) as she analyses the preliminary results of part of a long–term study of ELF talk among university students in Germany involving a variety of real–life and simulated interactions. The subjects in one of these interactions were a German female, a Korean female, a Chinese male and an Indonesian male, all between the ages of 25 and 30. They were asked to read a short text on the role of ELF and a 30-minute discussion was taped and transcribed. Students were interviewed two weeks later to obtain introspective feedback and metapragmatic
assessments. The first major trend observed by House is overarching, self-centred behaviour. Students engaged in parallel monologues exhibited no fine-tuning, lack of prefacing or mitigating of dissimilative action and new topics were started without preparation or initiation. The second, apparently contradictory trend is that of local, co-constructive behaviour demonstrating consensus-orientation and feelings of solidarity. House theorizes that subjects may be expressing solidarity as ELF speakers and suggests that it is crucial because their common identity as speakers of ELF “needs to be created fresh from scratch with each new ELF event because ELF is felt to be an instrumentally opportune medium of communication, not a culture symbol to identify with an effective and integrative way” (p. 263). House, also, offers another interpretation that the consensus and solidarity displayed may be superficial and making deeper misunderstanding and cultural differences. In the context of a classroom discussion there is no need for real consensus as was seen in Firth’s (1996) study, where exact conditions of economic exchange have to be agreed upon; it is perhaps easier in the classroom for the illusion of the agreement to prevail. Indeed, in the post-task interview, the Korean student pointed out that consensus-orientation is a token of politeness in Asia and might have given the discussion an appearance of consensus without the agreement, House added.

1.4 Statement of the Problem

Successful learning of an SL or an FL entails acquiring not only its linguistic knowledge such as phonology and syntax but also socio-cultural knowledge about the TL community. The importance of understanding the socio-cultural values of the TL has been emphasized by many scholars (Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972; Wolfson, 1989) who all claimed that pragmatic competence (the ability to use linguistic sources in a socially appropriate way) as well as grammatical competence is needed for successful L2 communication. This new convention of SL or FL learning process requires an adequate and balanced shift from the old approach (an acquisitional perspective) to the learner’s development of pragmatic knowledge, that is, ILP.

In the study of ILP, many attempts have been made to provide explanations as to what the pragmatic mechanisms of L2 learners are and what might constitute them. Politeness is commonly believed in most cultures to be a required value that should be attached to the linguistic forms to maintain or sometimes strengthen some human
relationships in society. Olshtain and Blum-Kulka (1985) maintain that a competent SL user should acquire the socio-cultural rules of appropriacy as well as grammatical competence. They point out that communication failure may still happen when proficient L2 learners do not have sufficient socio-cultural knowledge of the target community. Studies of ILP have often attributed L2 learner’s communication failure to their lack of socio-cultural knowledge. To be competent, learners have to follow all the socio-pragmatic norms and conventions of politeness of the TL. Violation or ignorance of these norms is bound to create some serious communication problems and widen the social gap between the interacting individuals and groups, leading to pragmatic failure. Miscommunication can have a negative impact on human relations. It defeats the purpose of FL learning; reinforces racism, discrimination and hatred between nations. It is the aim of this study to investigate the roots of such socio-culturally based miscommunication, so that one may come to understand how and where solutions to such problems may best be found.

Much of the work in ILP has been conducted within the framework of speech acts. Speech acts can be thought of as ‘functions’ of language, such as complaining, thanking, apologizing, refusing, requesting and inviting. Within this view, the minimal unit of communication is the performance of the linguistic act. All languages have a means of performing speech acts and presumably speech acts themselves are universals, yet the ‘form’ used in a specific speech act is concerned with the linguistic possibilities available in languages for speech act realization and the effect of cross-cultural differences on SL performance and on the interpretation by NSs of SL speech acts.

Since earlier studies in ILP provided a range of findings, the present study is an attempt to focus on particular language learners from a particular background (Yemeni Arabic speakers learning English as a foreign language, henceforth YEFLLs). This study will examine the learners’ ILP through the politeness mechanisms of learners from a vertical and collectivistic culture (i.e., which is power/relationship-oriented) learning an L2 spoken in a horizontal and individualistic culture (i.e., which is autonomy/task-oriented) and learning it in an FL learning context. The distinction of both conceptual views is predicted to have an important influence over the learners’ ILP. The distinctive concepts might well result in the non-nativeness of the learners’ language (i.e., inter language). That is, they might perceive some potential social factors (e.g., power, social distance, and ranking of imposition).
widely involved in manifesting politeness differently from the NSs of the TL of a different conceptual culture.

Cultural differences make it difficult for an average Arab EFL learner of English to communicate appropriately with a native counterpart without touching on some pragmatic attributes. A prevailing example is when Arab students mix with foreigners they tend to discuss ‘ages and wages’ which is tactless in the context of the western culture. As people are involved in conversation, their interaction is based on their need to create a certain kind of relationship and make a connection with one another. When the conversation is between two people of different cultures, many things can go wrong. Each individual, like most learners throughout the world, is brought up assuming, quite innocently, that his/her cultural patterns are right, while the practices of others are acceptable only to the degree that these reflect the belief of their own group. In this respect one finds that Arabs are curious to know marital status, number of children or the reason for not having any and salary—all of which the west considers personal. Arab speakers would also keep nagging while inquiring after one’s job, age, and the company one works for and how much this or that possession or article costs. Such inquiries may violate the conventions and norms of western culture.

YEFLLs experience some problems when they are placed in a situation where they feel they lack the sufficient means of communicating appropriately. This fact pertains to those EFL learners who have only mastered basic vocabulary and syntax in the TL, but who have not developed full competence in sociolinguistic skills. In spite of their reasonable command of grammar and vocabulary, YEFLLs fail to communicate effectively in particular situations. And sometimes they might find communication with NSs a negative experience. So, instruction in the TL should focus on fostering pragmatic awareness and enabling students to integrate satisfactorily into the TL-cultural norms and express various types of speech act appropriately.

Raising awareness of politeness that is reflected through linguistic or social behaviour is likely to help a good command of English. This is because at first one responds to the situation on the basis of his/her own cultural up-bringing. Training students on the pragmatic aspects of the TL prevents offending interlocutors from the other culture. For example Yemeni as Arabs, are widely believed as a religious-oriented society. The culture and social norms of Arabic community is greatly ruled
by religion. Arabic has its faith in (Allah) God deeply ingrained within its speech acts. Any attempt to analyse speech acts in Arabic must recognise Islam as their foundation; everything occurs as God wills. The phrase “insha’allah” (God willing) abundantly permeates Arabic conversation. A native English speaker might be confused by his Arabic native interlocutor’s intention when using such a statement, because in English, it carries the connotation of “may be” or “someday”. Accordingly, when an Arab EFL student or speaker requested to do a favour by an English counterpart says “insha’allah” in response to the request, the latter might be exasperated.

It is apparent that people’s needs are almost universal, but what differs is the way in which these needs are satisfied in different societies. For instance, what constitutes a proper request in Arabic may seem weird in English. In English language there are many different ways of expressing the same idea in requests, but not in Arabic. Thus, Arab EFL learners are used to having less choice available to them for performing the same speech act in their own language. Therefore, they may use an English speech structure taken from their language that they think is appropriate in all situations. The NS is implicitly aware of the subtle difference between “Please + imperative” as a way of performing a request, and the use of “Could I have another cup of coffee, please?” The Arabic speaker, familiar with basically one form of request, is not. When requesting, he tends to say, “Please give me a cup of coffee”. This is what is known as sociolinguistic transfer that refers to the use of the rules of speaking from one’s cultural group when interacting with another group. This may happen in interaction where a student learns an FL but employs the rules of speaking of his NL (Chick. 1996).

The English language learning/teaching process in Yemen is in an FL context. And in contrast to SL learning environments, research studies conducted in the EFL context report that the range of speech acts within realization strategies is quite narrow and the typical interaction pattern restricts pragmatic input and opportunities for practicing discourse organization strategies (Lorschner and Schulze. 1988). Moreover, Rose (1994 a) points out that large classes, limited contact hours and little opportunity for intercultural communication are some of the features of the EFL context that hinder pragmatic learning. In the same view, two particular studies placed in this context illustrate how the input learners receive may not result in learning the speech act of requesting (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford. 1996; Nikula. 2002). On the
one hand, Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1996) point out that the requests teachers made to students were status-bound and as a consequence could not serve as direct models for the learner. Nikula’s (2002) study, on the other hand, focuses on how pragmatic awareness is reflected in the use of modifying the elements of the speech act by two NNSs in an EFL context based classrooms. The findings of this study reveal a tendency towards directness in teachers’ performance that is explained in terms of the constraints of the classroom and the teacher’s status compared with that of students. Apart from the analysis of the input, other studies have examined the presentation of requests in pedagogical materials (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Alcon and Safont, 2001; Salazar and Uso, 2001; Crandall and Basturkmen, 2004) and have shown that it is not adequate since presenting a list of linguistic forms is highly unlikely to result in pragmatic development.

To sum, research into the pragmatic competence of adult FL and SL learners has demonstrated that grammatical development does not guarantee a corresponding level of pragmatic development (Bardovi–Harlig and Dornyei, 1997) and that even advanced learners may fail to convey or understand the intended illocutionary force or politeness values of the TL. In this context, the basic intention of this research is to examine the following situation: If after years of learning English at the different levels of education, an average Yemeni learner fails to perform the day-to-day communicative chores in English in the personal, professional and social spheres with an optimal degree of competence and confidence, then, obviously, something vital is lacking in the EFL curriculum that needs to be identified and if necessary, suitably remedied.

1.5 Significance of the Study

In many SL and FL learning/teaching contexts, the vital pedagogic goal of the various speaking and listening activities and materials is to introduce to students some motivating experience and a greater amount of opportunities of exposure to the different norms and voices of interpersonal talk in the TL. In such a context, SL or FL learners usually find the area of pragmatics (that is using different speech acts such as refusing, complementing, requesting, etc. and the related appropriate conventions) problematic. Consequently, one needs to take the issue of cross-cultural pragmatics into the classroom since pragmatics is a subject that is an indisputable part of language learning but has received insufficient attention in the study of acquisition.
Appropriate requests are among the most important speech acts needed by YEFLLs. First, requests occur very frequently in everyday encounters. The inappropriate use of the request act by NNSs can serve to make them look rude or impolite. In some cases, communication breakdown can occur. It is also widely believed that NSs consider pragmatic errors to be more serious than phonological or syntactic errors (Koike, 1994; Thomas, 1983; Wolfson, 1989). Second, as Blum-Kulka (1991) pointed out, requesting style is a good index of a cultural way of speaking. Sifianou (1999) maintained that the conventionalized realization of requests, as well as their frequency, is the clearest indicator of whether a society is a positively or negatively oriented society. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), a ‘positive-oriented society’ is a society in which speakers’ need for approval and belonging (ingroupness) are emphasized, whereas showing of deference and keeping distance are emphasized in a ‘negative-oriented society’. The linguistic formulation of requests is determined by the degree of directness in the request act. As Bilbow (1995) pointed out, speakers’ (in)directness varied according to the relationship with the hearer and according to the nature of what was being requested along with the potential benefits of complying with the request. The relationship between requester and requestee along a continuum of closeness affected the requester’s choice of degree of directness in performing a request.

In this regard, this study will focus on particular language learners from a particular background (Yemeni Arabic speakers learning English as an FL). It will examine the learners’ ILP through their politeness mechanisms belonging to a vertical and collectivistic culture (i.e., which is power/relation-oriented), learning L2 spoken in a horizontal and individualistic culture (i.e., which is autonomy/task oriented) and learning it in an FL context. The study will also examine whether or not pragmatic devices are utilized appropriately for making the teaching materials clearer and more meaningful for the students in terms of what is appropriate to say, to whom, when and where, both socially and culturally. As the development of pragmatics is a cognitive process, one needs to examine whether the aspects of pragmatics are considered in the English language learning/teaching process. For example, is social register taken into account in the design of language activity? Are scenarios created for students to practise interacting with people in a culturally appropriate manner? Are students provided with the opportunity for developing cultural and social awareness of various kinds of discourse and narrative structures in the TL?
As the title reveals, this study carries a three-dimensional significance. It will test and analyse the pragmatic and communicative competence of the YEFLLs to measure their approximation to or violation of the pragmatic norms of the TL community, tackle their needs to find out what leads them to be inappropriate and incompetent when they encounter social interactions with NSs and review the methods and materials currently in use to weigh their pros and cons from a pragmatic standpoint. As EFL teachers, what one needs is to take into account the socio-cultural aspects of learning English in order to ensure successful and effective communication in the TL. Learners need to be aware of the non-conventional implications that a certain utterance may have for a particular context. Learners need to learn to understand and produce utterances that are appropriate to the various contexts. In the process of teaching and learning English, in addition to the questions of 1) Is this grammatically correct? 2) Is the pronunciation acceptable? A third question is added here 3) Is this pragmatically appropriate to the particular context?

Having considered the current situation of ELT in Yemen and the different factors surrounding this process, this study comes as an attempt to analyse the pragmatic competence of the Yemeni undergraduate learners of English as an FL to see to what extent they adhere to the socio-cultural norms and rules and systems of the TL. Comparing their speech act behaviour to that of their native counterparts can accomplish this mission. So, this study is a pragmalinguistic study of the speech act of requests and requests strategies as used by Yemeni speakers of Arabic pursuing a BA in English in the faculty of education in Thamar University. Along with testing the ILP of the Yemeni undergraduate learners of English, the second intention of this research is to tackle the main factors which may have a positive or negative impact on the English learning/teaching process. For this purpose, the same subjects will receive a Yes/No questionnaire in order to elicit their communicative needs, objective resources available and some of the socio-cultural conventions that may affect learning. The result of this test will help the researcher to figure out what leads the Yemeni learners of English to be so incompetent, so inappropriate, or so foreign.

1.6 Limitations of Teaching English in an EFL Context

Investigating the EFL teaching learning process in Yemen and its pros and cons in the sense of raising the learners’ awareness and fostering their pragmatic knowledge of the TL leads one to realize the limited role of instruction in such a
context. There are two issues that are often raised in instructional ILP research, namely the quality of input presented to learners in classrooms (including the linguistic description offered by both teachers and text books) and the optimal degree of instructional intervention.

Where the former is concerned, it is indicated that while sufficient input is crucial for L2 learning and classrooms are among the regular sources of input (especially in the case of FL contexts) many classrooms tend to provide either less input than needed or the input they produce is sometimes misleading. According to Kasper (1997 b) this is not because classrooms offer ‘artificial discourse’. On the contrary, the discourse that they produce is as authentic as any other kind of discourse. Classroom interaction usually involves a narrow range of speech acts (Long, Adams, Mclean, and Castanos, 1976) and discourse markers (Kasper, 1989 b) that learners need in communication outside the instructional setting. It is also unequal in terms of teacher-student roles and power. Teacher-talk usually displays a lack of politeness markings and the monopolization of discourse organization and management by the teacher and thus does not serve as a pragmatically appropriate model for learners (Ellis, 1992).

Moreover, teachers’ instruction and textbooks may sometimes prejudice learners towards a specific type of input and steer them away from others. For example, Mir (1992) found that as teachers explicitly emphasized the apology formula “I’m sorry” over others, the learners tended to over use this formula. Widjaja (1997) also found that their learners did not hesitate to use the refusal formula “No, thank you” in all refusals contexts as they were taught that this was a polite way to refuse an offer. These learners also opted for higher directness than the American English NSs in refusing as a result of their instruction-induced belief that Americans preferred to be direct. Beebe and Takahashi (1989) and Takahashi and Beebe (1993) found the same effect of instruction on Japanese ESL learners’ preference for explicit criticism when disagreeing and correcting in English.

Textbooks as another source of pragmatic input also do not always provide authentic and representative language to learners. Either speech acts are not presented, or they are presented unrealistically. In addition, there is usually a lack of metapragmatic explanation in textbooks to facilitate L2 pragmatic learning (Vellenga, 2004). For example, Boxer and Pickering (1995) warn that textbooks generally do not contain indirect complaints as a social strategy. Bouton (1996), on the other hand,
points out that most of the invitations provided in a textbook rarely occur in a published corpus of NS’s invitations. Furthermore, textbooks sometimes stress on semantic formula over others to provide misleading information. Han (1992), for example, found that the Korean ESL learners in her study frequently resorted to the formulaic “thank you” as a compliment response because they learned from Korean ELT materials that this is the only correct way to respond to a compliment. The reason is that most of the textbooks are built mainly on NS intuition of how they would perform a particular speech act. Since most NS pragmatic knowledge is tacit and cannot be reported, it is necessary that teaching materials be researched-based so that they can better represent NS language in use, thus offering learners more realistic input. In a recent study Vellenga (2004) found that textbooks rarely provide adequate metapragmatic explanation. She, therefore, suggested that textbooks should include not only authentic samples of speech act but also extralinguistic contextual and cultural information to help learners make correct pragmatic choices.

The second important issue of how much instructional intervention is optimal has been raised by a number of researchers (Kasper, 1997b; and Bardovi-Harlig, 2001). L2 learners do not always desire to totally converge with NS pragmatic behaviour. In a study of NNS students in an American University, Hinkel (1996) found that the majority of Chinese, Indonesian and Arabic L1 students agreed with the statement “I don’t always try to follow the rules of polite speech accepted in the US”. Siegal (1996, p.326) comments on this behaviour as follows “Second language learners do not merely model native speakers with a desire to emulate, but rather actively create both a new interlanguage and an accompanying identity in the learning process”.

Therefore, the assumption that pragmatic competence should be based on the NS’s model needs to be reconsidered. So does the assumption that every deviation from NS’ norms displayed in learners’ production needs to be ‘fixed’ by the L2 teacher. Furthermore, Kasper points out that NNS’s total convergence may sometimes be perceived by NSs as “intrusive and inconsistent with the NNS’s role as outsider to the L2 community” (1997b, p.12). In this case, some divergence as a marker of non-membership could be more appreciated. (Liddicoat, et. al, 1999) suggested that striving for intercultural competence does not mean assimilation into the target culture. Rather, intercultural language learning involves the development of a “third place” between the learners’ native culture and the target culture, i.e. between self and
other. Language learners need to understand what NSs mean when they use the language, even if they do not choose to replicate NSs’ behaviour (Liddicoat, 2000, p.51). Kasper (1997b) claims that in many situations successful communication means optimal rather than total convergence. On these grounds, it seems that while teaching L2 pragmatics the teacher needs to guarantee a provision of authentic and representative language, at the same time also needs to allow for learners’ subjectivity and social claims. The teacher is not asking the students to adopt another identity, which, as Byram (1994) notes, might entail a rejection of one’s own. Instead, the teacher might offer information on some of the underlying factors that can affect discourse, and some possible consequences of flouting the actualisation of such factors in specific socio-cultural situations. Most of the ESL students’ subsequent input will come from their environment, but they can equally spend time reflecting on their native culture. As Thomas (1983, p.110) suggests: “...To give the learner the knowledge to make an informed choice and allowing her/him the freedom to flout pragmatic conventions is to acknowledge his individuality and freedom of choice and to respect his system of values and beliefs”.