Influence of Chinese Culture on the Politeness Strategies in the Second Language Acquisition of English among Chinese Learners

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, English as a lingua franca has played an important role in Chinese learners' second language acquisition. More and more Chinese students have acquired different levels of English through education or studying abroad. However, no matter how high the proficiency they have, sometimes their words are still offensive to a native speaker even when they are in an English-speaking country. It does not mean that they are not polite, but it may be caused by the difference in their politeness strategies. This paper investigates whether there is an influence of Chinese culture on those politeness strategies of Chinese learners who speak English and what the influence is. It will mainly focus on the positive and negative strategies. It also pays attention to the pragmatics that cause the differences between the dialogues of Chinese learners and native speakers. The method is a qualitative method by conducting interviews designed as Discourse Completion Tests. Interviewees are expected to imagine themselves to be in the four scenarios given and respond with short speeches that they think is appropriate in those circumstances. The results collected are compared with normal conventions of native speakers of English and analysed through various politeness strategies. Then the paper will discuss the reason behind these influences with the aspects of Chinese culture, including Chinese language structures, conventions and also hierarchy factors. This paper reveals problems that Chinese learners may have in the conversation with native speakers and aims for them to avoid such misunderstanding in later communications and improve their condition of second language acquisition by calling attention in understanding culture.

Keywords: Politeness Strategies, Chinese Culture, Second Language Acquisition.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language learning cannot be separated from the influence of culture. According to Condon, culture can be defined as a way of life. No matter where people live, their behaviors and thoughts follow and are generally based on their own cultures [1]. Politeness, as a fundamental part of culture, will influence a large part of linguistics, and especially, second language acquisition [2]. For many Chinese learners, even in the cultural environment of the target language, it is still difficult to get rid of the influences of their mother tongue. The impact of such cultural differences on language has led to some Chinese learners being regarded as impolite. Therefore, this study decided to study whether Chinese learners exposed similar politeness problems when using English as a language, they later acquired through second language acquisition. Through this research, it will prove whether Chinese culture has an impact on Chinese students, analyze the specific impact of Chinese culture on Chinese learners, and the reasons for the impact, so that Chinese learners can avoid the same mistakes in the process of second language acquisition.

2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1. Culture

The definition of culture can be a learning system of values, beliefs, and norms among a certain group of people [3]. It can be defined more broadly with ethnic background, race, nationality, religion, gender, and sexual orientation. Culture not only plays an important role in shaping people's values and habits, but also influences their language and behaviors. Cultural knowledge is crucial to the mastering of a language, but

vice versa the culture of a society can also be changed with the use of language.

The cross-cultural sensitivity can help to explain the learners' understanding and attitudes towards culture [4][5][6][7].

Chen and Starosta discussed cross-cultural sensitivity in detail [6][7]. They believed that if learners want to successfully communicate with members of other groups, they need an open attitude, as well as the sensitivity and understanding of other cultures. These requirements will ultimately generalize successful communication.

2.2. Politeness

Brown and Levinson define "face" as a public self-image that everybody in the society wants for themselves [8]. They perceive it as "something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction." In the general social conventions, people will cooperate with each other to maintain their "face", which is the "individual's self-esteem" of the "public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" [8].

They also argue that face and culture are inevitably connected. They describe face as to be "subject to cultural specifications of many sorts—what kinds of acts threaten face, what sorts of persons have special rights to face-protection, and what kinds of personal style (in terms of things like graciousness, ease of social relations, etc.) are especially appreciated" [8]. In addition, the concept of face is naturally associated with the nature of social roles, honor and virtue, shame, and salvation, religion, or some other basic cultural concepts.

Brown and Levinson believed that the face of each person depends on whether the face of the other person is maintained or enhanced, so participants should consider the face of the other person in communication [8]. Face contains two specific components: positive face and negative face. The positive face refers to the positive and consistent self-image or personality declared by the person being interacted with, especially including the desire for such self-image to be appreciated and recognized. The negative face is a basic territorial claim, a personal reservation, and a right not to be distracted, that is, the right to freedom of movement and the right to be free from coercion.

2.3. Politeness Strategies

2.3.1. Positive Politeness

The positive politeness strategy serves to minimize the threat to the listener's positive image. These strategies are used to help listeners feel good or comfortable during the conversion. For example, if the speaker uses polite words in conversions such as "please," the listener will feel like being respected. If the speaker gives concerns, the listener will feel being cared. Therefore, the help listeners feel good" here includes all the positive images that makes listeners happy, including being concerned, cared, respected, and other feelings. It is more frequently used in situations where listeners know each other well and must meet their positive facial needs or values [9]. In addition, for avoiding possible conflicts, some strategies for positive politeness include expressing friendships, unity, and compliments [8].

2.3.2. Negative Politeness

Negative politeness strategies aim to avoid offenses by showing deference. These strategies include asking questions, being ambiguous, and expressing different opinions. There is a historical example of a high-risk negative politeness strategy that occurred in 1546. At the time, Henry VIII was the sixth and last and his wife, Catherine Parr, was almost arrested for her outspoken religious views. She tried to divert the king's rage by respecting him through distracting his painful health problems by expressing her differences only in the form of opinions [10].

2.3.3. Off Record

Brown and Levinson's final polite strategy is off record, which is indirectness. It tries to achieve politeness through using indirect language, eliminating the possibility of speakers' enforcement on others. These strategies are not recorded to convey the speaker's intentions in general or are different from those of the speaker rely on the listener's interpretation [11][12]. The strategy of giving speakers credit not to impose or give them an opportunity to be helpful and generous relies heavily on pragmatics to convey meaning while using semantics to avoid losing face [8][13].

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative method by conducting interviews with ten Chinese students who can speak English. To eliminate possible variables that may affect the language competence, all the research participants are highly educated with experience of studying abroad. The interviews are designed as Discourse Completion Tests (DCT). Interviewees are expected to imagine themselves in four scenarios and perform the corresponding actions.

The four scenarios (interview questions) are:

The first scenario: You got a D in your major courses, but you worked hard during the semester, never missed any classes, and completed your homework on time. Now you are asking the professor to reassess your grade.

The second scenario: You argued with an unfamiliar classmate because you held different views during the discussion in class. Now you have to calm down and start the apology.

The third scenario: You saw your professor presenting at academic conferences. Now he/she has finished his/her speech and you are now praising him/her.

The fourth scenario: Your friend is going on a two-week trip and asks if he/she can trust you with his/her dog. But you can't accept this request for some reason, so now you need to decline your friend's request.

The answers of the participants are collected and analysed in this research, focusing on the similarities and differences in their discourses. The Table 1 illustrates the reasons for choosing these four situations, as people show different levels of politeness in each of them.

For the level of intimacy, it is divided into less intimate (-), intimate (+) and very intimate (+). For Politeness, the level is very polite (++) and polite (++).

Table 1. The Relationship between the Interviewee (A) and the Targets (B) that A were Expected to Imagine Themselves to Talk with.

Situation	Targets	Level of intimacy	Age and social status	Politeness
Request	Professor	-	A<B	++
Apology	Classmate	+	A=B	+
Compliment	Professor	-	A<B	++
Rejection	Friend	++	A=B	+

4. RESULTS

In the first (request) and the third (compliment) scenarios, when the interviewees were in the need of greeting a professor, most of them produced it like:

"Hi professor, I just know…"

"Hi professor, I really want to…"

"Hi professor, I'm coming to…"

"Professor, I'm really…"

"Oh professor, you did…"

According to Cambridge Dictionary[14], "Hi" is used in the informal greetings as a substitute of "Hello" and usually to the people who you know well. And a professor, whose level of intimacy is obviously much lower than this condition, will regard this kind of greetings extremely impolite. Addressing professor directly or simply with an exclamation will be considered even more offensive. Only one or two interviewees were able to use formal strategies which are more likely being produced by native speakers:

"Dear professor, so I've been…"

"Hello professor, I am really sorry…"

When generating a request in the first scenario, most of the interviewees would first introduce the reason of why they want to make this request, which is they got a bad grade. Then they would explain why they deserve to make this request, which are the reasons that show the mismatching of their grades and themselves.

"I recently noticed that I got a D grade in this course…I just say I did a very great effort to complete this course, and I did my job perfectly."

"I just know my final grade of this course…but I never missed any classes and I completed all my homework on time."

"So the thing is I got a D in your course…I think I have been really working hard during the semester and I never missed any classes."

These contents are trying to keep the real issue, which is asking the professor to reassess their grades out of their dialogues for a while to show their politeness to the hearer by using the strategy "off record". Only when coming to the end of their speeches, they will officially make the request.

"So could you please recheck my score and reassess my whole process?"

"But by any chance, do you have any way to reassess my grade?"

"So I really appreciate it if you could reassess it."

The discourse marker "please" here clearly indicate their preference of positive politeness strategies. Though "by any chance" and "I really appreciate it if" are hedges which would normally serve for negative politeness, they are already too positive to native speakers by directly show their eagerness to their requests. For native speakers, their speech would be more negative by simply offering a hint of their real request, because they do not want to impose the hearer, or they want to guarantee the freedom of the hearer to offer consideration of the speaker's needs.

In the second scenario when the interviewees were asked to apologize, they will immediately admit their mistakes by saying:

"I'm sorry."

"It's my fault."

"I just want to apologize for what I did before."

Then they will try to establish common ground by confirming both sides have their own correctness which includes both the hearer and the speaker and seek forgiveness or make further suggestions in the end.

"Right now I realize that we both have our own stage. And it will be better to communicate with patience and understanding more."

"I still insist that my view may be correct, but you may be correct too…And I hope we could work together well and successfully complete this content."

"But I hope you can understand me because we had different views…and I hope you can forgive me."

These actions accompanied with the instant confirmation of faults are all efforts to show understandings and to make the hearer feeling better with positive politeness. A native speaker on the contrary, will make their speech more negative by producing sentence like "Would you allow us to calm down?" or "Do you think we should proceed?" to take the hearer's views into consideration.

When referring to praising a professor in the third scenario, all the interviewees would not hesitate to offer their compliments directly:

"I just want to let you know that <u>your speech is so great</u>…"

"Professor you really did a <u>great job</u> on that speech."

"Oh professor you did a really <u>good job</u>!"

These instant confirmations of the hearer's good work are extremely positive attempts and show the deepest politeness of the speakers. But for the native speakers, to praise a professor as "good job" is a rather offensive approach because a student is in no place to evaluate a professor's performance. These Chinese interviewees obviously did not notice this aspect and continually try to show respect by presenting their interests in the topic of the speech:

"I think I'm so interested in one of the topics you have just said, so maybe we could, it's my honor to talk about it later in your office."

"…you have successfully explained all these points clearly…I just wonder if I can ask you some related questions about this."

"Everyone had a better understanding of the area. I would appreciate it if I have another opportunity to hear some other speeches that you will give in the future."

In the fourth scenario when they were required to form a rejection, most of them directly reject the request:

"Sorry, I can't do this job…"

"Sorry, I think I cannot help you…"

"Oh I'm very sorry that I have to say that I couldn't…"

These direct denials clearly state the main issue and also immediately transfer their unavailability into their own mistakes. Only 3 of the interviewees try to produce it in a more negative way in the beginning:

"I really want to do this favor for you, but…"

"I am really thankful for your trust in me…"

"If I could help you, I definitely would like to, but…"

Though they try to produce it in a more "native" way, it is still a very limited attempt because the true native speakers would explain more reasons of why they can't do it at the beginning and use more hedges or constant "sorry" to make the rejection even more negative than these Chinese interviewees can acknowledge. But the interviewees have their own strategies by providing further suggestions and showing consideration to the friend's request in positive attempts:

"I can introduce and try to find some pet store for you…"

"Maybe I could recommend someone who can do this better than me."

"I'm just wondering whether you have other choices to deal with it."

5. DISCUSSION

Through the results of this research, the informal greetings to professor among Chinese learners are very common. This phenomenon may strongly related to the unfamiliarity of pragmatics in greetings when they are in their process of second language acquisition. Also concerning to the vocabulary usage of Chinese itself, there is only one way to express similar meanings which is "你好（nǐ hǎo）", and this can be translated as both "Hi" and "Hello".

In all dialogues of Chinese learners, positive politeness strategies are more frequently visible than other strategies, including discourse markers, establishing common grounds, and also showing instant confirmation. These strategies are often contrasted to the negative approach that the native speaker would use, and we may find possible reasons in Chinese culture to explain this phenomenon. Because Chinese culture emphasizes collectivism, the negative face, i.e. the need for freedom of action is not so important among Chinese people. Hence, imposing on someone's freedom of action does not usually threaten the addressee's face in Chinese but it is often acceptable in China. What really concerns the addressee's face in Chinese society is dignity or self-respect. Negative faces do not exist in Chinese culture[15]. While in English-speaking countries, individualism is more emphasized so the negative face

becomes the stressed point to guarantee the freedom of the hearer.

What can be suspected in the scenario of compliment is rather interesting. China, as a hierarchical society for thousands of years, can allow the students to praise their professors directly by saying "great job". While for the native speakers, being in the society which calls for equal power relationships, it is impolite for the students to do this because they are not in the position to evaluate the professor. I may speculate that this is related to the Chinese custom of showing respect through instant agreement. And the higher the hierarchy, the more direct compliments are required. While in western culture, evaluating a person is never encouraged no matter what the hierarchy is, unless it is used in special situations like in the need of critiques.

6. CONCLUSION

This research shows that Chinese learners will be affected by Chinese culture when they use a second language, which is English in this context. According to the interview answers obtained, the Chinese learners often use the politeness strategies which are more familiar to them in Chinese culture, and that may unintentionally cause misunderstanding when communicating with native speakers. Chinese speakers always preferred more positive politeness strategies when communicating to show their confirmation to the hearer and their mutual agreements established in the conversation due to the strong influence of Chinese culture. But though positive politeness is much more preferred among Chinese speakers, the negative face must be emphasized when they are trying to use a different language. This research successfully discovers and compares the existence of these language problems and I hope these discovered errors can be avoided and improved as much as possible in subsequent communication of Chinese learners second language acquisition.

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