# The Effect of Pragmatic Failures in Chinese-English Intercultural Communication on English Acquisition

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**ABSTRACT**

In the current conditions of globalization and the use of English as a lingua franca (ELF), English learners can gain lots of language skills and oral expressions through their continuous efforts, but the lack of actual language environment and awareness of pragmatics make it hard to be fully mastered. One of the most important reasons for this is the misuse of pragmatics. The appropriateness and effectiveness of language use in intercultural communication are directly affected by it. Due to the complexity and broadness of the pragmatics study, this research paper will find out the most common and main problems that affect Chinese students' learning of English by analyzing the existing studies related to pragmatic failures. In order to let the practicality of English utilized, this paper will also try to summarize some effective ways to avoid these problems at the same time.

*Keywords: intercultural communication, pragmatics failures, teaching, culture input*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Language is the most important communication tool for human beings. It has a social function that allows people from different countries to express their thoughts when talking with each other. This is related to the conception of intercultural communication, which as an independent concept originated with the anthropologist Edward T. Hall in his *The Silent Language* in 1959. Hall treated intercultural communication as a rule-governed interaction between people from different cultures and as a practice that permits researchers to theorize about cultural patterns of interaction [1]. Guo-Ming Chen and William J. Starosta 's ICC model [2] is considered the theoretical preparation for the study and measurement of the factors that influence intercultural communication. They divided the model into three parts. First is the cognitive aspect of intercultural communication competence, also named intercultural awareness. It involves cultural practices that influence people's thoughts and behaviors. Cultural awareness requires people to understand the similarities as well as the differences between the cultures of the target language and the culture of the native country. This consists of two components, self-awareness as well as cultural awareness. And second is the affective aspect of intercultural communication competence, also considered as intercultural sensitivity. It reveals the behavioral need for

people to understand, appreciate, and accept different cultures on their own. This aspect consists of six components includes self-esteem, self-monitoring, open-mindedness, empathy, mutual influence, and unfairness. And the last one is the behavioral aspect of intercultural communicative competence also referred to the cross-cultural proficiency, which involves the ability to make one's behavior effective and appropriate in the context of intercultural communication.

Ideally, intercultural communication should generate intercultural learning opportunities between L2 learners and students of the host country. Nevertheless, almost unanimously, researches show that it is difficult for international students from China and other Asian countries to communicate with the locals because of the lack of the factors have been mentioned in Chen and Starosta 's ICC model [2]. The reason for this is perhaps as Liu, H and H. U. Jin-Chan mentioned that Wolfson had stated: "When communicating with foreigners, native speakers tend to be quite tolerant of pronunciation or syntactic errors. Conversely, violations of speech rules are often interpreted as impoliteness because native speakers are less likely to be aware of the sociolinguistic relevance [3]".

Currently, English is used as a second language for most Chinese students, while the English lessons in China are now deficient in the teaching of pragmatics,

which is closely associated with the word "sociolinguistic" that Wolfson stated above. This is a keyword in the concept of pragmatics failures, which the British linguist Thomas first introduced in her book, *Cross-cultural Pragmatic Failure* in 1983. Thomas (p.91) defined pragmatic failure as the inability to understand the meaning of discourse [4].

Since Thomas proposed the concept of "pragmatic failure", many Chinese scholars have conducted extensive research on English pragmatic failure among Chinese students because it directly affects students' perception of English and has caused certain effects and even misunderstandings in Chinese students learning English.

In China, according to He Ziran, pragmatic failure is those faults, which make communication imperfect in verbal communication, which is one of the generally accepted definitions [5]. After that, Guan-Lian Qian proposed a similar statement that "pragmatic failure is committed when the speaker uses grammatically correct sentences, but unconsciously violates the interpersonal relationship rules, social conventions, or takes little notice of the time, space, and addressee [6]."

Similar to He Ziran, Thomas classified pragmatics failures into two categories: "pragmalinguistic failure" and "sociolinguistic failure"[4], which is accepted by most scholars in this field.

To be more specific, "pragmalinguistic failure" refers to the linguistic failure of the language itself, which consists of two aspects, the first is unable to accurately analyze English words with similar meanings [7]. Take the word "solemn" as an example, in Chinese it has only one meaning, which is "庄严的". However, in English, the words "stately", "dignified", "grandeur" and "awfulness" all have the same meanings, and the choice of these words and explanations are varied in different contexts. In the practical translation or communication, some speakers ignore this difference, and the inaccurate interpretation of words happened. Secondly, they do not understand the expressions of English and apply the structure of their native language. For example, Chinese students tend to use the sentence "This is my point" when summarizing their opinions in English, but this does not match the English grammar and is wrong because the point has been stated and it has already happened, and the correct grammar is the past tense, which should be expressed as "That's my point".

"Sociolinguistic failure" refers to the linguistic failure that occurs in communication due to the lack of understanding or ignoring different countries' social and cultural backgrounds [8]. For example, when receiving a compliment, Chinese people tend to deny it. They will show their politeness by following the principle of modesty. When an English-speaking person says: "You are an excellent basketball player", the Chinese people always say "No, no, I am a poor basketball player", while the English-speaking people will say "Thank you, that's because I have practiced a lot." In the Chinese culture, it is considered to be modest to decline a compliment, but in intercultural communication, it may make one think that the compliment-giver has a poor sense of judgment. But westerners on the same occasion tend to accept it and tend to express their gratitude or show a happy mood means they show their politeness by agreeing with others' words.

This research aims at getting to know the concept of intercultural communicative competence and to analyze some pragmatics failures by analyzing secondary resources and an individual interview to find out the factors that influence the L2 learners and help them get better in the target language. Section 2 will be the methodology, which includes a brief introduction of the whole research; Section 3 will present the data and the sources; Section 4 will discuss the statistics, and the last part will be the conclusion

## 2. METHODOLOGY

"The primary goal of most foreign language learning is to develop the ability to use real and appropriate language to communicate and interact with others, and the goal of foreign language teaching is to extend the range of communicative situations in which the learners can perform with focus on meaning without being hindered by the attention he must pay to linguistic form [9]". Nuyts assumed that: language as a systematic human behavior must be based on a very complex cognitive structure [10]. Otherwise, it cannot be applied. Besides, language learning includes input and output. The failed examples may be a start, it can make students have the access to successful discourse strategies more concretely [11]. However, there is no direct access to the cognitive. Therefore, the structure and characteristics of cognition can only be inferred from various external behavioral features [10]. Thus, exploring it through linguistic behaviors is an effective way.

Considering that the discourse of pragmatics does not apply to younger learners of English. This analysis will focus on the research about pragmatics failures of college students whose native language is Chinese and who have some basic knowledge of English.

Different from the original authors, this research paper will use their results to answer two questions: First is the relationship between English and English pragmatic competence; Second is the main cause of the pragmatic failures of Chinese students. To further test these 2 questions and find out the methods to avoid pragmatics failures, I did an interview with Chen on March 18, 2022, who has overseas study experience. (Notes: Chen participated voluntarily, and the content presented in this report has been approved by her). This

interview includes 3 questions: Q1: Do you think the content of actual communication abroad is the same as what is taught at home. Q2: What is the most impressive linguistic mistake you have made in the process of intercultural communication? Q3: Do you think it is possible to become a native English speaker if you stay abroad for a long enough period? These three questions are based on two secondary data analyzed in this research paper, which will be mentioned in Section3.

After interviewing Chen, I will combine the effective ways to improve domestic English pragmatic proficiency as summarized in the articles published by He Ziran [5], Li-Ping Wu [12], and Chen's answer to complete the discussion part.

## 3. DATA COLLECTION AND RESULTS

To answer the question of the relationship between English and English pragmatic competence, these are the results of the pre-test and pro-test in the experimental class and control class, which are presented in Table1 and Table 2 from the paper, *The study of English majors' intercultural communicative pragmatic failures*, whose author is Wang Fang [13].

**Table1:** The data measured before and after the experimental class

| Item | Number | Mean | Std Deviation | Std.Error Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pre-test | 22 | 58.3636 | 7.47405 | 1.59347 |
| Post-test | 22 | 76.7273 | 5.47011 | 1.16623 |

**Table 2:** The data measured before and after the control class

| Item | Number | Mean | Std Deviation | Std.Error Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pre-test | 22 | 56.9091 | 5.51111 | 1.17497 |
| Post-test | 22 | 57.3636 | 5.93252 | 1.26482 |

As for the question of the main cause of the pragmatic failures of Chinese students. Here are the statistics collected by Kasper, G in his article *Pragmatic Transfer in Studies in Second Language Acquisition* [14].

**Table3:** The percentage of the sources of pragmatic failure

| Items | Ignorance | Transfer |
|---|---|---|
| Percentage | 66% | 21% |
| Items | Lack of Cultivation | Misguidance |
| Percentage | 9% | 1.5% |
| Items | Overgeneralization | Others |
| Percentage | 1.5% | 1% |

The last part will be the transcription of Chen's interview contents, which will be presented in the third-person narrative form. For qustion1, Chen believes that some daily communication is consistent with actual foreign communicative content, such as the use of "excuse me", for the reason that perhaps the Chinese students perform better in the pragmatic application of English than the Chinese and Western cultures are similar. However, for question2, she thinks there is still some confusion in intercultural communication because of the negative native language transfer. For example, "Never mind" can be used either to say no thanks or to reply to the apology. As for question 3, Chen believes that the human brain and mind are so complex that it may not be possible to fully master foreign language skills even after staying abroad for a long time, but Chen is unsure. This is because intercultural communication involves many factors, not only mastering the knowledge but also taking into account the change of cultural background, the psychological and mental state of the person in the specific circumstances, and the ability to adapt to the new environment. But it is undeniable that cultural input is crucial. Remarkably, according to those explanations of pragmatics failures, it may happen in all the areas of social life. Therefore, the study should not be limited to daily communication, but also include some specialized areas.

## 4. DISCUSSION

In the paper, *The study of English majors' intercultural communicative pragmatic failures* [13], WANG Fang used tests to conduct an empirical study on English majors' intercultural communicative pragmatic competence. She randomly selected the first class (22 students) as the experimental class (EC) and the fourth class (22 students) as the control class (CC). The students in the experimental class received classroom instruction about intercultural communicative pragmatic errors, while the control class did not. The test was divided into a pre-test and a post-test, from Table 1, we can see that the average score of the experimental class is 58.3636 in the pre-test and 76.7273 in the post-test, and the average score of the post-test is 18.3637 points higher than the average score of the pre-test, which means that there is a big improvement in their performance and there is a significant difference in the pre-test and post-test. It can be said that the English proficiency and linguistic ability of the English majors in the experimental class have been greatly improved after the test. It also shows that the intercultural communication course, especially the related knowledge about pragmatic errors, plays a pivotal role in improving students' pragmatic skills. However, some problems were also revealed in the post-test. No

student got full marks, and the mistakes made in the pre-test were repeated in the post-test. Therefore, English teachers should pay enough attention to this issue and try to improve English majors' pragmatic skills. While from Table 2, we can see that the average score of the control class in the pre-test is 56.9091 and the average score of the post-test is 57.3636, and there is only a difference of 0.4545 points between them, which proves that there is no significant difference between the control class in the pre-test and the post-test. At the same time, the analysis of the pre-test and post-test data of the control class also tells us the fact that without the learning knowledge related to intercultural communication courses, it is difficult for English majors to improve their linguistic awareness and linguistic competence in their own.

As for the most important factors affecting students' learning of pragmatics knowledge, Kasper G. came to a conclusion after surveying a certain number of students, which is defined as "the influence exerted by learners' pragmatic knowledge of languages and cultures other than L2 on their comprehension, production, and learning of L2 pragmatic information [14]". Stemming from the inseparable relationship between language and culture, he identifies two types of pragmatic transfer: pragmalinguistic transfer and sociopragmatic transfer. The proportion of pragmatic failure caused by transfer from Table 3 is much higher than the proportion of the lack of knowledge, and more neglect is also influenced by native language habits. It illustrates that native language transfer is perhaps the most important cause of pragmatic failures. According to Thomas, while grammatical errors may reveal a speaker to be less than proficient language user, pragmatic failure reflects badly on him/her as a person. The grammatical mistakes seem to be superficial, and the listener can realize quickly and even ignore them, and capture the useful information to understand the real intention of the speaker [4]. Thus, it is still able to continue the communication, but it may be unacceptable for the listener to bear the pragmatic failure committed by a person who can speak English fluently.

In addition to Thomas's viewpoint, Chen's perspective is also like D. Hymes's statement: In addition to linguistic competence, a competent communicator must also have knowledge of how to use language appropriately and effectively [15]. Therefore, it is important to know when and where to speak. Meanwhile, he summarized: "one of the important components of communicative competence is appropriateness which refers to the ability to use correct forms of language in a specific socio-cultural context [15]. Appropriateness could be regarded as a language user's pragmatic competence though Hymes doesn't use the term, and this highlights the significance of teaching. According to Jung, from a pragmatic point of view, students must develop the following abilities: the ability to perform speech acts, to produce and interpret non-literal meanings,

to use politeness strategies, to perform discourse functions, and to use cultural knowledge [11].

Similar to Jung's methods, this research paper collects the statements from He Ziran's paper *Chinese Students' Pragmatic Failures in English Communication-An Investigation of the Differences between Chinese and English Pragmatics* in 1986[5]. He proposed how to help students improve their pragmatic skills and avoid pragmatic failures. He thinks knowledge of English pragmatics should not only be taught but also included in teaching plans. He suggests that pragmatic knowledge should be incorporated into the teaching of discourse, grammar, and vocabulary. Moreover, he suggests that students' pragmatic skills can be developed through other methods, such as watching English movies or videos, reading modern literature, giving full play to the role of foreign teachers; introducing the cultural customs of English-speaking countries in the form of lectures, especially those of which are different from Chinese culture. Like the above is the methods in the paper published by Li-Ping Wu in 2013 named *A Study on English Majors' Pragmatic Failure in Cross-cultural Communication-An Empirical Study in Guangxi Normal University*, there are three suggestions for teaching are mentioned: first is raising students' pragmatic awareness; second is cultivating students' cultural sensitivity; third is enhancing the availability of input [12].

Based on the above points, not only the general direction that should be paid attention to [12]; but also, some specific approaches are mentioned [5] [11].

## 5. CONCLUSION

Addressing the issues of how English pragmatics failures affect the Chinese students when they are learning English by analyzing the above findings of experiments on pragmatic failures conducted by other scholars and the results of Chen's interview, we can be indicated that the intercultural communicative competence, English pragmatics use, and English learning are all connected and most Chinese students are not aware of the concept of pragmatic use mostly because they are unable to set themselves into the real intercultural communication circumstances. Therefore, it seems that it is difficult to let students unconsciously and autonomously learn English pragmatics knowledge. Another key finding is based on the result of Wang Fang's experiment [13], there is no direct connection between English use and English pragmatics use, which make many Chinese students confused. At the same time, Kasper G. shows that negative native language transfer [14] is the main factor that affects English learning because of the lack of a specific environment. All of these are showing the importance of teaching and the input of culture, and the specific methods can refer to the suggestions from the scholars mentioned in the discussion part.

In addition to this, it is essential to take into account the evolution of the vocabulary and the changes of the eras, as well as the subtle changes in the thinking and psychology of the speakers, which are mentioned in the ICC model [3] from the introduction part, and these may affect the use of English and need to be studied through extensive experiments. Another issue to be further studied is whether second language learners can acquire the second language as well as native speakers when spending enough time in the target environment.

Overall, this research paper only analyzes the factors that influence second language acquisition in terms of pragmatics failures in intercultural communication to find some effective ways to improve English through teaching.

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