

A Study on Chinese College Students' English Pragmatic Failure

Zhang Yuanmin

College English Teaching and Research Section
Xi'an University of Technological Information
Xi'an, 710299, China
e-mail: 514729960@qq.com

Liu Gailin

Xi'an University of Technological Information
Xi'an, 710299, China
e-mail: luga888@163.com

Abstract—With the development of globalization, cross-cultural communication permeates people's life. Hence, cultivating Chinese college students' communicative competence in English language teaching is obviously becoming more and more important. However, the current situation in college English teaching is that more attention has been given to the promotion of English linguistic competence of students from elementary school to college; hence, the imbalance leads to the deficient development of English pragmatic competence among college students. Through analyzing the college students' English pragmatic failure, this research attempts to pinpoint the causes of their failure from cross-cultural communication aspect to improve college students' English pragmatic competence.

Keywords—Chinese College Students; English Cultural Background Knowledge; English Pragmatic Failure; Teaching

I. INTRODUCTION

In China, English is a compulsory course in university. For decades, the English language teaching has been greatly affected by structuralism and examination-oriented education system. The English class is flooded with mere exercises on linguistic skills and mechanic pattern drills. Both teachers and students attach too much time and energy to linguistic forms of English, but show little concern for appropriateness of English usage in actual situations and neglect social-cultural meaning, cultural background knowledge, language functions, and the effect of context on the development of linguistic and pragmatic competence. As a result, Chinese college students frequently fail to use the English language appropriately or interpret in an acceptable way when communicating with native English speakers. When English pragmatic failure appears in the cross-cultural communication, they find themselves quiet at a loss. Pragmatic failure is a representation of poor pragmatic competence and if pragmatic competence is developed, the incidence of pragmatic failure will be correspondingly reduced. Consequently, this research analyzed the English pragmatic failure of 100 students from one university in Xi'an, pinpointed the causes of their failure, and subsequently proved that the chances of English pragmatic failure can be reduced with enough input of English cultural background knowledge.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In cross-cultural communication people with different cultural backgrounds often encounter misunderstanding between each other even though they find little difficulties to understand the literal meaning of their utterances. This kind of misunderstanding resulting from verbal and nonverbal factors is bound to violate the pragmatic principles or deviate from the conventions of target culture. Many linguists and scholars have made researches into this. Thomas, as one of these persons, proposes the notion of "pragmatic failure" which often stands in the way of cross-cultural communication.

If people fail to achieve the desired communicative effect in communication, pragmatic failure will be likely to occur. When pragmatic failure occurs, the speaker fails to achieve his or her goal, and the mismatch between the speaker's intention and hearer's interpretation occurs. It can be summarized that they are unable to understand what is meant by what is said. Pragmatic failure was first put forward by Thomas. He defines that "pragmatic failure is an area of cross-cultural communication breakdown..." (Thomas, 1995). Thomas (1983) points out that interference in communication is generally referred to as pragmatic failure, which has nothing to do with the grammatical mistakes but comes from inappropriate ways of speaking or the unconventional expressions resulting from different perceptions of what is considered as appropriate linguistic behavior. In general, grammatical error belongs to language; pragmatic failure falls into language use. Actually, pragmatic failure occurs wherever the communicator could not use language appropriately or interpret language correctly.

In cross-cultural communication, people from different cultures may speak the same language, if they do not have enough knowledge of cultural tradition of the other country, and interpret the utterances from their own cultural background, and then the cultural conflicts will arise. And this may cause pragmatic failure. In China, He Ziran & Yan Zhuang (1986) first analyze the cross-cultural pragmatic failure in both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic aspects.

Pragmalinguistic failure occurs when the pragmatic force mapped by the speaker onto a given utterance is systematically different from the force most frequently assigned to it by native speakers of the target language, or when conventional strategies are inappropriately transferred from the speaker's mother tongue to the target language.

Pragmalinguistic failure is the wrong use of language itself, including incorrect use of English language with semantics and structures of the mother language. To make it easier, pragmalinguistic failure is caused by people's different understandings on a linguistic structure. Every culture has its own norms regarding the appropriateness of different types of expressions and strategies. This decides that when interacting with the native speakers, Chinese college students should keep in mind that they do not violate the English pragmatic principles or deviate from the conversations of the English. However, Chinese college students often don't realize that and can't make themselves understood because they always mechanically apply the pragmalinguistic meaning of a certain word or structure in Chinese to English. As Thomas (1983) argues that pragmalinguistic failure is simply a question of highly conventionalized usage which can be taught quite straightforwardly as "part of grammar", and thus fairly easy to overcome.

Sociopragmatic failure refers to errors occurring when communicators do not know the differences between cultures and thus do not choose the appropriate language. Different cultures tend to have very different ways of thinking, rules of speaking, social values, and relative weights of pragmatic principles. The diversity in social value system and the ways of ideas that are expressed in cross-cultural communication are not always well interpreted. Sociopragmatic failure is much more difficult to deal with, since it involves the learners' system of cultural background and beliefs as well as their knowledge of the language. As Leech (1983) has observed, pragmatic principles are more or less universal, but their relative weights are culturally different.

Pragmatic failure creates barriers to the effective communication mainly because of lack of cultural background knowledge. It is obvious that cultural differences can be seen everywhere in cross-cultural communication. College English teaching should attach great importance to English cultural background knowledge and help college students to understand the culture differences between Chinese and English to eliminate English pragmatic failures.

III. AN ANALYSIS OF THE CAUSES OF ENGLISH PRAGMATIC FAILURE AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR CHINESE TEACHING AND LEARNING

English pragmatic failures are somewhat common among Chinese college students. Thus, English pragmatic failure should be given attentive consideration. It is worthwhile for us to make effort to explore English pragmatic failure to improve Chinese college students' English pragmatic competence. Therefore, we come to looking into typical English pragmatic failure examples of 100 students from one of university in Xi'an, and study how it influences the cross-cultural communication.

A. *English Pragmalinguistic Failure of the Chinese College Students Investigated*

Chinese college students often fail to make their meaning understood because their utterances, in one way or another, violate English pragmatic principles or deviate from the conventions of English language. As a consequence, the

English speaker may either accept an illocutionary force that does not match Chinese college student's intended one or find the utterance meaningless or inappropriate, for it does not fit the English speaker's cultural convention. To make it easier, English pragmalinguistic failures are caused by Chinese college students' different understanding on a English linguistic structure. So we try to analyze Chinese college students' English pragmalinguistic failure from failing to use words, expressions, sentences and cultural transfer.

1) *Failure in the usage of words*

Example 1

In a repair shop on Monday

Repairman: "It will be fixed next Thursday."

When should the customer come to take his washing machine?

- a) Three days later.
- b) Ten days later.
- c) Three days later and Ten days later.

11% of the investigated Chinese college students have chosen "Three days later", 60% of the investigated Chinese college students have chosen "Ten days later" and 29% of the investigated Chinese college students have chosen "Three days later" and "Ten days later". It is obvious that the investigated Chinese college students misunderstood the real meaning the time "next Thursday". For many Chinese college students, it is really a complicated concept to understand. In Chinese, Xia Zhou Si can only mean the Thursday of the following weekday, no matter which weekday this expression is used. However, in English speaking countries, according to the different time of utterance, "next Thursday" may refer to either the Thursday of the week that succeeds the week that includes the time of utterance, or the Thursday that first follows the time of utterance. If the speaker makes the utterance on Monday or Tuesday, "next Thursday" is ambiguous. It refers to either the Thursday within the same week, or the Thursday in following week. It all depends on the time when speaker makes the utterance. The ambiguity of this English expression confused some Chinese college students, the majority of them, basing on their knowledge of the semantically equivalent Chinese expression, chose B as the appropriate answer.

2) *Failure in the usage of expressions*

Example 2

Man: It is very kind of you to show me around the campus.

Woman:

- a) Never mind.
- b) It's a pleasure.
- c) Certainly, no problem.

Though the literally meaning of "Never mind" is equal to Chinese "Mei Gan Xi" or "Bu Ke Qi", the communicative conventions behind the two expressions are different. In Chinese "Mei Gan Xi" or "Bu Ke Qi" is said in responding to either thanks or apology, while in English "never mind" or "it doesn't matter" is only used to an apology. 38.4% of the investigated college students considered "Never mind" is appropriate response to "It is very kind of you to show me

around the campus.”. Thus, the force of the utterance has lost and the Chinese college students have failed to make his or her meaning understood. Actually in English culture, “Never mind” is widely used in the situation when one apologizes for something and you don’t care about it. In such a case, the appropriate response should be “It’s a pleasure”.

3) *Failure in the usage of sentences*

Example 3

In the classroom

The students are discussing the plan of an excursion. When finding that one of them, called Xiao Lin, don’t want to go, Dick decided to confirm whether he would go or not and say to him.

Dick: “Xiao Lin, don’t you go to?”

Xiao Lin:

- a) Yes, I don’t go to.
- b) No, I don’t go to.

It is apparent to see that the answers of 20% the investigated Chinese college students are in accordance with the Chinese expressing habit. When responding to “yes” or “no” question in Chinese, we should answer it directly on the utterance of the speaker, while the answer of “yes” or “no” question in English is not aimed at the addressee but the intention of the speaker. Thus the appropriate answer should be “No, I don’t go to.” The reason why so many Chinese college students didn’t choose the correct answer is that according to English culture people pay more attention to expressing their own subjective views on the objective facts, while Chinese people focus on the response to the utterance of the meaning of the speaker and want to chime in with each other in communication. The difference of Chinese and English language in cognitive basis reflects that difference of English speakers and Chinese people in cultural foundation. Because of different cultural background knowledge, Chinese people place great emphasis on sincerity and tend to believe others in social communication while English speakers stress truthfulness and tend to show their sincerity with outward evidence.

4) *Cultural transfer*

Cultural transfer is also called mother tongue transfer. Learners use their previous mother tongue experience as a means of organizing the target language data. In other words, in the process of language learning the learners are accustomed to establishing the system and structure of the target language by using their mother tongue’s habits. Cultural transfer is a universal phenomenon in Chinese college students’ pragmatic failure. Some Chinese college students often transfer Chinese customary utterances to English, which may puzzled the English native speakers.

Example 4

On the way to school, a student greets his teacher.

Xiao Sun:

- a) Good morning, teacher.
- b) Good morning!
- c) Good morning, Mr. Stoneham.

38% of the investigated Chinese college students chose “Good morning, teacher.” This is because in Chinese, words expressing occupation can be used to address people. In our country when students greet their teachers, they usually use

“teacher” such as “good morning, teacher”. They are so familiar with this greeting. Chinese college students have no sense of inappropriateness when greeting teachers by addressing “teacher”. They just translate the Chinese expressing into semantically equivalent English word. However, “teacher” cannot be used to address people in the English-speaking countries. According to the custom in English, the teacher should be addressed as “Mr., Mrs. or Miss + surname”. However, teachers have been traditionally respected in China. Students are not supposed to address their teachers by simply using their names. The more formally the Chinese students address their teachers, the more respect they pay to them. While in English culture, the more friendly the students are with their teacher, the more likely they used the teacher’s given name.

B. *English Sociopragmatic Failure of the Chinese College Students Investigated*

English sociopragmatic failure is a serious problem in English learning among Chinese college students. Chen Zhi’an & Huang Ming (2002) note “Sociopragmatic failure is caused by mismatched which arise from intercultural different assessments within the social parameters affecting linguistic choice-size of imposition, social distance between speaker and hearer, relative rights and obligations.”. To help Chinese college students avoid English sociopragmatic failure, we will analyze the Chinese college students’ English sociopragmatic failures from the following two specific aspects.

1) *Differences in values*

Each culture has a unique set of value. Differences in value system may become obstacles to hide the cross-cultural communication, and even turn into disturbances to objective thinking, because people are used to their own value orientation and will reject the thinking patterns adopted by people in another culture. It is rather hard or even impossible to understand the native speakers’ behavior patterns without knowing more of their value systems.

Example 7

A Chinese student gives a birthday present to her American friend.

Albert: (opening the present) Wow, it’s neat. Thank you.

Xiao Hua:

- a) Really? Do you like it?
- b) Don’t mention it. It is only a small gift.
- c) I’m glad you like it.
- d) Not at all.

The result shows 20% of the investigated Chinese college students chose “Really? Do you like it?”, 12% of the investigated Chinese college students chose “Not at all.”, 10% of the investigated Chinese college students chose “I’m glad you like it.”, 58% of the investigated Chinese college students chose “Don’t mention it. It is only a small gift.”. According to the traditional Chinese culture, a well-mannered person would be normally likely to devalue the gift, though the present is very expensive. Influenced by Chinese culture, the majority of the Chinese college students chose “Don’t mention it. It is only a small gift.” as the most appropriate answer. But it may make the English speaker feel

puzzled on hearing these answer if he or she is not familiar with the Chinese culture. They will think: “since it’s just a very cheap one, why do you give it to me?” and they are apt to misunderstand this kind of modesty. So we can see that English sociopragmatic failure appears and cross-cultural communication breaks down. According to English culture, the appropriate answer would better be “I’m glad you like it.”.

2) Cultural differences

In cross-cultural communication, cultural differences inevitably create barriers to effective communication, because Chinese people and English people comply with different sets of norms and rules of social interaction. Each language has its peculiar culture acquired naturally by native speakers in the process of growth and education and need not be interpreted in detail. For this reason, in English learning, the Chinese college students ignore the fact that the native speakers of English speak differently, respond to compliment and apologize differently, engage in different forms of polite interaction, adopt different ways of making request and so on and they may transfer rules of speaking from Chinese to English without considering the cultural differences and the different communicative rules. When Chinese college students communicate with the English native speakers, they may be confronted with the problem of cultural differences which causes English sociopragmatic failure. Difference cultures tend to have very different ways of thinking, rules of speaking and relative weights of pragmatic principle. In this case, misunderstanding of one’s intention is inevitable and is much more difficult to cope with, since it involves the speaker’s cultural background knowledge of the target language.

Example 10

In a commercial negotiation, Chinese representative could not accept the scheme forwarded by the American side. Which of the following ways is appropriate to refuse it?

- a) I’m afraid that we can not accept your scheme.
- b) I’m afraid that we need the further discussion.
- c) Sorry, this scheme is unacceptable.

In this example, the correct answer is “I’m afraid that we can not accept your scheme.”. However, a lot of Chinese college students selected “I’m afraid that we need the further discussion.”. “I’m afraid that we need the further discussion.” is Chinese way indirect and mild refusal, and it is easy for Chinese to understand the conversational implication of “I’m afraid that we need the further discussion.”. But when Americans heard “I’m afraid that we need the further discussion.”, they would think their scheme was possible to be accepted, because if not, why did Chinese need further discussion. However, what they thought is exactly opposite to the Chinese speaker’s implication. This misunderstanding is also due to cultural differences.

IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR CHINESE COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING AND LEARNING

English pragmatic competence is the ability to use a language in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context. So high levels of English linguistic competence do not guarantee concomitant high

levels of English pragmatic competence. After we have realized the necessity of developing Chinese college students’ English pragmatic competence, how do we cultivate Chinese college students’ English pragmatic competence? The following are some approaches to develop Chinese college students’ English pragmatic competence.

A. Effective Instruction

Some researchers demonstrate that pragmatic routines are teachable to foreign language learners. This finding is very important in terms of curriculum and syllabus design because it dispels the myth that pragmatics can not be taught.

1) A word without linguistic or context is a mere figment and stands for nothing but itself. So in teaching English words, phrases, sentences and grammar, the Chinese college English teachers can give clear explanations about their utterance meaning or their illocutionary force, trying to make them contextually appropriate. In order to make Chinese college students have a good command of words, phrases, sentences and grammar, Chinese college English teachers can try to explore possibilities of a contextual approach in classroom. When teaching a English text, Chinese college English teachers should pay more attention to analysis the author’s writing style and the intention that author writes the text for. And also Chinese college English teachers should ask Chinese college students to analyze the various situational contexts of the spoken discourse in order to help them understand the speaker’s meaning intention in a better way.

2) In order to improve Chinese college students’ pragmatic competence, Chinese college English teachers should impart English pragmatic knowledge to Chinese college students such as complimenting, apologizing and closing a conversation, leaving and taking, etc. By introducing the authentic examples, Chinese college students can get highly quality English input, and thus have the possibility to prepare well for the appropriate English output. It is still considered very important to let Chinese college students know how pragmatic rules operate in the English speaking community and perhaps draw attention to mismatches or inconsistencies in behavior. Moreover, besides teaching how pragmatic rules actually operate in the English, teachers may notice that some Chinese college students continue to prefer their own speech strategies even if they know those strategies are not perceived well in English speaking community. This is because the Chinese college students lack of English pragmatic consciousness. So the following part will discuss how to cultivate Chinese college students’ English pragmatic consciousness.

B. Raising English Pragmatic Consciousness

Kasper (1993) suggests that a pragmatic consciousness raising approach can be used to develop pragmatic competence in both English as foreign language and English as a second language context. This approach sensitizes learners to context-based variation in language use and the factors that contribute to those variations, rather than teach a specific means of performing a speech act. Raising English pragmatic consciousness can also be carried out through

giving Chinese college students observation task outside classroom. Chinese college teachers can advise students to read original magazines, newspapers, novels as well as see films or watch TV. After reading, Chinese college teacher can ask Chinese students to hand in their book reports or a discussion can be held to share what they have learnt. So we can see that the effective English input can not only help Chinese students know the language itself, but also develop their English pragmatic consciousness.

C. Necessity of Increasing English Cultural Background Knowledge

From what has been discussed in the previous part we know that English pragmatic failure is in most cases caused by the inadequacy of English cultural knowledge. How do Chinese college students increase English cultural background knowledge? we can increase Chinese college students' cultural background knowledge from two aspects: learning English cultural background knowledge in class and out of class.

1) learning english cultural background knowledge in class

In Chinese college English language teaching, the teacher should not only teach Chinese college students correct English linguistic knowledge, but also expose them to culture and customs and the norms of speaking of the English speakers. In listening and speaking class, teachers should teach the English cultural connotation and norms contained in some speech acts according to different functions such as shopping, introduction, asking the way, apologize. In reading class, it's necessary to introduce some deep English cultural elements such as thought patterns, discourse and rhetoric styles so that Chinese college students can make further understanding of English culture.

2) learning english cultural background knowledge out of class

The class time is limited. Cultural background knowledge achieved only through classroom is not enough.

So, we have to make full use of out of class time. Chinese college students should be provided as many chances as possible to access to all kinds of activities such as lectures of special topics, direct contact with English native speakers, On-line chatting and Net surfing.

V. CONCLUSION

When communicating with native English speakers, Chinese college students often commit English pragmatic failures which put a barrier before cross-culture communication. This phenomenon draws our attention. After reviewing the studies and development of pragmatic failure at home and abroad, we found that English pragmatic failure is the prerequisite to a successful cross-cultural communication. We have examined 100 Chinese college students' pragmatic failures and have pinpointed the causes from cross-cultural perspective. After knowing the basic problems about English pragmatic failure, we has probed some techniques to reduce Chinese college students' English pragmatic failure.

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