

Pragmatic Failure in Intercultural Communication and English Teaching in China

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Abstract: On the basis of a literature review and a small-scale, exploratory study in the target language community, this paper analyzes the phenomena of pragmatic failure committed by Chinese students in their daily conversations in intercultural communication, and discusses the nature and causes of pragmatic failure in intercultural communication situations. After gaining a better understanding of the phenomena, recommendations are made on how to raise the pragmatic awareness, and develop the pragmatic ability of Chinese learners of English in the EFL classroom so as to increase their intercultural communicative competence in English. [China Media Research. 2008; 4(3): 43-52]

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Introduction

With the globalization of the world economy, intercultural communication is becoming more and more important. As an international language, English is the most widely used throughout the world. In China, English as a school subject is becoming increasingly more important. More and more Chinese students are going to English-speaking countries to further their studies. However, even though they have little difficulty understanding the literal meaning of utterances when confronted with authentic communication situations, they may not interpret the utterances correctly, or express themselves appropriately. Intercultural communication sometimes breaks down in real-life conversations, not because of the non-native speaker's errors in syntax, or their inaccurate pronunciation in the target language, but because of their pragmatic incompetence, which leads to pragmatic failure. In other words, they may be unable to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context. As Rintell & Mitchell (1989) point out, it can cause misunderstandings or create offence when learners can understand only the literal meaning of words and do not know the rules of use for interpreting those words.

Pragmatic failure belongs to the field of cross-cultural pragmatics, a new branch of pragmatics which has developed rapidly in the past twenty years. Several research studies about pragmatic failure in speech acts have been conducted in EFL classroom settings in China (He & Yan, 1986; Hong, 1991; Gu, 2003; Chen, 2005; Zhang, 2005), but few have been done on Chinese Learners of English in the target language community. On the basis of a literature review and a small-scale, exploratory study in the host environment, this paper attempts to analyze the phenomena of pragmatic failure committed by Chinese students in their daily

conversations with native English speakers. The purpose is to gain a better understanding of the phenomena in order to make recommendations on how to raise the pragmatic awareness, and develop the pragmatic ability of Chinese learners in the EFL classroom. Specifically, beginning with an understanding of pragmatic failure, the paper conducts a review of pragmatic failure committed by Chinese students in intercultural communication situations. It goes on to discuss the potential sources of pragmatic failure. Then the paper reports the small-scale, exploratory study which was carried out in the target language community. Finally some teaching ideas are recommended.

Pragmatic Failure

The concept of pragmatic failure was first proposed by Jenny Thomas (1983) to define the inability to understand what is meant by what is said. Ziran He (1997) points out that pragmatic failure is not the general performance errors in using words or making sentences, but those mistakes which fail to fulfil communication because of infelicitous style, incompatible expressions and improper habit. Qian (1997) explains that although the speaker uses sentences which are grammatically correct, they unconsciously violate the norms of interpersonal relationships and social norms in speech, or take no notice of time, hearer and context. For example, 'Where are you going?' is cordial greeting form among the Chinese, but if used to show friendliness to native English speakers; it is likely to be regarded as an intrusion of privacy. Wolfson (1983, 62) points out, 'In interacting with foreigners, native speakers tend to be rather tolerant of errors in pronunciation or syntax. In contrast, violations of rules of speaking are often interpreted as bad manners since the native speaker is unlikely to be aware of sociolinguistic relativity.'

There are two principal types of pragmatic failure in the literature, namely pragmalinguistic failure and sociolinguistic failure. Pragmalinguistic failure:

...occurs when the pragmatic force mapped by S onto a given utterance is systematically different from the force most frequently assigned to it by native speakers of the target language, or when speech act strategies are inappropriately transferred from L1 to L2. (Thomas 1983, 99)

Hong's study (1991) shows pragmalinguistic failure is closely linked with language itself, referring to the case that learners unconsciously transfer native expressions into English ignoring their pragmatic meaning, or use other inappropriate expressions of the target language.

Sociolinguistic failure, in contrast, is closely related to cultures defined by Thomas (1983:99) as '...social conditions placed on language use' stemming from '...cross-culturally different perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behaviour.' It involves lack of awareness of the conventions and the socio-cultural norms of the target language, such as not knowing the appropriate registers and topics or taboos governing the target language community (Seran & Sibel, 1997).

These two types of pragmatic failure cannot always be distinguished as they are closely connected and overlapping. An inappropriate utterance may be regarded as pragmalinguistic failure from one angle, or sociolinguistic failure from another angle; correct interpretation of the failure relies on an understanding of different contexts, intentions and interlocutors (He, 1997).

Pragmatic Failure Committed by Chinese Students

Some researchers (He & Yan, 1986; Hong, 1991; Gu, 2003; Chen, 2005; Zhang, 2005) in China have explored the pragmatic competence of Chinese learners of English. Their most common instrument of research is a multiple-choice discourse completion task (MDCT), with a questionnaire which requires the students to judge the appropriateness of the utterance. These studies generally show that the Chinese learners' pragmatic competence is far from satisfactory. Pragmatic failure is mostly categorized and analyzed according to different communicative acts such as greeting, addressing, responding to compliments, and accepting invitations. Different from the previous studies, mainly based on the theoretical framework of Thomas (1983), the model in this paper for the categorization of pragmatic failure will be shown and analyzed with examples from literature in the following section. (*Some examples are reconstructed to be in the same format. ENS: English Native Speaker; CLE: Chinese Learners of English*)

Pragmalinguistic failure

Inappropriate transfer of expressions

Departing from linguistic stipulations, some Chinese students might translate an utterance from their first language into the target language. At the lexical level, they might take it for granted that the Chinese words are equivalent to those of English in cultural connotation and then transfer the habit of Chinese language use into intercultural communication contexts.

Example 1

Situation: The drug stores in a town are usually open on Sundays. An English visitor didn't know that, so he asked the Chinese guide.

Visitor: Are the drug stores open on Sundays?

Guide: Of course.

(The visitor seemed embarrassed.)

(Lin, 2005, 58)

'Of course' indicates enthusiasm in a Chinese context, meaning 'Yes, indeed it is' in English, but in the example it would be abrupt and impolite because it seems to imply that the English native speaker is ignorant or stupid, and only an idiot would ask such a question (Thomas, 1983).

Inappropriate transfer of speech act strategies

Austin (1962, 145) defines speech acts as all things we do with words when we speak. Production of words or of sentences is considered as the performance of speech acts. Some Chinese learners might not use English expressive ways and mechanically apply the conventionalized L1 communicative strategies to the target language as the following examples show.

Example 2

Situation: A Chinese student was at a native speaker's home.

ENS: What would you like to drink? Tea or coffee?

CLE: No, no, no. No trouble, please.

(The host did not serve him anything to drink.)

(Xia et al, 1995, 152, cited in Wang, 2004, 9)

In Chinese culture when the host offers something to drink or eat, the guest will usually refuse at first by saying 'no' whether s/he would like to take it or not. Then the host must keep on asking the guest to accept the offer until s/he accepts it. In contrast, the native English speaker generally expects that the guest will give a truthful reply, and does not serve any drink or food if the guest says 'no'. As a result, the Chinese guest's improper reply left him thirsty because the strategy he subconsciously used is not appropriate in the target language.

Example 3

ENS: Thanks a lot. That's a great help.

CLE: Never mind.

(Gu, 2003, 87)

Chinese speakers usually respond to others' thanks by saying 'Mei Guan Xi', but it can be expressed in English by 'It doesn't matter.', 'Never mind.' or 'That's

all right.' In English, these expressions are not always interchangeable. Example 3 shows that the Chinese learner didn't respond to the compliment appropriately.

Inappropriate use of target language expressions

The meaning of linguistic forms used to perform certain speech acts may change when they are translated literally from Chinese to English. When Chinese learners don't know the exact meaning of a certain word or expression, they may regard the literal meaning as its connotation and use it in the context improperly.

Example 4

Situation: The conversation was between a female college student of English and a male American student of literature. They had known each other for some time. (After a talk with each other for a moment)

ENS: Bye!

CLE: Wait a moment, please. Have you seen my letter?

ENS: ...

CLE: The letter?

ENS: What?

CLE: Letter?

ENS: I think I've lost it.

CLE: Oh, you break my heart!

ENS: (embarrassed) What?

(Both felt embarrassed)

(Wang, 2004, 7)

This example shows that the Chinese learner of English was not aware of the association between 'break one's heart' and love affairs, which put both of them in an embarrassing situation. Wang (2004) reports that the Chinese student learnt later that the phrase is often used when someone is deserted by their lover, but she thought that it meant 'make somebody feel sad and disappointed'.

Sociolinguistic failure

Cultural and value judgements

In intercultural communication, being unaware of each other's respective social and cultural tradition, the interlocutors may participate in the communication with their own cultural values and use their own cultural systems to interpret the new situations they experience.

Example 5

Situation: An American teacher was talking to a Chinese student.

ENS: Your English is excellent.

CLE: No, no! My English is very poor, and it is far from being perfect.

(Ma, 2004, 40)

In the example, the Chinese learner used polite and modest expressions of accepting a compliment in Chinese. S/he had transferred the Chinese appropriate politeness strategy of self-denigration to English as a way of showing modesty. This kind of response may be

perceived as embarrassing because it implies that the native English speaker's compliment is questionable.

Example 6

Situation: After a Chinese person stayed in her Canadian friend's house, she was ready to leave.

Chinese: 'I'm sorry I took up you too much time.'

Canadian friend: No, you didn't.

(Wang, 2000, 57)

Wang reports that the Canadian friend thought what the Chinese said was not true and responded to her carefully and immediately by saying 'No, you didn't'. The Chinese person wanted to express politeness, but being unfamiliar with Chinese culture, her friend did not understand the pragmatic meaning. 'Thank you. I really appreciate your time.' would have been appropriate in this context.

Taboo topics

What is considered an act of politeness in Chinese culture might be regarded as intrusion upon a person's privacy by an English native speaker. To show warmth and concern is regarded as a polite act in Chinese culture. That is why when two Chinese meet each other even for the first time, they might ask about each other's age, marital status, children, income and the price of an item. In contrast, in Western culture it may be regarded as impolite to ask a person such questions which are considered too personal in public.

Example 7

Situation: A Chinese student was at her friend's house.

CEL: Look! What a beautiful vase you've got here.

ENS: I got it last week. And it was made in China.

CEL: The design is marvellous. And the shape, too. How much did you pay for it?

ENS: Oh, I bought it at the China Exhibition. It's not expensive. But I don't know if the exhibition is still on.

(Song & Fu, 2003, 63)

In Song & Fu's (2003) study, when the subjects were asked to identify the inappropriate expression and improve it in the above scenario, the result showed that some of their subjects exhibited a low sensitivity to the improper expression contained in it and could not identify the problem. It is generally considered impolite to ask an acquaintance among the professional classes the price of an item directly in the English-speaking country.

Inadequate comprehension of utterances

In intercultural communication, some Chinese learners may know the literal meaning of an utterance, but may fail to understand its contextual meaning, or fail to accurately understand the speaker's intended force.

Example 8

Situation: The conversation was between a Chinese high school female teacher of English and a female visitor from America. They met at Tian'anmen Square for the first time.

Visitor: Nice to meet you.

Chinese: Nice to meet you, too.

(After chatting for a while)

Visitor: Nice meeting you.

(The Chinese teacher continued talking.)

Visitor: Sorry, we have to go.

(Wang, 2004, 11)

In this example, the English native speaker wanted to end the conversation by saying 'Nice meeting you', but the Chinese teacher of English did not understand the discursive force of the sentence and continued talking.

Pragmatic failure due to social factors

Thomas (1983) points out that 'sociopragmatic' judgements concern the size of imposition, cost/benefit, social distance, and relative rights and obligations. Chinese learners of English may sometimes use speech act realization strategies irrespective of social factors such as social status, degree of imposition, and time and space when the interaction takes place. Thus, they may appear to be behaving in a pragmatically inappropriate manner.

Example 9

Situation: Chinese non-English major sophomores asked a professor in the United States to buy and mail a dictionary for them. Some of their requests are as follows.

I want you to buy the dictionary.

Buy the dictionary for me and I will be happy.

You can buy the dictionary for me.

I expect that you can deliver the dictionary to me.

(Xu, 2001, 32)

Xu (2001) reports that the expressions above were very direct. There was a great social distance between the students and the professor, and they had no right to force the professor to do anything for them, but some students failed to choose proper strategies to soften the force of the face-threatening act. The non-target-like request strategies are indicative of the students' pragmalinguistic incompetence, which resulted in their inappropriate sociopragmatic use.

Potential Sources of Pragmatic Failure

The above section has presented some examples of pragmatic failure that Chinese students committed in intercultural communication, and has briefly analyzed how these cases of pragmatic failure came into being. This section will identify and sum up three factors causing pragmatic failure. It should be pointed out that there is some overlap in these factors.

Cultural differences

A culture is a complex set of shared beliefs, values and concepts which enables a group to make sense of its life and which provides it with directions for how to live (Fay, 1996). Chen & Starosta (1998, 54) state that culture not only provides the foundation for the meanings we assign to our perceptions, it also determines how we choose to expose ourselves to and direct our attention toward specific kinds of messages and events. Our verbal communication styles reflect and embody the beliefs and worldviews of our culture (Chen & Starosta, 1998:147). Cultures vary from country to country, and also differ among various groups within a country. Culture divergence interferes in language use and may lead to negative transfer. Kecskés (1999:304, reported in Barron, 2002:68), in an investigation of the reception and production of pragmatic routines by foreign language students of English, finds that the use of pragmatic routines by learners living in the target speech community for one year or under is generally characterised by strong L1-culture transfer.

Gao & Ting-Toomey (1997) state that Chinese culture is referred to as a collectivistic culture emphasizing conformity to group norms and harmonious interpersonal relationship. Hofstede's findings (1983) indicate that, in contrast, countries such as Great Britain and the United States belong to an individualistic culture stressing the self and personal achievement, and as a result equal or horizontal relationships are highly valued. However, we do not suggest that Chinese are a homogeneous cultural group or that every Chinese person is a typical Chinese (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1997). The same is true in other countries. When we acknowledge individual differences, people from these two different cultural contexts have their own shared cultural values, beliefs and communicative preferences. Where there is a lack of awareness of cultural distinctiveness, the home culture is looked on as the norm, the target language culture as deviant (Barron, 2002, 25). A second language learner's understanding of conceptualizations and constructs in second culture is fundamentally affected by his or her culturally defined worldviews, beliefs, assumptions and presuppositions (Hinkel, 1999). In intercultural communication, the occurrence of culture conflicts and inappropriate speech acts is inevitable.

Pragmatic transfer

Research has shown that English learners' pragmatic knowledge in their native language significantly influences their comprehension and production of pragmatic performance in English. Negative pragmatic transfer involves utilizing the sociolinguistic rules of speaking in one's native speech community when interacting within the host speech community (Wolfson, 1989). Potential L1 transfer by

English learners of other languages has been well documented in literature. In a study by Saito & Beecken (1997), learners seemed to transfer L1 pragmatic strategies. In Olshtain & Cohen (1989), learners also appeared to transfer L1 linguistic means of speech act realization, for example, L1 apology semantic formulas. Takahashi & Beebe (1993) found that learners transferred the L1 norm of social-discernment in assessing the interlocutors' relative social positions.

Presumably, English-language speech patterns of Chinese learners are greatly influenced by their social-cultural background. In intercultural communication they subconsciously conduct their own behaviours and thoughts by their native pragmatic rules and value perspectives. In Yu's (1999) study, the requests made by both the Chinese using Chinese and Chinese learners of American English were much more direct than requests made by the native English speakers, which relates to the result of Liu's questionnaire survey (2003) that Chinese speakers adopt more direct strategies and non-conventionally indirect forms. Yu (2004) conducted an empirical study of the compliment response behaviour of two groups of Chinese learners of English compared with that of native Chinese and English speakers in order to determine how they responded to compliments in different situations. Compliment responses by the learners in Taiwan were more likely to be rejections than acceptances. The English behaviour of the English learners in Taiwan and in the United States reflected native language communicative styles and a transfer of L1 socio-cultural strategies. Clearly, deviating from what is considered the norm in the host speech community could lead to a communication breakdown.

Lack of pragmatic knowledge

As has been shown above, inadequate pragmatic knowledge can lead to miscommunication. In China, He & Yan (1986) carried out an initial quantitative research study on the pragmatic failure of Chinese students in communication in English. Its results show that lack of pragmatic knowledge is the main cause of pragmatic failure for Chinese learners. The subsequent studies of some other researchers (Hong, 1991; Gu, 2003; Chen, 2005; Zhang, 2005) indicate that Chinese learners with good grammatical competence do not necessarily develop their pragmatic competence in English, which can prevent them from communicating effectively with native English speakers.

Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei (1998, 256) explain the deficit of pragmatic competence in EFL participants with reference to a possible lack of input and also to an overemphasis on grammatical issues. Although much effort has been made to improve the teaching of English in China by both Chinese and foreign teachers, the traditional grammar-translation method, with careful

explanation of word meaning and usage followed by drilling and mechanical exercises, is still widely used in many contexts all over the country (Luchini, 2004). It is commonplace for teachers to deliver a lesson by analyzing sentence structures, explaining lexis and answering questions on grammar. Correctness of the language form is the most important thing to students and teachers (Guo, 2004). Although some course-books are compiled with an introduction to cultural knowledge, some teachers may focus more on the explanation of language points, and seldom integrate cultural knowledge and pragmatic rules with the teaching of linguistic forms. As a result, there may be occurrences of pragmatic failure and a lack of cultural and pragmatic knowledge among the students.

The Exploratory Study

Participants

In order to explore the potential pragmatic failure to which Chinese students are prone, a small-scale, exploratory study was carried out in the target language community. Five Chinese students took part in the study. One was male and four were female, aged from 24 to 32. Four enrolled as postgraduates studying for a master's degree at a British university, and they had stayed in England for over 6 months. The other one had finished her MA course and had stayed in the host environment for about two years. They were considered competent users of the English language (IELTS 6.0 or TOEFL 600 at least).

Five native English speakers also participated in the study. One was male and four were female, aged from 19 to 59. They were undergraduates and postgraduates at the same university. Three were full-time students and the others were part-time.

Method and procedure

The written discourse completion task (DCT), as Golato (2003, 92) points out, explicitly requires participants not to conversationally interact, but to articulate what they believe would be situationally appropriate responses within possible, yet imaginary, interactional settings. It has been found to enable the collection of formulas and strategies which reflect the content of formulas or strategies used in everyday speech and which are comparable across cultures and languages (Barron, 2002, 84). In the present small-scale study, the DCT was employed and designed with five different situations with one compliment, two compliment responses and two requests within equal-status and unequal-status relationships (Appendix). The Five Chinese students were asked to write what they might actually say in these situations. They responded immediately, taking about six minutes to complete the task in the researcher's presence. Similarly, responses of the five English native speakers were also elicited as

baseline data to evaluate the quality of the speech acts by the Chinese students.

Subsequently, a semi-structured interview was conducted to encourage these five Chinese students to talk about their experiences as foreigners in real-life interactions with native speakers. The students were interviewed either individually or in pairs. The interview was conducted in Chinese so that they could fully express their ideas. Each student was asked the same questions. However, depending on the students' answers, follow-up questions were sometimes introduced. The interviews were digitally recorded.

Data analysis

The responses of the Chinese students were qualitatively compared to those of the English native speakers. The classifications of compliment response and request strategies are respectively based on those in research by Yu (2004) and Blum-Kulka, et al (1989). On the basis of the literature, Yu (2004) classified compliment response strategies into acceptance, amendment strategies, non-acceptance strategies, face relationship related response strategies, combination strategies and no acknowledgement. According to the level of directness, there are direct, conventionally indirect and non-conventionally indirect request strategies (Blum-Kulka, et al. 1989). The semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim and later translated into English. One English native speaker

was consulted to judge whether the Chinese students' utterances were appropriate or not in this study. The data are analyzed and interpreted below.

Results

The Chinese students' responses in Situation 1 & 3 corresponded closely with the native-speaker informants, and showed less variation from native-speaker norms than in Situation 2, 4 & 5 in the Table below. In Situation 1 & 3, similar to the compliment responses of the native-speaker informants, the Chinese students adopted combination strategies. They seemed to employ the appreciation token 'Thank You' to indicate that they accepted or agreed with the compliment given and then chose to amend its complimentary force. In Situation 2, to express their appreciation of the lecture, the native speakers preferred to say 'I really enjoyed your lecture.' and used '(really) interesting', 'helpful', and 'good' to describe the lecture. One Chinese student's response was similar, but the other students responded quite differently and used '(very) impressive', '(so) great' and 'wonderful'. In Situation 4 & 5, when making a request, the Chinese students employed conventionally indirect strategies and internal modification as the native speakers did, but they employed different expressions, as shown in the table below. In Situation 5, when asking the supervisor for an extension, it seems that they lacked the English pragmalinguistic knowledge that a request can be mitigated to a greater extent by making it syntactically more complex.

A Comparison of the Responses of the Chinese Students and the English Native Speakers

Speech Acts	The English Native Speakers	The Chinese Students
Compliment Responses (Situation 1 & 3)	Combination Strategies (Acceptance + Amendment) e.g. Thanks. I have tried really hard to get things together and it seems to be working.	Combination Strategies (Acceptance + Amendment) e.g. Thank you. I have worked very hard on it for a long time.
Compliment (Situation 2)	Lecture: (really) interesting, good, helpful I really enjoyed your lecture.	Lecture: (very) impressive, (quite) interesting, wonderful, (so) great
Requests (Situation 4 & 5)	1. Conventionally Indirect Strategies 2. Expressions Would you mind if I...? Would it be possible for me...? Is there any chance that I could...? May I please...? Could I...? 3. Internal Modification I'm sorry...	1. Conventionally Indirect Strategies 2. Expressions Could you...? Can I...? Could you please...? 3. Internal Modification I'm sorry... Sorry...

In the interview, the students reported that communications broke down or misunderstanding occurred when they communicated with native speakers either because they did not know about English culture, because they did not use an appropriate word or expression and employed their own language use habit, or they did not get the intended meaning of the

interlocutor. One student found it difficult to respond appropriately when her host offered her drinks or food when she came to stay in a host family. She had learnt to say 'Yes, please.' or 'No, thanks.' Another student once said 'You have become slimmer.' to her housemate, but her housemate responded immediately by saying 'I have lost weight.' About making a direct

request, one student had the following story to tell. (*Due to the word limit, the episodes from the transcript are reconstructed below.* ENS: English Native Speaker; CLE: Chinese Learners of English)

Situation: A taxi-driver drove her to her friend's home. On the way she noticed they had passed the house.

CLE: Stop, stop.

(*After getting out*)

CLE: Could you help me with the luggage?

NES: I won't help you any more.

The student said that at that moment she felt uncomfortable and realized that she had offended the driver unintentionally. Actually, the student behaved in a pragmatically inappropriate manner in a case of urgency due to her native language use.

One student told a story about the misunderstanding that occurred between her hostess and herself due to her own language use.

Situation: The student was going to Cambridge, and her hostess would take a trip to Italy during the Easter Holiday.

ENS: You won't stay here by yourself, will you?

CLE: Yes.

(*Later in the evening*)

CLE: Could you tell me how to buy a train ticket online?

ENS (*surprised*): Are you leaving?

CLE: Yes, I am going to Cambridge.

ENS: I had planned to buy some food for you.

One student commented that knowing the pragmatic meaning of linguistic forms can make social encounters proceed smoothly, but it is not easy to do that. She thought that her utterance was offensive in the following context.

Situation: The Student and her flatmate were chatting.

ENS: I ordered a lot of food, but I could not eat it up and paid a lot of money.

CLE: You are stupid.

The student said that she did not know its pragmatic force and later she learnt from the classroom that she should have said 'You were being stupid.' However, she could have also used 'silly' rather than 'stupid' to soften it further.

The students reported that sometimes communications broke down because they did not know the real meaning of an expression such as 'pull your leg' and a joke made in the classroom. Sometimes they could not draw the implied mood of 'should' and 'should not' in context. When they had different understanding of the culture-specific meaning of a word, such as 'sex', from that of native speakers, misunderstanding occurred.

The students reported that when they did not know how to say something in English, they would express

themselves in a roundabout way, or they would translate it from Chinese to English, which sounded awkward to native speakers. It seemed that they depended more on communication strategies such as paraphrasing rather than on their mother tongue.

The students reported that in China they learned English for exams. Their task had been to memorize words, learn grammar, analyze sentence structures and do reading comprehension. In the English classroom they rarely had communicative activities to develop their real-life communicative competence. In the host environment they preferred to read newspapers, talk to native speakers and watch English TV programs to imitate how native speakers express themselves.

The results from this exploratory study indicate that Chinese students seem to lack competence in using English appropriately in a certain social context. Although some of their responses in the DCT were similar to those of the native-speaker informants, some utterances and their experiences showed the influence of Chinese pragmatics to a certain extent. It is common for a Chinese speaker to use 'wonderful' to show his/her appreciation of a lecture, or to adopt more direct strategies in making a request, such as saying 'Stop, stop' to a taxi driver, or to employ their own language use habit, such as saying 'Yes' to indicate agreement to a tag question. The findings are, however, very limited. The DCT cannot thoroughly reflect the students' pragmatic problems. Studies that investigate pragmatic competence on a number of speech acts, as well as other aspects of pragmatics, are necessary.

Recommendations on Developing Pragmatic Competence

From what has been discussed above, we know what intercultural pragmatic failure is and what the potential causes of pragmatic failure are. Language learners must not only acquire the correct forms and sounds of the target language, but also the knowledge of how language is pragmatically used in the target culture (Lee, 2002). It is important to develop Chinese learners' pragmatic competence in the EFL classroom so as to increase their intercultural communicative competence in English.

Raising Chinese learners' cultural awareness

In order to successfully interact with people from other cultures, we have to understand our own and others' cultural values, norms, customs and social systems (Chen, 1990). English teachers should integrate the target culture into English learning, not only including values, beliefs, customs and behaviours of the English-speaking countries, but also the cultural connotations of words, phrases and idioms. As three participants suggested, it is practical to make good use of textbooks together with authentic materials such as

film scripts, plays, newspaper articles and internet to provide relevant cultural information so as to broaden the students' cultural knowledge. It is useful to compare and contrast parallel social situations in China and the English-speaking countries, talk about the differences and similarities of meaning and appropriateness in these scenarios. In addition, it is possible to develop their ability to identify areas of possible misunderstanding so as to avoid such miscommunication.

Instruction in pragmatic knowledge

Some studies have examined the effect of instruction on pragmatic development in various areas: implicature (Kubota, 1995), pragmatic fluency (House, 1996), and speech acts (Takahashi, 2001; Rose & Ng Kwai-fun, 2001). Kasper (2001, 151) argues that learners' awareness of appropriate pragmatic behaviour can be raised through explicit teaching and meta-pragmatic treatment of pragmatic features by way of description, explanation, and discussion. English teachers should provide students with explicit teaching on pragmatic knowledge, exposing learners to the pragmatic aspects of language. When teaching a function such as 'making a request', it is possible to ask students to identify what linguistic forms are used, the linguistic components of the pattern and how they function in English, and to help them make connections between linguistic forms and pragmatic functions, so that they can use this knowledge in meaningful ways. Eslami-Rasekh (2005) suggests that awareness-raising activities, such as what is considered an offence in their culture compared to the target culture and what are different degrees of offence for different situations in the two languages (L1 and L2), are helpful to expose students to the pragmatic aspects of language and provide them with the analytical tools they need to arrive at their own generalizations concerning contextually appropriate language use.

Creating an interactive learning environment

Learners acquire the knowledge of how to get meaning across as they become socialized through experiencing a variety of roles in interactions in the classroom under the teacher' guidance (Jung, 2005). In class, as the Chinese participants suggested, it is important for English teachers to create a relaxing, engaging environment and provide some opportunities for learners to use the target language rather than one-way learning from the teachers. The teacher should create some situations close to reality, such as how to negotiate with a landlord about renting a room. Role-play, simulation and drama engage students in different social roles and speech events (Kasper, 1997) and provide opportunities to practice the wide range of pragmatic and sociolinguistic abilities (Olshtain & Cohen, 1991). The Chinese participants also suggested

that after class, learners should be encouraged to communicate with English native speakers on and off campus, or through the internet as much as possible, for constant exposure to and use of the language.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to analyze the phenomena of pragmatic failure committed by Chinese students in their daily conversations with native English speakers. After identifying instances of pragmatic failure Chinese students are likely to produce and searching for its potential sources, some teaching ideas are recommended above. It should be pointed out that since norms of pragmatic competence may be as varied as contexts, it needs to be more fully explored. As the central part of communicative competence, pragmatic competence is the prerequisite to successful communication. Since communication is a dynamic process which consists of coding and inference, it is not possible to convey all pragmatic rules to students, but it is necessary to raise students' awareness of those rules by exposing them to authentic materials and practice in context. High levels of grammatical competence do not guarantee concomitant high levels of pragmatic competence (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999). To minimize the possibility of intercultural pragmatic failure and to be better accepted in the host environment, Chinese students should learn how to do things with words in a socially and culturally appropriate manner. The aim would be to adopt English linguistic behaviour to make social interaction smoother and more comfortable for both English native speakers and Chinese learners of English.

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Appendix

Discourse Completion Test

Directions: Please read the following short descriptions of situations and write what you would say if you were in this situation.

1. You're preparing a Christmas party with your friend, Betty.
Betty: You're really well-organized.
Your response: _____
2. Your supervisor, John gives a two-hour lecture and it impresses you. As soon as the lecture is over, you go up to him. What would you say to him?
Your response: _____
3. After you give a presentation in class, your supervisor, Mr Smith says to you: 'Your presentation was great.'
Your response: _____
4. Suppose you are working on an assignment. You know your good friend, Hilary, has a book which is quite helpful for this assignment. You'd like to borrow this book. What would you say to her?
Your response: _____
5. You have to hand in a seminar paper to your teacher, Ms Goodman tomorrow, but you haven't finished writing it. What would you say to her to get an extension?
Your response: _____