



# A Study of Chinese EFL Learners' Pragmatic Failure and the Implications for College English Teaching

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## Abstract:

English, as a communication tool, is playing an extremely significant role in cross-cultural communication. The main function of language is communication, and pragmatic competence is an important component of communicative competence. However, owing to a lack of pragmatic knowledge, English learners can hardly avoid committing pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication. Pragmatic failure sets up barriers to the success of cross-cultural communication. Since pragmatic failure closely relates to English learners' lack of pragmatic knowledge and understanding of the culture of the target country, in order to improve their pragmatic and communicative competence, more introductions to pragmatic knowledge and cultural information should be incorporated into English teaching. This research aims to find out the pragmatic competence of college English learners in China and to provide constructive suggestions as to how to improve their pragmatic competence. This paper first investigates pragmatic failures that college English learners tend to commit in cross-cultural communication through questionnaires and interviews. Then, building on the analysis of the collected data, it further discusses the main sources of the pragmatic failures and provides suggestions for college English teaching. It is hoped that these suggestions can help to develop students' pragmatic and communicative competence.

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**Key terms:** pragmatic failure, pragmatic competence, cross-cultural communication, English teaching

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## 0. Introduction

Cross-cultural communication requires both speakers' sufficient mastery of the linguistic knowledge of the target language and their pragmatic competence. Looking back on the history of College English teaching in China, teachers' attention tends to focus on linguistic knowledge, while pragmatic information is not usually considered as significant as linguistic forms and rules. However, studies show that even students with sufficient linguistic knowledge still make mistakes in real-life communication with foreigners (He Ziran, 1988; Ji Peiying, 2008). These students are good at reading and writing with sufficient knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary and able to score high in tests like TOEFL, IELTS, or Band IV and Band IV (two national tests for non-English majors in China), but they fail in communicating with foreigners. In these cases, the mistakes they commit are not verbal or grammatical; instead, these mistakes occur because certain social conventions or rules of interpersonal relationship have been violated. These kinds of mistakes are defined as Pragmatic Failure (He Ziran, 1988; Qian Guanlian, 2002). Pragmatic failure may cause misunderstanding, and thus sets up barriers to successful cross-cultural communication. Since the purpose of college English teaching is to develop students' proficiency in intercultural interaction, English teachers should pay more attention to improving students' pragmatic competence so as to help them avoid pragmatic failure. Improving students' pragmatic competence

requires that English learners should have more access to the culture of the target society, which requires teachers' introduction to the social conventions, communicative rules and values of the target nation.

On the basis of Jenny Thomas's studies (1983), a lot of research has been carried out both in China and abroad on pragmatic failure and its implications for English teaching. As a consequence a large number of English teachers have begun to accept the importance of pragmatic teaching in the classroom; however, so far, there has not been much systematic research carried out on the pragmatic failures made by Chinese students in the process of English learning and cross-cultural communication. Hence, more elaborate studies should be implemented in order to develop students' pragmatic competence as well as teachers' capability in cultivating students' communicative competence.

## **1. Literature Review**

### **1.1 Definitions of Pragmatic Failure**

J. Thomas (1983) defines pragmatic failure in *Cross-cultural Pragmatic Failure* as "the inability to understand what is meant by what is said". She points out that pragmatic failure has occurred on any occasion "On which H (the hearer) perceives the force of S's (the speaker's) utterance as other than S intended she or he should perceive it". (Thomas, 1983) The following examples are used by Thomas to illustrate her definition:

- a. H perceives the force of S's utterance stronger or weaker than S intended s/he should perceive it;
- b. H perceives as an order an utterance that S intended s/he should perceive as a request;
- c. H perceives S's utterance as ambivalent where S intended no ambivalence;
- d. S expects H to be able to infer the force of his/her utterance, but is relying on the system of knowledge or beliefs that S and H do not share ." (1983, 94)

#### **1.1.2 He Ziran's Definition**

He Ziran (1988) points out that pragmatic failure refers to "failure to achieve the desired communicative effect in communication". He further indicates that "Pragmatic failures are not the errors in diction, but those mistakes failing to fulfill communication because of infelicitous style, incompatible expressions, and improper habit." (He Ziran, 1997)

#### **1.1.3 Qian Guanlian's Definition**

Qian Guanlian (2002) defines pragmatic failure in a more specific way pointing out 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 time, space and addressee."

### **1.2 Classification of Pragmatic Failure**

#### **1.2.1 Thomas's Classification**

According to Thomas, pragmatic failure falls into two major types: Pragmalinguistic Failure and Sociopragmatic Failure. Thomas (1983) points out that "pragmalinguistic failure occurs when the pragmatic force mapped by the speaker onto a given utterance is systematically different from most frequently assigned to it by native speakers of the target language, or when conversational strategies are inappropriately transferred from the speaker's mother tongue to the target language."

Sociopragmatic failure results from different cultural norms and pragmatic principles that govern linguistic behaviors in different cultures. Since speakers with different cultural backgrounds have different understandings of the appropriateness of linguistic behavior, there may be barriers to effective communication. As Thomas

(1983) points out, different cultures have different ways of thinking, rules of speaking, social values and place different relative weights on the pragmatic principles, and these cross-culturally different assessments of social parameters have negatively affected language users' linguistic choices, which finally result in sociopragmatic failure.

### 1. 2. 2 He Ziran's Classification

He Ziran (2004) points out that pragmatic failure has the following three manifestations: pragmalinguistic failure, sociopragmatic failure and pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication. Pragmalinguistic failure can be considered from both sides of the conversation. On the one hand, the speaker commits pragmatic failure because he takes for granted that the listener is able to understand his meaning and he thus makes an inappropriate utterance. On the other hand, the listener commits pragmatic failure by deducing the meaning of the speaker's utterance incorrectly. Sociopragmatic failure occurs when the speaker does not give concern to the identity and social status of the listener during the conversation. He may produce pragmatic failure by using a polite form of expression toward a close person or someone of a lower social status; or by addressing a remote person or someone of a higher social status with an intimate form. The speaker's lack of knowledge about the politeness principle of social interaction is a major cause of sociopragmatic failure. He Ziran points out that pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication occurs under the following four circumstances:

- a. The speaker chooses an inappropriate topic. Different cultures usually have different beliefs, value views and living habits. Therefore, people need to distinguish between free and constrained topics in intercultural communication. <sup>i</sup>
- b. The speaker uses expressions which have different implications in the target language, or which deviate from his own intention in producing such utterance. This kind of pragmatic failure commonly happens in greetings. <sup>ii</sup> Besides, misuse of fixed expressions in the target language also gives rise to misunderstanding.
- c. The utterance made by the speaker to express a certain idea does not conform to the convention of the target language. Since people with different cultural backgrounds tend to use different expressions and strategies to convey the same information, they tend to commit pragmatic failure while speaking a language other than their mother tongue.
- d. A participant in a conversation makes an inappropriate response to a certain question or statement. He Ziran (2004) points out that Chinese people prefer to show their modesty while being complimented, however, on the contrary, people in the west like to show their talents directly and would accept praise happily .

## 2. Methodology

### 2. 1 Instruments

The present study is primarily a qualitative study involving two research instruments: questionnaire and interview. The questionnaire includes twenty open questions, each providing a real-life communicative context. The respondents are required to write down the appropriate utterances according to their own understanding and they are allowed to look up unfamiliar words in the dictionary. By using open questions instead of multiple-choice questions, the researchers intended to prevent respondents from using elimination skills in answering these questions so as to guarantee the validity of the research feedback. The questions used in the questionnaire are mainly based on He Ziran's "English Pragmatic Competence Investigation" attached to *A Survey of Pragmatics* (1987). The interviews were employed to examine students' attitudes toward learning pragmatics,

to learn whether they are satisfied with the current pragmatic pedagogy, and whether they have suggestions to improve college English teaching. Besides, the interview aims to find out the potential sources of pragmatic failure that Chinese learners tend to produce, owing to the influence of some cognitive and psychological factors upon learners' English use.

## **2.2 Subjects**

The questionnaires were handed out at ZheJiang University on December, 12<sup>th</sup>, 2008. The subjects were sixty-eight non-English majors studying at ZheJiang University. All of them were selected randomly from first-year to fourth-year students with different professional backgrounds. The interviews were carried out from December, 13<sup>th</sup> to December, 20<sup>th</sup>, 2008 and twenty students were invited to the interview. All of them came from different grades and specialties.

## **2.3 Procedures**

The research was carried out in classrooms. Before the questionnaires were distributed and the interview was made, the students had been informed clearly that the research was intended to test their pragmatic competence. Directions were given to the respondents before they started to write down their answers. Respondents were required to finish the questionnaires independently and they were allowed to look up any unfamiliar words in the dictionary. Interviewees were selected randomly from several classrooms and they were from all the four grades with different educational backgrounds. It was required that they answer questions according to their own understanding.

## **3. A Study on Pragmatic Failure**

### **3.1 Results and discussion of the questionnaire**

According to Jenny Thomas (1983), pragmatic failure falls into two major types: Pragmalinguistic Failure and Sociopragmatic Failure. According to this classification, pragmalinguistic failure includes mostly verbal behaviors and sociopragmatic failure contains both verbal and non-verbal behaviors. Based on this classification, pragmatic failure studied in this research is divided into pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure. Thus, the questions in the questionnaire were also designed in accordance with the type of pragmatic failure that students tend to commit in the different contexts presented in the questions<sup>iii</sup>. Therefore, the data collected from the questionnaire can fully represent students' pragmatic competence. Besides, in order to further investigate EFL learner's tendency to commit pragmatic failure under different communicative contexts, questions in the questionnaire were divided into verbal pragmatic failure and non-verbal pragmatic failure questions and the former set was further divided into nine specific sub-types: pragmatic failure in addressing; pragmatic failure in greeting; pragmatic failure in introducing; pragmatic failure in expressing thanks and response; pragmatic failure in making requirements and response; pragmatic failure in inviting and offering; pragmatic failure in complimenting and response; pragmatic failure in apologizing and response; pragmatic failure in parting.

Since all the questions included in the questionnaire were open questions, there was no fixed answer for each question and only utterances that comply with pragmatic conventions and regulations were considered correct. In order to determine whether the respondents' answers to the questions were correct or not, we firstly referred to the suggested answers to questions in the questionnaire given by Professor He Ziran in his researches on Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic failure. Secondly, we have also checked some textbooks which contain information about how to speak appropriately under the contexts of the questions. Among all the sixty-eight

respondents, only one provided correct answers for all the questions while the other sixty-seven committed different kinds of mistakes. The average percentage of correct answers of the total sample is about 66.9% which indicates that the average rate of pragmatic failure is around 33%. Besides, the accuracy rate of each of the twenty questions differs owing to the fact that the pragmatic failures students tend to commit under the provided contexts fall into different types.<sup>iv</sup> Generally speaking, EFL learners with diverse linguistic proficiency are all prone to commit pragmatic failures in intercultural communication, although some may commit more than others. This indicates that the students' pragmatic competence is not very well developed and they lack certain knowledge about the social conventions of the foreign culture which are essential in successful cross-cultural interaction. Results of the questionnaire show that there is room to improve the EFL learner's pragmatic competence by incorporating the teaching of cultural and pragmatic knowledge into classroom teaching.

### **3.2 Results and discussion of the interview**

The interviewees were required to answer all the questions individually and independently according to their own understanding. Twenty respondents realized that they cannot avoid pragmatic failure while communicating with foreigners which sometimes creates barriers to their successful interaction. As for the potential sources of these failures, eighteen of them mentioned cultural differences between China and English-speaking countries and believed that a lack of knowledge about the target culture was the main cause of pragmatic failure. Besides, sixteen students pointed out that the current classroom teaching was responsible for their lack of pragmatic knowledge. In addition, negative pragmatic transfer from Chinese to English, foreigners' tolerance towards Chinese speakers' pragmatic failure, and inappropriate input were mentioned as potential sources of pragmatic failure.

Ten respondents said that textbooks and classroom teaching were where they mainly obtained information about cultural background and pragmatic knowledge in English. Six said that they learnt the culture and social conventions of English-speaking countries from TV programs, newspaper reports and magazines in English, and the other four pointed out that English films and TV serials were their main source of information about foreign culture. Only two respondents believed that they could obtain sufficient pragmatic knowledge and background information in the classroom, while eighteen were not satisfied with the amount of information provided by their teachers. No matter whether they were satisfied with the current teaching content or not, all twenty interviewees held the opinion that it was of great significance for teachers to teach pragmatic knowledge and cultural information in class and they showed great interest in learning more about the social and cultural background information of English-speaking countries in order to improve their proficiency in cross-cultural interaction.

A variety of suggestions were provided by the respondents on how to approach the teaching of cultural and pragmatic pedagogy in the classroom. Some suggested that culture should be integrated into English teaching classes by providing background information and creating a culture-rich learning environment where both teachers and students realize the importance of cultural pedagogy and culture becomes an essential part of English teaching. Some advocated that textbooks and other teaching materials should be improved by adding more authentic cultural materials. Others pointed out that more attention should be paid to the self-development of English teachers so that they could better take on the responsibility of incorporating pragmatic knowledge and cultural information into their classroom teaching.

According to the results of the questionnaire and the interview, the Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic competence is not very well developed and pragmatic failure has thus set up barriers to their success in intercultural communication with English speakers. Since students have already realized the essentiality of pragmatics and culture in intercultural communication and showed great interest in enlarging their knowledge about foreign cultures, it is of great importance to improve the EFL learners' pragmatic competence by emphasizing cultural and pragmatic pedagogy in English classrooms.

#### **4. Analysis of the main sources of pragmatic failure**

##### **4.1 Cultural difference**

It is unavoidable that cultural differences between China and English-speaking countries set up barriers to cross-cultural communication. Differences in social conventions, value views, thinking patterns, social habits and customs are all sources of pragmatic failure. As Thomas (1983) pointed out, different cultures have different ways of thinking, rules of speaking, social values and relative weights of pragmatic principles, and these cross-culturally different assessments of social parameters have negatively affected language users' linguistic choices, which finally result in sociopragmatic failure. Besides, some scholars in China implement their studies of pragmatic failure from the cultural perspective (He Ziran, 1988, 2004; Huang Cidong, 1988; Qian Guanlian, 2002). They hold the opinion that cultural differences are the main source of pragmatic failure. In intercultural interaction, participants from different cultural backgrounds may adhere to their own cultural conventions, and behave in the way they believe is appropriate. Therefore, they may find it difficult to adapt to each other's manner of speaking and they will commit pragmatic failure which inevitably leads to misunderstanding. Chinese people believe that it is extremely impolite and even arrogant to reply to compliments by directly saying "thank you"; instead, they are taught to show their modesty by declaring that what they have done is not good enough or there is still room for improvement. However, native English speakers usually accept compliments naturally without feeling embarrassed.

The fundamental cultural difference lies in the fact that Chinese people strictly stick to collectivism in their speech and acts, while people in English-speaking countries are characterized by individualism. In China, the concept "collectivity" is considered as the core of the Chinese culture, which means that people should always regard themselves as members of a collectivity and give priority to the collectivity over individuals. "In cultures that tend toward collectivism, a 'we' consciousness prevails: identity is based on the social system; the individual is emotionally dependent on organizations which invade private life." (Samovar & Porter & Stefan, 2000) Consequently, in the Chinese value system, the interests of the collectivity outweigh the individual's interests. Furthermore, the aim of each individual is to contribute to the prosperity of the country. Cooperation and harmony are valued in interpersonal relationships and people respect authority. Conversely, individualism is the core of western culture. In western society, individual development, benefits and achievements are encouraged and protected and people should satisfy their own needs first. "In cultures that tend toward individualism, an 'I' consciousness prevails: competition rather than cooperation is encouraged; personal goals take precedence over group goals; people tend not to be emotionally dependent on organizations. These cultures stress individual initiative and achievement, they value individual decision making. Individualism promotes self-efficiency, individual responsibilities and personal autonomy." (Samovar, Porter & Stefan, 2000) So, in many western societies, people have been taught to think and behave independently since childhood and for them, the concept of collectivity is quite obscure.

## 4.2 Negative pragmatic transfer

Language transfer refers to the learner's use of prior linguistic information (chiefly his mother tongue) or some physical carryover of native language surface to a second language context. If the patterns of the learner's mother tongue that are different from those of the L2 are getting in the way of learning L2, this is negative transfer. Both Thomas and Kasper attribute pragmatic failure to negative pragmatic transfer. Kasper (1992) defines pragmatic transfer as "the influence exerted by learners' pragmatic knowledge of languages and cultures other than L2 on their comprehension, production, and acquisition of L2 pragmatic information." If the pragmatic transfer leads to pragmatic failure in communication, it is considered as negative pragmatic transfer. Negative pragmatic transfer falls into two types: negative transfer of native linguistic knowledge and negative transfer of native cultural conventions.

### 4.2.1 Negative transfer of native linguistic knowledge

The Chinese language has its unique system of vocabulary and grammar, which is quite different from that of English. When Chinese students start to learn English, they are confronted with a new language system. Since the linguistic knowledge of Chinese is deeply rooted in their perception, they are likely to confuse it with their linguistic knowledge of English and apply it in their use of English. Hence, this causes negative transfer, and the transfer could be phonological, semantic or syntactic. Negative transfer of native linguistic knowledge can be illustrated through the Chinese EFL learners' use of the third person singular forms "he", "she" and "it". In the Chinese language, though there are three characters for "he", "she" and "it", these characters all have the same pronunciation *ta*. Chinese people do not have to distinguish between them in oral communication. However, while speaking English, they have to choose the right form to refer to somebody or something in the third person. Affected by their Chinese linguistic knowledge, the Chinese EFL learners committed pragmatic failure by confusing the use of "he", "she" and "it".

### 4.2.2 Negative transfer of native cultural conventions

Speakers are guided by certain cultural norms in cross-cultural communication. In accordance with these conventions, they choose what to say in a conversation and evaluate what other people have said. EFL learners, influenced greatly by the cultural conventions of their own country, may subconsciously apply the conventions of their mother tongue to the target language while communicating with foreigners, which can cause misunderstandings or even breakdowns in communication.

Question 3 "Suppose you meet your classmate, John Smith, an American native, on the street shortly after dinnertime. You would greet him by saying \_\_\_\_\_" in the questionnaire illustrates the pragmatic failure caused by the negative transfer of native cultural conventions. In China, it is a convention to ask other people whether they have had dinner or not when they meet around dinnertime. So, the respondents provided a lot of answers like "Have you had dinner yet?" or "How was your dinner?" However, native English speakers do not ask such private questions under most circumstances when greeting each other. Therefore, in cross-cultural communication, if a Chinese greets a foreigner by saying "Have you had your meal", he may be considered impolite and the latter may not be willing to continue the conversation.

## 4.3 Teaching-induced errors

Learning English in China, students do not have many opportunities to be exposed to an authentic English environment and to communicate with native English speakers. English classes and textbooks are their main sources of the foreign culture and pragmatic knowledge. However, some teaching techniques applied by English teachers may actually increase the likelihood of pragmatic failure.

The fundamental reason why English teaching induces error lies in the fact that the English teaching system in China is examination-oriented, which means the goal of English teaching is to train students to achieve a good score on all kinds of exam papers. Even at universities, English teaching for non-English majors concentrates on helping them pass Cet-4 and Cet-6 tests. As a result, knowledge conveyed in the classroom is mainly about vocabulary and grammar. Though it is advocated that students' skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing should be developed equally, the skills that are actually developed are only those needed in examinations rather than for practical use. As a matter of fact, even students who achieve high scores in exams could not avoid committing pragmatic failures in real-life communication.

In addition, textbooks do not contain enough of a focus on pragmatic knowledge and cultural information. Though a large amount of linguistic knowledge is covered, there is not enough of the pragmatic knowledge that is needed in cross-cultural communication. Textbooks usually provide standard patterns of different utterances used in practical interaction. However, in the real situation, foreigners do not necessarily follow these patterns. Therefore, students may have difficulties in understanding what foreigners say and they may commit pragmatic failures since they always make utterances according to the rules and patterns they have learnt in class. This explains why Chinese students usually reply to a foreigner's greeting "how are you" by saying "I'm fine, thank you, and you?" Furthermore, since English teachers usually conduct classes in accordance with the materials provided in the textbooks, they may find it unnecessary to introduce much about the foreign culture to their students. However, as cultural difference is the main source of pragmatic failure, students without a good understanding of the foreign culture are likely to have difficulties when communicating with native English speakers.

#### **4.4 Foreigners' tolerance towards Chinese speakers' pragmatic failure**

It seems to be a common practice that native English speakers do not always point out and try to correct Chinese speakers' pragmatic failure. When communicating with non-native speakers, native English speakers are usually well prepared to accept their mistakes and they will not experience feelings of impatience or of having been insulted when other communicators violate pragmatic rules or social conventions. Instead, they will try to understand what the nonnative speakers have said so as to promote the smooth continuation of the conversation. This is why Chinese EFL learners with low English proficiency can still communicate successfully with native English speakers. In English classes given by native English speakers, teachers are also tolerant towards the students' mistakes. Considering that the students are from a different cultural background, these teachers will not point out their pragmatic failures as long as they can understand their students. Though this may ensure the smoothness of the communication, the students will lose the opportunity to realize their mistakes and thus not be able to make improvements to reduce the likelihood of pragmatic failure in the future.

#### **5. Some Constructive Suggestions for College English Teaching**

Linguists have realized the importance of cultural teaching. Stern points out that "It is nowadays a commonplace in language pedagogy to stress the importance of culture teaching and to say that language and culture are interweaved, that it is not possible to teach a language without culture, and that culture is the necessary context for language use." (1999) Since the pragmatic failures are caused by the students' lack of pragmatic knowledge and cultural information associated with the target language, the following are some suggestions as to what college English teachers can do in the areas of pragmatic and cultural pedagogy.



### 1) Designing a cultural syllabus

The syllabus is used as the guide of the whole process of English teaching. In order to integrate cultural teaching with English teaching, specific requirements about the contents and methods of cultural teaching should be added to the syllabus. In China's examination-oriented education system, the English teaching syllabus is actually designed to develop the students' ability to fulfill all kinds of tests and examinations while culture is ignored. Consequently, considering the guiding position a syllabus holds in English teaching, adding culture into it can better guarantee this integrating process.

### 2) Creating a culture-rich learning environment

Though it is almost impossible to provide students with an authentic learning environment where they can have direct communication with native English speakers, it does not follow that teachers cannot try to create a culture-rich environment for them. In addition to introducing linguistic and cultural knowledge to learners, teachers should exert more effort to help their students to apply what they have learnt in practice. Teachers can create real situations for students to participate in. For instance, the teacher first invites the students to read a passage named "Dining Customs", and then asks the students to act as waiters and customers at a restaurant in the US. Students are required to talk with each other independently. This provides a great opportunity for them to think and speak in accordance with foreign social conventions and at the same time they have to understand what other people say so as to make the conversation continue smoothly. This role-playing activity increases students' awareness of the appropriate application of cultural information learnt in class and prepares them for real communication with native English speakers. Besides, in order to make sure that students fulfill the activities successfully, teachers should convey enough information about the foreign culture to the students beforehand.

### 3) Introducing pragmatic knowledge

Introducing pragmatic knowledge means that teachers should convey information about the communicative function of different linguistic forms to students. In fact, EFL learners are commonly misled by the so-called standard linguistic patterns they have learnt in class and they may not be able to make adjustment in different contexts. For instance, most of the Chinese EFL learners greet foreigners by saying "Nice to meet you" just because they are taught to use the pattern "Nice to meet you. --- Nice to meet you too." by their teachers when they first begin to learn English. However, in fact, many more different ways of greeting are used by native English speakers. So in English classes, teachers should avoid introducing pragmatic knowledge in a fixed way. Instead, they should teach students to interpret the meaning of utterances from both linguistic and pragmatic perspectives so as to obtain correct understanding. Owing to the variability of language itself, there is no absoluteness of communicative functions of different linguistic forms. Therefore, it is not advisable to provide rules of using certain linguistic forms exclusively. Statements like "the imperative is used to order" are often made by teachers. And this may cause students' misunderstanding since imperative does not always entail order, and order can also be expressed through other linguistic forms. For instance, in the following sentences, imperative actually means offering, advising and welcoming.

- a. Have some tea, please. (Offering)
- b. Stay in bed and have some rest. (Advising)
- c. Come in. (Welcoming)

Considering this, when teaching the imperative, it is better that teachers provide more examples of imperative sentences that are applied in different contexts so that the students can have a more comprehensive understanding of the communicative functions of imperative and avoid committing pragmatic failures in cross-

cultural communication.

#### 4) Providing more authentic teaching materials

It is beyond doubt that students can learn to use English well only when they are exposed to authentic learning materials, especially when learning English in China where they do not have many opportunities to have direct communication with native English speakers. In order to increase English learners' pragmatic competence, more authentic teaching materials should be provided. Authentic materials refer to those that involve the social conventions, customs, habits, and culture of the target language, which will help students understand how people in English-speaking countries think and behave in everyday life. By trying to think and act like native English speakers, EFL learners can use English in a more natural and native way in cross-cultural communication. In addition, apart from textbooks, there are a lot of other sources from which students can further broaden their knowledge about the foreign culture and these materials can be used as supplements to the textbook. English novels, magazines, newspapers, movies and TV serials can all be made good use of.

#### 5) Developing teachers' competence

Teachers are responsible for transmitting linguistic and cultural knowledge about the target language to the learners. Thus it is absolutely essential that English teachers meet the needs of their students. To develop their language and teaching competence, they should be encouraged and required by the university authorities to attend professional training programs, where they can update their knowledge about English and learn new teaching techniques. In addition they have to broaden their linguistic and cultural knowledge about the target language through self-study and make good use of all the available resources, which include all kinds of academic journals and books both published in China and abroad, academic conferences, research projects, and short-term courses abroad and thus improve their language proficiency. In order to be qualified, teachers must keep on studying to keep up with changes in the English language, its culture and society. Since many teachers are not confident in their own knowledge of pragmatics, they should actively try to seek and read some related books or materials related to pragmatics to develop their English competence.

### **6. Conclusion**

This paper investigated the pragmatic failures that Chinese EFL learners commit in cross-cultural communication. In accordance with the analysis of different types of pragmatic failures that occur in intercultural interaction based on the data of the questionnaire, cultural difference, negative pragmatic transfer, teaching-induced errors, and foreigners' tolerance towards Chinese speakers' pragmatic failure are concluded as being the four major sources of pragmatic failures. Considering that Chinese students still have difficulties in adhering to foreign social conventions while communicating with native English speakers, more efforts should be made to improve college English teaching. The significance of this research can be illustrated in the following two aspects: first of all, the empirical data collected from the investigation can provide some information concerning the authentic situation of English learners' pragmatic competence: what kinds of pragmatic failures they commit most frequently; what kinds of pragmatic knowledge they lack most; and whether students themselves have realized the importance of learning pragmatic knowledge. By analyzing the nature of the pragmatic aspects of learner language, this investigation can help both EFL learners and teachers to recognize the indispensable role pragmatic teaching plays in EFL pedagogy, thus contributing to learners' progress in developing their pragmatic competence and communicative competence. In addition, based on a qualitative analysis of the main causes of pragmatic failure, feasible methods can be designed and implemented

to improve English teaching. EFL teaching thus will not only focus its attention on teaching the language itself (grammar, vocabulary, semantics, etc.) but also attach equal importance to the pragmatic and cultural aspects of language mastery, including both increasing the students' cultural knowledge and developing their pragmatic competence.

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## Appendix I

### The Questionnaire

This questionnaire is only used for personal research purpose and will be kept strictly confidential! Please write down the answers according to your own understanding. Thank you very much for your cooperation!

Directions: In the following you will be presented with 20 questions. Please answer each of them briefly within 30 minutes. If you come across any difficult words, you may look them up in the dictionary, but do not

discuss with your classmates.

1. Wei Ling met his English teacher, Rodney Johns, outside the classroom. What would he say to address his teacher? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Suppose you meet your friend, Michael Johnson from Britain, for the first time on Wednesday. You would greet him by saying: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Suppose you meet your classmate, John Smith, an American native, on the street shortly after dinnertime. You would greet him by saying: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Liu Jun met his classmate Jack who comes from the US on a snowy day. He greeted him by commenting on the weather. He would probably say: \_\_\_\_\_
5. When introducing yourself to someone you don't know at a party, what would you say? \_\_\_\_\_
6. When introduced to an elder professor or a friend's parents, what would you say?  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. Wang Hong works in an international business office. One day she worked very late. Her boss said to her, "Thanks a lot. That's a great help." How may Wang Hong reply? \_\_\_\_\_
8. Wu Hua had a question to ask his foreign teacher. He went to Professor Black's office. After he got the answer, he got up to leave. What would he say?  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. You want to borrow a book from your American friend. You say: \_\_\_\_\_
10. Joyce is talking to her friend, Brenda who is from Britain.  
Joyce: I wonder if you'd mind posting this letter for me on your way home, Brenda?  
What would Brenda reply? \_\_\_\_\_
11. One day, a Chinese student invited his foreign teacher to have dinner. When all is ready, the student warm-heartedly said: \_\_\_\_\_
12. You want to invite you're American friend Jack to come to your house for dinner. What would you say to him? \_\_\_\_\_
13. After Dr. Brown from the US has given his three-hour lecture, what would the students say to compliment him? \_\_\_\_\_
14. Xiao Ma is an interpreter. One day a foreign visitor, Mr. Brown, talks to him.  
Brown: Your English is quite fluent.  
What would Xiao Ma reply? \_\_\_\_\_
15. Miss Wells has been late for school quite recently. After class, her English teacher Professor Thyme talks to her.  
Prof. Thyme: Er-Miss Wells. I'm sorry to have to mention this, but could you possibly try to be a little earlier in the morning? This is the third time you've been late this week.  
What would Miss Wells reply? \_\_\_\_\_
16. One day an American lady accidentally bumped into Wei Lin on the street.  
Lady: I'm terribly sorry.  
What would Wei Lin reply? \_\_\_\_\_
17. At your friend's party, how would you indicate that it was time for you to leave? You may say: \_\_\_\_\_
18. You are visiting a Westerner and at the end of the afternoon he is saying "goodbye" at the door. What might you say to him? \_\_\_\_\_

19. What would a host do or say to indicate to a guest that it was time to leave?

\_\_\_\_\_

20. Zhou: What do you think of the film?

Green: I can't praise this film too highly.

What does Mr. Green mean? \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix II

### Research Results of the Questionnaire & Interview

#### 1. Research Results of the Questionnaire

Group	Number	Appropriate	Inappropriate	Rate of PF
1 <sup>v</sup>	1	79.4%	20.6%	20.6%
2 <sup>vi</sup>	2	94.1%	5.9%	5.9%
	3	66.2%	33.8%	33.8%
	4	86.8%	13.2%	13.2%
3 <sup>vii</sup>	5	88.2%	11.8%	11.8%
	6	67.6%	32.4%	32.4%
4 <sup>viii</sup>	7	36.8%	63.2%	63.2%
	8	99.1%	0.9%	0.9%
5 <sup>ix</sup>	9	70.6%	29.4%	29.4%
	10	42.6%	57.4%	57.4%
6 <sup>x</sup>	11	41.2%	58.8%	58.8%
	12	97.1%	2.9%	2.9%
7 <sup>xi</sup>	13	26.5%	73.5%	73.5%
	14	97.1%	2.9%	2.9%
8 <sup>xii</sup>	15	88.2%	11.8%	11.8%
	16	79.4%	20.6%	20.6%
9 <sup>xiii</sup>	17	32.4%	67.6%	67.6%
	18	63.2%	36.8%	36.8%
10 <sup>xiv</sup>	19	1.5%	98.5%	98.5%
	20	80.9%	19.1%	19.1%

#### 2. Research Results of the Interview

##### 2.1 Interview Questions

- 1) Have you ever committed pragmatic failures while communicating with foreigners? If yes, what do you think were the causes of the pragmatic failures?
- 2) How do you get information about cultural background and pragmatic knowledge in English?
- 3) Can you learn much about cultural background and pragmatic knowledge in English classes?
- 4) Do you think it is important to teach culture and pragmatics in class?
- 5) Do you have any advice on how to approach cultural and pragmatic pedagogy in class?

## **2. 2 Results:**

- 1) 100% of the subjects admit that they have committed pragmatic failure in intercultural communication. 90% think cultural differences are the main source of pragmatic failure. Classroom teaching, negative pragmatic transfer and foreigners' tolerance are also mentioned as potential sources.
- 2) 50% of the subjects think that textbooks and classroom teaching are where they mainly obtain cultural background and pragmatic knowledge in English. 30% think that TV programs, newspaper reports and magazines in English are where they obtain cultural background and pragmatic knowledge. 20% think they learn cultural background and pragmatic knowledge from English films and TV serials.
- 3) 90% of the subjects think that they cannot learn much about cultural background and pragmatic knowledge in English classes.
- 4) 100% of the subjects hold the opinion that it is of great significance for teachers to teach pragmatic knowledge and cultural information in classes.  
Suggestions such as integrating cultural and pragmatic knowledge into classroom teaching, improving textbooks and extracurricular teaching materials and developing English teachers' competence are put forward by the subjects.

## **Notes**

- i According to Professor He Ziran, this distinction between free and constrained topics should be made and it is necessary in a conversation for a speaker to choose an appropriate topic that both the two speakers feel comfortable to talk about.
- ii For instance, it is a convention for Chinese people to ask someone they run into at dinner time if he or she has had dinner yet, just as a form of saying "hi". However, as for those native English speakers, they may consider that this somehow infringes upon their privacy.
- iii The questions used in the questionnaire were designed with references to the questions used by He Ziran in his research into English learners' pragmatic failure. We have also made some improvements in accordance with the ten types of pragmatic failure we divided in our paper.
- iv The accuracy rate of each of the twenty questions in the questionnaire is listed in appendix II.
- v Group 1: pragmatic failure in addressing
- vi Group 2: pragmatic failure in greeting
- vii Group 3: pragmatic failure in introducing
- viii Group 4: pragmatic failure in expressing thanks and response
- ix Group 5: pragmatic failure in making requirements and response
- x Group 6: pragmatic failure in inviting and offering
- xi Group 7: pragmatic failure in complimenting and response
- xii Group 8: pragmatic failure in apologizing and response
- xiii Group 9: pragmatic failure in parting
- xiv Group 10: nonverbal pragmatic failure