



Pragmatic Failure of College Students in Cross-Cultural Communication

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Abstract

Pragmatic failure has been one of the main topics in pragmatics, second language acquisition, and other related research fields for many years. It reflects a deficit in pragmatic knowledge and is widely considered a hindrance to successful cross-cultural communication. Notably, proficiency in English as a learner does not equate to proficiency as a communicator, this is especially true for college students because although most of them have a good mastery of English grammar and vocabulary knowledge through a large amount of training and practice, they may still probably lack good communicative competence and inevitably encounter all kinds of pragmatic errors, which will cause embarrassment and misunderstandings in the process of real communication. Since developing students' proficiency in cross-cultural communication is the purpose of college English teaching, it's necessary for English teachers to pay more attention to help them avoid pragmatic failure so as to develop more fluent and successful communication with others of different social and cultural backgrounds. This paper first analyzes the pragmatic errors that college English learners tend to commit in cross-cultural communication. Then, it further discusses the factors leading to the occurrence of pragmatic errors and provides suggestions for college English teaching. It is hoped that these suggestions can help college English learners avoid pragmatic failure as much as possible and develop their communicative competence.

Subject Areas

Linguistics

Keywords

Pragmatic Failure, Pragmatic Competence, College English, Teaching Methods

1. Introduction

These years, pragmatic competence, as a significant competence by which hearers comprehend what speakers say contextually [1], has received widespread attention from scholars at home and abroad for its overwhelming and practical value to human society. Meanwhile, as economic globalization progresses rapidly, communication between people from different cultural and social backgrounds becomes increasingly frequent [2]. Therefore, developing cross-cultural communicative competence to facilitate successful communication becomes necessary for speakers. However, pragmatic failure is commonly seen because communication between people from different fields, regions, and countries will inevitably be influenced by their lack of knowledge of the other party's culture, which will cause embarrassment and even misunderstanding [2]. Many research results showed that the frequency of L2 learners encountering pragmatic failure is much higher than English native speakers [3]-[7]. This situation is especially common in college students' English, even though college students usually perform better in English grammar and vocabulary. Some researchers have found that when college students talk to their foreign teachers, even if they can correctly convey their meaning, they often fail to achieve the expected effects, and sometimes their utterances even cause misunderstandings that unconsciously annoy the foreign teachers [8]. Hence, focusing on cross-cultural communication of college students, we will first analyze the phenomenon of pragmatic failure in detail in terms of its definition, types, and the antecedent factors triggering the occurrence of pragmatic errors, then we will explore implications and appropriate college English teaching methods to facilitate more successful communication between college students and foreigners regardless of their distinct cultural and social backgrounds.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Pragmatic Failure

Pragmatic failure refers to the "pragmatic error" [9]. Pragmatic failure was first conceptualized by Jenny Thomas in her paper, which was considered as "the inability to understand what is meant by what is said", that is, in the actual process of verbal communication, the listener fail to come understand the intention of the speaker, misinterprets the message he or she received, and does not respond as a qualified listener should [10]. In addition, apart from the definition given by Thomas, some other researchers gave their definitions of pragmatic failure. For example, Sun Ya and Dai Ling defined pragmatic failure as "the speaker unconsciously violates interpersonal norms and social statutes, or disregards the time and space, the object, the identity, status, and occasion of the two communicating parties, leading to interruption of or failure of the communicative act [11]. The errors of this nature are called pragmatic errors." Cao on the other hand, defines a pragmatic error as "an error that occurs in the process of communication because of the failure to achieve a full communicative effect" [12]. Despite the different types of definitions, researchers have reached a common sense that prag-

matic failure is a hindrance to effective cross-cultural communication.

In terms of the category of pragmatic failure, it is usually classified into pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure, with the former referring to “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”. For example, Chinese people are modest and careful with their speech, so they like to use some vague words in their communication such as “maybe, perhaps, probably, almost”, while American and British people don’t have such speech impediment because they are more outspoken and straightforward by nature. Besides, sociopragmatic failure denotes “failure results from different cultural norms and pragmatic principles that govern linguistic behaviors in different cultures”. Due to the fact that speakers from diverse cultural backgrounds hold varying perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behavior, obstacles to effective communication may arise. According to Thomas, individuals from distinct cultural backgrounds exhibit divergent thinking patterns, conversational norms, and social values, while also assigning varying degrees of importance to pragmatic principles. These cross-cultural disparities in the evaluation of social parameters exert a detrimental impact on language users’ communicative choices, ultimately giving rise to sociopragmatic failure. For example, the traditional Chinese greeting when meeting someone is “Have you eaten?” or “Where are you going?” However, such a greeting will confuse Westerners because they don’t have such greeting habits. They usually use “good morning” and “good afternoon” instead to show the purpose of greeting.

Thomas’s categorization of pragmatic failure has laid a solid foundation for the following studies by many other researchers. Many researchers have tried to establish their categorizations about pragmatic failure based on different perspectives, which has not only enriched the study of the field of pragmatic failure but also has benefited the cross-cultural communication between speakers of different social and cultural backgrounds. For example, some researchers categorize pragmatic errors in terms of their structures and forms at vocabulary, sentential, and discursal levels [13]. Some researchers tend to categorize pragmatic errors according to the antecedents that trigger these errors, such as pragmatic errors caused by request speech acts, the use of different words with the same meaning, the use of interlanguage, cross-cultural differences, and so on [14]. Besides, some other researchers developed their categorization based on the social pragmatic dimension and categorized these errors into the following types: failure to perceive the level of formality and procedure in social situations; failure to perceive one’s own or the other party’s goals, intentions, and so on; failure to perceive and express the emotional distance between each other; offense to the other party’s shared values and customs [15].

Moreover, several studies have been conducted concerning the issue of prag-

matic failure. Some researchers explored the issue of pragmatic failure in the context of internationally used languages and made classifications as well as suggestions accordingly [15]. Natrio analyzed pragmatic failure through the translation of a proverb done by Indonesian EFL students and the result showed that the translation of the Indonesian proverb not acceptable in the target language considering how the cultural aspect is not transferred properly [16]. Hutauruk and Puspita investigated the possibilities of pragmatic failure by Indonesian EFL students through their translation [17].

Although researchers have provided several different ways of categorization and have conducted many studies concerning the issue of pragmatic failure, the field of pragmatic failure encountered by college EFL learners is still understudied, and there is still a lack of research awareness of exploring pragmatic failure targeting undergraduate populations. Compared with other groups, college students have more opportunities to use English for practical communicative purposes rather than just aiming for a higher score on English proficiency tests, therefore it is necessary for the researchers to take undergraduate as the research target to further analyze the issue of pragmatic failure in order to promote their English communicative competence.

2.2. Cross-Cultural Communication

Concerning the definition of “cross-cultural communication”, two versions of interpretations are generally acknowledged. One is based on the saying “one country, one language, and one culture”, which holds that once people cross country borders, they may be very likely to suffer from a huge cultural shock [18]. The scope of the other version of interpretation is a little bit broader, that is cross-cultural communication refers to all the matters arising between speakers of different cultural backgrounds and is not limited to the boundary of countries. Thomas clearly favored the second version. In her view, “cross-cultural communication” is not limited to what happens between natives and foreigners across national borders but should include communication between two speakers who do not share a common language or cultural background in any field. Thus, interactions between employer and employee, citizen and policeman, university professor and freshman, etc., can all be subsumed under the definition of “cross-cultural communication” [19].

3. Analysis and Discussion

3.1. Pragmatic Errors College EFL Learners Commit

College English learners may encounter pragmatic failures in the following categories: firstly, pragmatic errors in terms of titles. Chinese do not call their teachers by their first names, but usually refer to them by their relatives’ titles or positions such as “teacher Wang” “teacher Li” etc.; however, when it comes to the use of titles in the native English language, the English native speakers usually refer to them as Mr. and Mrs., and usually call them by their first names. Secondly, prag-

matic errors in compliments. Chinese college students usually use compliments when the other person has made great achievements to express their appreciation; however, Western students can pay compliments to any small things in their lives. Thirdly, pragmatic errors arising from students' ways to response to a compliment or praise. Raised in an environment where they are taught to maintain humility, Chinese college students often respond to others' praise with self-deprecating remarks, rather than accepting the compliment directly, which is considered as a virtue and a phenomenon of politeness that is characteristic of Chinese culture. But in cross-cultural communication such speaking style often cause misunderstandings. For instance, we will always see the scene that when a foreign teacher praises the Chinese student for his or her good performance, the student will often be self-deprecating to show that he or she is modest and courteous, ultimately causing the foreign teacher to feel embarrassed because the Western countries do not have such a cultural practice. When British or American people are praised, they will always be very happy to say "Thank you" or "Really?" But the Chinese response is usually a modest negative: "No, no, thank you." For Westerners, this kind of negative response can make them feel embarrassed, as if they are telling a lie or that they don't have the ability to distinguish between good and bad, which can even lead to a feeling of resentment.

3.2. Antecedent Factors Triggering Pragmatic Failure

"Noise" is the main cause of pragmatic errors. Noise refers to anything that is added to a message that is not intended by the sender to send the message. According to Communication Science, noise includes the differences in communication strategies, the differences in information between the communicators, and the influence of communication channels. According to He, in the process of cross-cultural communication, the differences in cultural information between the communicating parties and negative pragmatic transfer are the root causes of pragmatic failure [20].

3.2.1. Cultural Differences between the Communicating Parties

Cultural differences may mislead the learners because they will affect their way of thinking. The cultures in different countries and regions are different. Under such circumstances, individuals naturally have differences in their values, beliefs, customs, and so on, which can easily lead to misunderstandings between the two sides in the process of cross-cultural communication. This stems from ignorance or misunderstanding of the other's culture, or from over-confidence or prejudice in one's own culture. Different cultures may have different interpretations and expressions of the same concept or phenomenon. For example, in some cultures, certain topics may be taboo or sensitive, while in other cultures they may be regarded as ordinary or harmless. For example, during the exchange, topics such as academic performance rankings, family financial conditions, and romantic relationship status are events that can be talked about among Chinese college students, although young people nowadays consciously avoid such issues and talk

about them in a brief way. On the other hand, in Britain and the United States, the above-mentioned topics are regarded as personal privacy and are generally avoided. Therefore, when communicating with foreign teachers or classmates, if cultural differences are ignored in communication, speakers are very likely to touch the sensitive points of the other party, offend the other party unintentionally, cause unnecessary misunderstanding and conflict, and ultimately lead to pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication.

3.2.2. Negative Pragmatic Transfer

Negative pragmatic transfer is another significant source that cause pragmatic failure. It refers to the influence exerted by learners' prior linguistic and cultural pragmatic knowledge on the comprehension, output, and learning of second-language pragmatic information [21]. To make it more specific, the negative transfer can be divided into two types: negative transfer of native linguistic knowledge and negative transfer of native cultural conventions [22].

Negative transfer of native linguistic knowledge often arises from the "reciprocal" transfer of syntactic and lexical forms as well as the transfer of speech act strategies. Syntactic and lexical "reciprocal" transfer occurs when learners try to use the whole sentence structure of their mother tongue to express themselves in the corresponding form of the target language, or to translate words from their mother tongue into the target language one by one. However, some of the translated texts, although the surface structure remains unchanged, have been given a new meaning in the target language. For example, Chinese students will say "Repeat" in class when they don't catch up with what the teacher is saying. Although the surface meaning of this utterance is the same as "I beg your pardon", which means to ask the other person to repeat what he/she has said, however, the extra-linguistic force is very different, in which "I beg your pardon" is a polite request while "Repeat" is an abrupt command. These transfers will bring about unexpected associations in cross-cultural communication. On the other hand, it has been found that foreign language learners often transfer speech act strategies from their mother tongue to the target language in cross-cultural communication. Here's a classroom example:

Teacher: Could you please share your thoughts on this poem?

Student A: (standing up, bowing slightly) I'm sorry, teacher. My understanding is very shallow...

Teacher: That's okay, just try to express your ideas.

Student A: I really don't know much about poetry. Maybe other classmates have better opinions...

Teacher: (pausing) But I'd like to hear your perspective first.

In this interaction, the student, influenced by the Chinese cultural norm of showing humility in academic settings (where downplaying one's abilities is considered polite), repeatedly deflects the teacher's request. This contrasts with the expectation in many Western classroom cultures, where students are encouraged to directly voice their thoughts even if they're incomplete. Therefore the student's

persistent self-deprecation comes across as evasive rather than respectful to the teacher. Another type of negative pragmatic transfer is the negative transfer of native cultural conventions. In cross-cultural communication, Chinese students may violate the phonological principles of English social interaction and inappropriately use the tone of voice that is common in their own native culture, thus violating the social and cultural consciousness of native speakers of English. For example, Chinese students often ask the teacher questions in class by uttering: “I have a question, teacher.” This is appropriate in Chinese culture, but in British and American culture, this tone of voice is considered inappropriate, and questions need to be asked in a more polite way. Therefore, native English speakers usually use polite language forms such as “Could I ask a question, Professor Smith” when they ask the teacher a question in class.

3.3. Suggestions for College English Teaching

3.3.1. Enhancing Students’ Ability to Express, Clarify, and Understand the Target Language

Cross-cultural communication requires participants to have the ability to express, clarify, and understand the target language. Firstly, it’s impossible for communication to take place if learners cannot express themselves clearly. Secondly, as misunderstandings are inevitable in the cross-cultural communication process, it is necessary for the speaker to have the ability to clarify the information so that when misunderstandings or incomprehension occur, the participant can state his or her intention or willingness to communicate in a clearer way. In addition, because there are many varieties of English other than British and American English, it is also necessary for learners to be familiar with the different speech intonation, vocabulary, and syntax within these varieties such as Japanese English, Korean English, American English, and so on. Wen pointed out that in the ELF context, more attention is paid to “the extent to which students are able to use what they have learned about the language to accomplish communicative tasks effectively” [23]. Therefore, the attention is not on the speaker’s ability to achieve a standardized intonation, fluency, accuracy, and to make few grammatical errors, but rather on whether the uttered discourse expresses his or her communicative goals and intentions appropriately.

3.3.2. Enhancing Students’ Ability to Adapt, Consult, and Correct Errors

In English teaching classrooms, it is impossible to cover all the communicative maximums and social norms, so it is necessary to focus on cultivating students’ ability to recognize cultural differences by themselves and on how to make timely adaptations and error corrections when they find that the other party’s communicative maximums are not in line with their expectations, and on how to find out the other party’s cultural norms through negotiation to make appropriate adjustments accordingly. In a word, the outcome of language instruction should be the acquisition of proper pragmatic strategies and competence within the specific context, rather than merely the acquisition of vocabulary, grammar, and syntactic rules [23].

3.3.3. Enhancing Students' Ability to Judge the Other Party's Emotions, Attitudes, Communicative Goals, and Willingness to Act, and Strengthening Students' "Empathy"

Empathy refers to the emotional connection between the speaker and the listener in which they are able to envision and understand the other party's intention. This requires instructors to pay attention to cultivating students' sense of empathy in the process of English teaching and learning so that they are able to take into account each other's culture, values, and social norms in their discourse output, and be tolerant and in understanding the other party's discourse, and willing to consider the appropriateness of communication from the other party's point of view. The success of cross-cultural communication is largely inseparable from the use of empathy.

3.3.4. Exposing Students to Western Cultural Context

Language is a vehicle for the transmission of culture and a major expression of local culture. In the process of learning, students should not only master the application of vocabulary and grammar but also understand the local culture and clarify the development history of the culture as well as the background in which it is located [24]. In order to improve students' cross-cultural communicative competence, teachers have the responsibility to provide learners with opportunities to keep in touch with the target language's culture. For example, during English class, teachers should make an effort to create an authentic language environment for the learners to help them understand the cultural norms and maximums of the target language, acquire the rules of language use, and achieve successful communication. Besides, college students have much spare time to learn independently, therefore, apart from teachers' instruction during English class, students can also be encouraged to make use of their extracurricular time to learn about some materials relating to Western cultures such as English literature work, newspapers, and magazines so as to broaden their vision of Western culture, improving their cross-cultural communication. Second language learners should be taught everything about the target language culture, etiquette, and traditions. To be more specific, teaching pragmatic competence should be involved in some modules such as Oral Expression (through watching films and analyzing how speech acts are performed in natural situations with a comparison to the first language), Literature (through analyzing poems, metaphors, idioms, expressions, etc. to show cross-cultural differences between the first and the target language), Civilization (through describing the target etiquettes, traditions, behaviors, principles, attitudes, etc.), and Translation (through explaining the cultural differences between the first and the target language) [25]. Only when learners are exposed to sufficient input relating to the Western environment, can they be more familiar with the cultural norms of the other party and avoid pragmatic failure.

3.3.5. Language Teachers Need to Shift Their Concepts of Language Instruction

In China's current college language teaching system, foreign language teaching is mostly carried out only in the classroom, with the teachers playing an absolutely

dominant role. If teachers only focus on grammar and vocabulary teaching, it is impossible for students to learn the practical use of the language and gain cross-cultural communication skills. Therefore, the design of a language course should take into consideration the needs of the language learners to better their communicative competence, and language teachers must change their traditional language teaching concepts as well as realize the danger of cultural conflict as well as the importance of cultivating students' cross-cultural communicative competence, only in this way can they help language learners achieve the expected teaching purposes.

4. Conclusion

The fundamental purpose of foreign language teaching is to achieve cross-cultural communication. Therefore, comprehensively improving the efficiency and quality of foreign language teaching and substantially increasing students' foreign language application ability is both a need for China's national economic development and an urgent task for intercultural Chinese education. In order to achieve this goal, it is necessary for us to correctly understand that foreign language education is a part of intercultural education, and to regard language as a whole that is inseparable from culture and society. As a major obstacle in cross-cultural communication, pragmatic errors deserve the attention of the foreign language education community. This requires English teachers to be good at knowing the factors that may cause cross-cultural communication breakdowns, helping to avoid nonnative speakers' cross-cultural pragmatic failure, guiding students' awareness and ability of cross-cultural communication and cultivating their composite talents that are in line with international standards. This paper analyzed the pragmatic failures that college EFL learners may commit and antecedent factors triggering pragmatic failures that college English learners commit in cross-cultural communication. As there are still many obstacles for college English learners in adhering to foreign social conventions and cultural norms while communicating with native English speakers, more efforts should be made to improve college English teaching [22]. First of all, instructors should enhance students' ability to express, clarify, and understand the target language; secondly, instructors should enhance students' ability to adapt, consult, and correct errors; thirdly, instructors should enhance students' ability to judge the other party's emotions, attitudes, communicative goals, and willingness to act, and strengthening students' "empathy"; thirdly, instructors should try to expose students to the Western cultural context; lastly, language teachers need to change their concepts of language instruction.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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