An Investigation of Pragmatic Failures in Communication for Chinese Beginners

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Abstract. As Chinese language is increasingly becoming the medium for intercultural communication, Chinese norms and rules when it comes to interaction are significant aspects when learning Chinese. Little studies have examined pragmatic aspects of Chinese learning to understand some of the common failures. To bridge this gap, this study aims to understand the commonalities of pragmatic failures of Chinese beginners with English as their native language. Findings suggest that the pragmatic error rate among Chinese beginners is relatively high in the social field. Additionally, pragmatic failures in communication occur in Euphemism, Command indications and Negative implications more frequently. This means that for beginners of Chinese, pragmatics is more difficult to understand, grasp and acquire. To enable Chinese beginners to be in a position to master pragmatics in language learning, this study has identified the main sources of pragmatic failures and given several recommendations that are useful in learning Chinese language. Among pragmatic failures include the characteristics of pragmatic acquisition, cultural differences, negative pragmatic transfer, and lack of opportunities for practical training. The recommendations have been given in terms of teaching level and learning level.

Keywords: Pragmatics; Chinese; Pragmatic Failures; Learners.

1. Introduction

Language is recognized as the main representation of culture. Understanding the culture of the target language is an important part of learning a language. A significant number of people are increasingly taking an interest in learning Chinese in the contemporary world due to globalization [1]. The basic aim of teaching Chinese is to enable learners to communicate with native speakers without much difficulty. There are explicit disparities in the values and customs of Chinese speakers therefore their language expressions are also distinct. If foreigners lack a deep understanding of Chinese pragmatics, it is simple to cause pragmatic failures and misunderstandings. Communication rules such as how to speak with a certain level of formality and politeness needed in a given situation or understand the intention of another person conveyed indirectly are some of the important skills to become a competent speaker of the target language. Learners are required to have a range of linguistic forms to perform a function of a language. Besides, learners need to understand the socio-cultural norms and rules that guide the applications of these forms. For example: which forms should be used to complain to whom? Lack of this knowledge may lead to miscommunication, subsequently causing a cross-cultural misunderstanding. Hence, a significant aspect of Chinese study entails learning and understanding the pragmatics of Chinese.

Previous studies have examined Chinese pragmatics in different contexts including linguistic behaviors and cultural values and norms that determine the behaviors. With several potential cross-linguistic and cross-cultural hurdles to overcome, in addition to an array of influential factors such as learner differences, which may affect development, the course of attaining fitting levels of pragmatic proficiency is not straightforward [2]. Hence, the latest studies into second language pragmatic development have extended a broader spectrum of investigative milieus and speakers to better comprehend the whys and how of this intricate sphere of second language acquisition. This not only advocates the importance of knowing the constructs of a language, but posing the ability to apply language in the socially required manner. Understanding pragmatics is important in learning a foreign language.
In a different study, Su and Ren explored the development of second language Chinese learners’ capability to convey requests during an interaction. The researchers examined the effect of proficiency on strategies and internal adjustments of requests as well as the sequential realization of requests in Chinese [3]. Their study found that learners across competencies depicted a similar range of pragmatic strategies, but they had overall incompetence when employing internal alliterations. Ability to delay requests among learners improved along with increased competency. However, learners’ overall production did not depict a similar extent of situational variances as was observed. In general, Chinese learners’ pragmatic competency develops with time as their proficiency also increases. Chen asserts that even with strong language ability, learners’ conforming pragmatic ability is unable to attain synchronous improvement [4]. It is a result of language communication having protuberant systematical features, which should have certain context, communication inspirations as well as other associated characteristics.

Past studies have also shown that learners and native speakers have preference commonalities for conventional indirectness [5]. However, they tend to favor different approach methods in realizing requests. Learners usually deviate from native speakers in their realization of requests, which is attributed to different factors. One main factor is the negative transfer of pragmatics, which takes place where pragmatic features in native speakers differ from learners, but learners are used to transferring these features from L1 to L2. According to Chen, pragmatic acquisition should be considered basic support during the entire process of learning Chinese language. Chinese heritage learners tend to perform better compared to Chinese foreign learners in both conception and production of Chinese sentences as well as formulaic expressions [6]. Heritage learners seem to perform better than non-heritage learners in the context of accurate comprehension, estimating the degree of native Chinese speakers.

Although a significant extent of learners’ proficiency does not actually guarantee an equivalent level of pragmatic proficiency, limited competency appears to restrict the development of pragmatics [7]. The process of learning a foreign language is prone to errors, chiefly the use of language that swerves the existing language rules in a language even though the error is part of learning [8]. The authors assert that the nature of Chinese language errors comprises linguistic errors as well as typographical ones. Some of the linguistic errors are diction, morphological errors as morphophonemic errors and using affixes, as well as syntax errors when using conjunction, phrase question words, and ineffectual sentences. The authors note that the application of this kind of letter is linked to the type of a character in Chinese known as “hanzi” which works as a symbol of meaning [8]. Language error of this kind of letter happens in words that have similar sound-symbol but has a different meaning.

Inter-cultural communication necessitates both speakers to have sufficient comprehension of the linguistic knowledge of the target language as well as their pragmatic competence. The study of pragmatics requires a firm focus on teaching and learning of target language [9]. More attention is usually given to linguistic knowledge, while neglecting pragmatic information. Pragmatic failures tend to cause misunderstandings, which causes barriers to successful cross-cultural communication. It is acceptable that difference in culture between English and Chinese-speaking countries causes barriers since different cultures have different ways of speaking, thinking, and social values among others. Pragmatic failures normally arise in pragma linguistic failure as well as socio-pragmatic aspects.

Based on the above literature, the purpose of this research is to understand the commonalities of pragmatic failures of Chinese beginners with English as their native language and to draw a general conclusion or experience by analyzing specific problems during the course of learning Chinese. To understand some of the problems, this research study will use a pragmatic competence test (using an online Chinese questionnaire through the Wenjuanxing platform) to be conducted among 108 English-speaking Chinese beginners.
2. Methodology

2.1 Materials

This research adopts the questionnaire survey method, the language of the questionnaire is Chinese, and the distribution and recovery are carried out through the Wenjuanxing online platform. In addition to basic information such as gender, age, and time spent learning Chinese, the questionnaire is divided into two parts: the first part is a communicative pragmatic investigation for Chinese beginners, with a total of nine single-choice questions. Each question creates a real Chinese communicative situation derived from daily life, including expressing refusal, commanding and instructing, caring for greetings, etc. Each question has five different answers (ABCDE) to choose from. It should be noted that the most suitable one in multiple-choice has become the presetting option, and the other options cannot be considered wrong in daily communication, but may bring some embarrassment, which is due to some smaller cultural elements that differentiate them. The E option is "Others", which is set to prevent some respondents from being unable to select answers that meet their wishes, and to increase the flexibility and rigor of the questionnaire. However, the data analysis part of this article will temporarily ignore the data of option E.

The second part is a survey of pragmatic learning for Chinese beginners. There are four multiple-choice questions. This part mainly asks about the difficulties that respondents encounter in pragmatic communication in Chinese, and at the same time tries to collect the reasons for the difficulties. In addition, the questionnaire also focuses on the Chinese learning environment and methods of respondents outside the classroom, in order to provide some effective suggestions for Chinese beginners at the level of Teaching and Learning.

2.2 Subjects

The questionnaire was handed out at Jiangxi University of Technology on March, 13th, 2022. The subjects were 108 Chinese beginners studying at Jiangxi University of Technology. These international students were all from English-speaking countries, and most of them were between 18- and 28 years old. Regarding the gender ratio and Chinese learning time of the respondents, please watch Figures 1 and 2 below.

![Figure 1. Gender distribution of respondents](image-url)
3. Data analysis and discussion

From March 13 to March 18, 2022, a total of 108 research questionnaires were distributed and recovered on the online platform. All the questionnaires were valid answers, and the recovery rate was 100%.

3.1 An investigation of Chinese pragmatic failures in communication

Statistics of the pragmatic error rate in the first part of the questionnaire are as follows:

Table 1. Error rates (for each question)

| Question Number | Number of Errors | Error Rates |
|-----------------|-----------------|-------------|
| Question 6      | 65              | 60.19%      |
| Question 7      | 87              | 80.56%      |
| Question 8      | 83              | 76.85%      |
| Question 9      | 82              | 75.93%      |
| Question 10     | 83              | 76.85%      |
| Question 11     | 63              | 58.33%      |
| Question 12     | 62              | 57.41%      |
| Question 13     | 86              | 79.63%      |
| Question 14     | 58              | 53.70%      |
| AVERAGE         | 74              | 68.83%      |

Table 2. Distribution of error rates (for each question)

| Error Rates     | Over 90% | 80-89% | 70-79% | 60-69% | 50-59% | Under 50% |
|-----------------|----------|--------|--------|--------|--------|------------|
| Total Number of Questions | 0        | 1      | 4      | 1      | 3      | 0          |
Table 3. Distribution of collected answers

| Questions | A (%) | B (%) | C (%) | D (%) | E (%) |
|-----------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Question 6 | 19.44 | 18.52 | 39.81* | 22.22 | 0     |
| Question 7 | 19.44* | 27.78 | 27.78 | 13.89 | 11.11 |
| Question 8 | 23.15* | 36.11 | 25.00 | 13.89 | 1.85  |
| Question 9 | 31.48 | 26.85 | 17.59 | 24.07* | 0     |
| Question 10 | 30.56 | 25.93 | 20.37 | 23.15* | 0     |
| Question 11 | 8.33 | 41.67* | 23.15 | 26.85 | 0     |
| Question 12 | 15.74 | 42.59* | 30.56 | 11.11 | 0     |
| Question 13 | 27.78 | 25.00 | 26.85 | 20.37* | 0     |
| Question 14 | 12.96 | 46.30* | 27.78 | 12.96 | 0     |

(Ones with “*” are presetting options)

From Tables 1 and 2, it can be seen that the overall pragmatic error rate of the Chinese beginners participating in the questionnaire is relatively high in the social field, with an average of 68.83%. Among them, the error rates of Questions 7, 8, 9, and 10 are higher than the average, and the error rate of Question 7 even reached the highest 80.56%. Through preliminary analysis of the data, it can be concluded that for Chinese beginners, the pragmatic failures in communication occur in Euphemism, Command indications and Negative implications more frequently. This may mean that for beginners of Chinese, the above three parts are more difficult to understand, grasp and acquire.

3.1.1 Euphemism

The euphemisms in the questionnaire mainly involve the euphemisms of Chinese vocabulary. Question 8 of the first part mainly examines euphemism words, while Question 9 examines fuzzy words.

(1) Euphemism words

In the investigation of euphemism words, the questionnaire selects the words “life and death” that can best reflect the cultural characteristics of the Han nationality. Such euphemisms are understood in the primary stage of Chinese learning, and are also used in daily communication. Euphemistic expressions with high frequency are common.

Question 8. The grandmother of Xiao Wang at the same table has been in poor health recently. If you want to call to check the situation, you will say on the phone:

A. Xiao Wang, how is your grandma recently? (23.15%)
B. Xiao Wang, is your grandma in good health, is she still alive? (36.11%)
C. Xiao Wang, has your grandma been out for a walk recently? (25%)
D. Xiao Wang, your grandma is sick, you have to stay with her. (13.89%)
E. Others. (1.85%)

For Question 8, only 23.15% of the respondents chose the preset option, but as high as 36.11% of the respondents chose the most inappropriate option B. Although "alive" in option B is a euphemism, it highlights the meaning of "death" behind it when greeting the recent health of the elderly, which is very offensive and should not be used.

Chinese teachers may have mentioned the word "Jianzai" to students in their teaching, and may tell students that it is a euphemism that people prefer to use. However, there is no further explanation on the generation, use conditions; objects and occasions of the word “Jianzai”, and students also lack a rational understanding of the use rules of it, resulting in the generalization of the use of the word "Jianzai".

(2) Fuzzy words

Fuzziness is one of the major characteristics of Chinese euphemism, and it is also one of the means of euphemism. Fuzzy words include the use of hypernyms on the object of euphemism, or vague words that do not belong to a set, or polysemic to express euphemism.
Question 9. Andy was a guest at his Chinese friend Xiao Wang's house. They were about to have lunch. Andy suddenly felt a stomachache. How should he say the politest?

A. Excuse me, I need to go to the toilet. (31.48%)
B. Sorry, my stomach hurts a bit. (26.85%)
C. I'm sorry, I'm going to have diarrhea. (17.59%)
D. Excuse me, I want to wash my hands. (24.07%)
E. Others. (0%)

Question 9 examines euphemistic expressions related to physiological phenomena, and the number of people who choose option A is the largest, as high as 31.48%. In item A, "toilet" is a euphemistic expression widely used in a certain historical period and can be used on any occasion, but the euphemism rules are updated. The word "toilet" has gradually lost its euphemistic meaning now, and it is in the transitional stage between euphemistic expression and straightforward expression. On some occasions, using the word "toilet" can also express euphemism, but Question 9 is on the occasion of eating, thus the use of "toilet" is too straightforward. For these reasons, "I want to wash my hands" in option D is more euphemistic and appropriate. According to statistics, only 24.07% of the respondents chose the preset option.

3.1.2 Command indication

Question 10. If you are the monitor and your classmates often talk in class, which makes the teacher very angry, you would say to your classmates:

A. Stop talking in class. (30.56%)
B. We should stop talking in class. (25.93%)
C. Everyone, stop talking in class. (20.37%)
D. Let's stop talking in class. (23.15%)
E. Others. (0%)

Question 10 is mainly concerned with command indication in Chinese communicative pragmatics. Influenced by the traditional Chinese concept of harmony, when giving orders, "we" or "let us" are often used instead of "you" in Chinese. Orders between peers are less blunt. In addition to this, "let us" is more appropriate because "let us" is more casual than "we" and does not make the conversation too awkward. Obviously, Chinese beginners are very unfamiliar with the commanding usage of personal pronouns, so that the error rate of this question is as high as 76.85%, and only 23.15% of the respondents chose the preset option.

3.1.3 Negative implication

The expression of negative implications in Chinese is often expressed in the form of asking and confirming each other's thoughts. Such inquiries often do not presuppose a clear answer and leave a large margin. As a result, it is even excessive deviation from the subject, which causes difficulties in understanding and communication sometimes.

Question 7. Your good friend tried on a new dress, you think its style is good, but the quality is not very well, you would say:

A. This dress looks okay, would you like to have a look at another one? (19.44%)
B. This dress is not nice, it does not suit you. (27.78%)
C. This dress looks a bit... (27.78%)
D. Go get another one, this dress is not satisfactory. (13.89%)
E. Others. (11.11%)

Question 13. It's time for lunch when your friends are guests at home. They are not seemed to leave yet, but you don't want to keep them at home. What do you think is the best way to say it?

A. It's getting late today. Come and play next time. (27.78%)
B. It's time for lunch, let's go out. (25%)
C. It's about the time, let's go. (26.85%)
D. It seems to be late; don't you think? (20.37%)
E. Others. (0%)
Question 7 and Question 13 all point to such negative implications and have the highest error rates of all items. Only 19.44% of the respondents in Question 7 chose the preset option, and only 20.37% in Question 13. The seemingly unclear negative hints stem from the cultural characteristics of harmony and restraint in China. In Chinese communicative pragmatics, overly obvious and strong rejection words rarely appear, so as not to hurt the harmony. Obviously, most Chinese beginners cannot understand and grasp the negative implications of Chinese pragmatics well, and they prefer to choose direct and clear utterances such as "This dress is not nice, it does not suit you."

3.2 The main sources of pragmatic failures in communication

The second part of the questionnaire is a survey of pragmatic learning for Chinese beginners. Question 15 and Question 16 are both multiple-choice questions. These two questions mainly ask about the difficulties that respondents encounter in pragmatic communication in Chinese, and at the same time try to collect the reasons for the difficulties. The data statistics of them can be watched in Figures 3 and 4 below. Through preliminary analysis of the data, it can be concluded that the main sources of pragmatic failures in communication come from four aspects.

Question 15. What do you think is the most difficult part of using Chinese?
A. Understand Chinese people speaking and talking. (29.63%)
B. Understand Chinese jokes and humor. (37.96%)
C. Solve daily life problems such as food, clothing, accommodation and transportation. (49.07%)
D. Communicate with foreign friends in Chinese. (54.63%)
E. Get used to Chinese rules and behavior. (46.30%)
F. Adapt to the Chinese teaching model. (12.04%)
G. Others. (0%)

![Figure 3. Data distribution of Question 15](image)

Question 16. What do you think is the main cause of the difficulties?
A. There is a big difference between English pragmatic communication and Chinese pragmatic communication. (52.78%)
B. Chinese grammar is very difficult to learn. (36.11%)
C. Chinese-style social interaction is very complicated. (52.78%)
D. Lack of companions to learn together. (58.33%)
E. Disturbed by native language and cultural background. (40.74%)
F. Others. (7.41%)
3.2.1 The characteristics of pragmatic acquisition

One of the major reasons behind the errors is that pragmatics is more difficult to teach and learn. Pragmatic failures may be teaching-induced. For example, a root of teaching-induced pragmatic error stems from the over-emphasis on the parallel between the category of grammar (the imperative) and the act of speech (ordering). However, imperative is barely ever applied in commanding or requesting during a formal conversation [10]. Moreover, the teaching approach of pragmatics is to condense the social environment into the classroom, while learning is to extend the content of the classroom into the social environment. This makes pragmatic acquisition more difficult.

3.2.2 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 failures. 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.

3.2.3 Negative pragmatic transfer

Pragmatic failure may also arise from the negative transmission of pragmatic knowledge from the first language. From a paralinguistic perspective, the incorrect transfer of happiness when learners attempt to transfer from their first language to the second language, the statement being transferred are semantically equal, but do contain a distinct pragmatic force in the target language for the purpose of interpretive biases. At the same time, learners are fond of not transferring some aspects of universal or first language-based pragmatic knowledge to second language communication even if it is suitable [11]. Hence, another cause for pragmatic failures is the negative transfer of mother tongue.

3.2.4 Lack of opportunities for practical training

Despite several efforts in place, learners are still not able to use the Chinese language in real communication. One main factor behind this is the lack of authentic input [12]. One of the critical conditions for fruitful language learning is enough exposure, robust, understandable and demanding cultural and linguistic materials of the second language. From a pragmatic perception, such materials are not sufficiently authentic due to the language difference between Chinese and English.
4. Recommendations for overcoming pragmatic failures

4.1 Teaching level

1) Introducing background knowledge
Teachers should consider expanding cultural background and supplementing rich knowledge of Chinese pragmatic communication. In the event of teaching Chinese language, the main principle that should be followed is integrating the teaching of cultural background knowledge. From this analysis, it is evident that cultural awareness determines the effect of language learning and application. Cultural awareness plays a significant role in successful communication across cultures [13]. Teachers should prepare learners to respect and embrace different cultures, appreciate cultural differences, understand the customs and habits of each other, and accept the etiquette of the target culture.

2) Providing more practical opportunities
Teachers should also consider creating real-life scenarios and increasing opportunities for daily pragmatic communication. It implies that the scope of teaching should not only extend to what is the course syllabus. However, it is necessary for the teacher to consider incorporating common life situations where students can learn to use pragmatics in communication without failure.

3) Enhancing teaching methods
Teachers should consider enhancing teaching methods to improve learners’ interest and efficiency in learning. An innovative approach would be to use digital contents such as film and TV dramas and movies that are translated and learners are familiar with the theme being conveyed [14]. In this way, learners will gain many insights regarding pragmatic competency. Teachers should also consider the development of text learning and exchange activities in the second classroom.

4.2 Learning level

1) Improving personal initiative
Learners should broaden their horizons and take the initiative to understand the cultural background behind Chinese. In this way, learners are expected to take the initiative of exploring Chinese culture on their own without teacher involvement [15]. The personal initiative will inspire learners to want to learn more about Chinese culture, which shows self-drive in mastering the dialect.

2) Expanding the space of communication
Learners should actively communicate, learn and practice pragmatic knowledge in real life. Learners should develop the habit of communicating using Chinese language not only in the classroom, but also outside the class setting while socializing with their peers.

3) Looking for learning partners
Learners should join a network of English speakers intending to learn Chinese language. In this way, learners will be able to share their experiences, challenges, and assist one another master Chinese language to become effective and confident speakers [16].

5. Conclusion

The current study examined existing literature and challenges in the acquisition of Chinese pragmatics by investigating politeness, rejection, command instructions and expressing concerns/greetings. After a broad analysis, it is evident that teaching Chinese as a foreign language is inseparable from pragmatics and pragmatic acquisition, which should be incorporated into the entire process of learning. If foreigners lack a deep understanding of Chinese pragmatics, it is simple to cause pragmatic failures and misunderstandings. Pragmatic failures are relatively high within the social context and occur in Euphemism, Command indications and Negative implications more frequently. Pragmatic failure occurs from certain words as mentioned by the teacher informing learners that they are euphemisms that may be used while students lack rational understanding regarding their rules of use. Fuzzy words also tend to result in pragmatic failure, especially words
that have currently lost their euphemistic meaning and are in the transitional stage between euphemistic expression and straightforward expression. Besides, Chinese beginners are not familiar with the commanding usage of personal pronouns, which results in a high pragmatic error rate. In addition, expression of negative implications in Chinese was found to be a major source of pragmatic failure, which causes difficulties in understanding and communication on some occasions. This study found that pragmatic failures include the characteristics of pragmatic acquisition, cultural differences, negative pragmatic transfer, and lack of opportunities for practical training. Pragmatics is more difficult to teach and learn and pragmatic failures may be teaching-induced, which gives Chinese beginners hard time communicating fluently. Cultural differences between China and English-speaking countries set up barriers to cross-cultural communication. Negative transmission of pragmatic knowledge from the first language is also eminent while learning Chinese language. This study also recommended that teaching level and learning level should be given much attention to ensure that students gain many insights regarding pragmatics while learning Chinese as a second language. In terms of teaching, it is important for teachers to introduce background knowledge to expand cultural background and supplement rich knowledge of Chinese pragmatic communication. Moreover, teachers are supposed to offer more practical approaches by considering creating real-life cases and increasing opportunities for daily pragmatic communication. In terms of improving personal initiative, learners should broaden their horizons and take the initiative to understand the cultural background behind Chinese. Learners should actively communicate, learn and practice pragmatic knowledge in real life. Concurrently, learners should join a network of English speakers intending to learn Chinese language. Inter-cultural communication necessitates both speakers to have sufficient comprehension of the linguistic knowledge of the target language as well as their pragmatic competence. It should be noted that different contexts bear different language expressions. Only through standardization of language use and comprehending expression practices that resonance in communication can be achieved. This study points out the importance of including pragmatics in both teaching and learning Chinese as a second or foreign language.

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