Chinese People's Pragmatic Failure in English in Cross-cultural Communication

Dongjie Ren[1, a], Zhengbing Liu[2, b]

[1]Wenzhou University Oujiang College, Wenzhou, China

[2]Wenzhou University Oujiang College, Wenzhou, China

[a]1181880216@qq.com, [b]karl1231liu@126.com

Abstract. This paper talks about the common pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication, it mainly contains three parts: the detailed examples of classified pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication; the analysis of the roots behind misunderstanding and pragmatic failures; the hopefully useful suggestions on how do Chinese English learners reduce embarrassment caused by these failures. Most of the instances come from what the author has seen or heard during his overseas study, others are from literature relating to linguistics, and the corresponding advice is partially based on his experience. By reading this text, readers probably can have a comprehensive understanding of the cultural differences between Chinese and English and get some helpful strategies for fluently communicating with foreigners from English countries without producing conflicts and mistakes. By the way, it also helps the establishment of self-confidence and encourages English learners to actively practice their English language.

1. Introduction

With the further opening-up and reforming, China enjoys more frequent contacts with the world. It covers oral communication, written communication as well as political, economic and cultural exchanges, etc. However, as for Chinese people, English is not their native language, and there are differences in signification and structural form between Chinese and English. Thus, a series of pragmatic failures are inevitable in the course of cross-cultural communication (Chinese people using English to communicate with people from other countries). Some mistakes may well cause misunderstanding, and others may even cause unnecessary conflicts. The purpose of this paper is to summarize several types of English pragmatic failures which usually occur in cross-cultural communication and the dissimilar ways of thinking between Chinese and English, to study and explore the causes of these failures, and to provide suggestions on how do Chinese English learners avoid or overcome these failures, as well as to improve their awareness of the importance of language, cultural background and thinking mode.

2. Types of pragmatic failure

2.1 The definition of pragmatic failure

In 1983, the concept of pragmatic failure was first put forward in the paper "Cross-cultural Pragmatic Failure" written by Jenny Thomas, a British linguist. It was defined as "the possibility to understand what is mean by what is said [1]." In the contemporary academic circles of China, scholars have different understanding and views on pragmatic failures: Scholar Hu Wenzhong once called it as "cultural error". In Thomas' standpoint, pragmatic failure can be divided into two categories: linguistic pragmatic failure and social pragmatic failure. The former is related to language itself while the latter is linked to social interaction. Pragmatic language failure refers to the communicators habitually applying their original expression to the target language due to the lack of linguistic knowledge of the target language. For example, when your supervisor or tutor praises your positive performance, they often say "Well done". Chinese native speakers may think of answering "It's my

duty." or such replies expressing responsibility and obligation. But it often gives English native speakers a hint of reluctance and coercion, which may lead to a crisis of trust between the two sides. In this case, the best answer should be "It's my pleasure." The so-called socially pragmatic failure is due to the lack of understanding of the target language and the cultural differences between the two languages. For example, "Your article showed your advanced thought and genuine emotion." means that the speaker highly appreciated his partner. People with Chinese cultural background may answer "Just so so." to show their modesty and prudence. In the eyes of native English speakers, it is a sign of too much contempt, which may will lead to counterproductive misunderstanding and embarrassment between communicators. In the following parts, in order to show the distinctive contrast, the author will put an example of Chinese-way thinking and another one of English-way thinking respectively.

2.2 Pragmatic failure of phatic communion (greetings)

The word "phatic communion" was first proposed by B. Malinowski. In his opinion, phatic communion (greetings) does not contain the exchange of specific information, but only serves as a guide for communication; it is only used to politely start a dialogue with others, rather than to provide specific information. Nowadays, this view has been widely accepted: Greetings are mainly used to maintain friendly relationships among people and should not involve any factual substance. They include daily greetings, talking about the weather, asking about health or living conditions.

In everyday life, greetings are often used as the prologue of daily communication. It has to be mentioned that any developed language has a set of greetings based on different interpersonal relationships and cultural backgrounds. Although people all over the world have the custom of greeting each other when they meet, the ways of Chinese and English speaking countries are far from each other. In this paper, the author will start with a typical example of daily greetings and discuss the pragmatic failure of greetings in cross-cultural communication.

One night, the author met one of his foreign friend on his way home. He took the initiative to say, "Hi, have you finished your dinner?" which means "你吃过了吗？", this is a common greeting used by Chinese people when they meet at the time for dinner. However, the friend replied, "No, but I've got an appointment. Maybe we can eat together the other day?". Until then, the author suddenly realized that in native English speakers' minds, asking if one has eaten is actually a implied expression of their desire to invite others for meal. Therefore, please avoid using this typical Chinese-way greeting if you don't want to squander your money. There is another story from one of the author's college classmate. When he happened to meet his international schoolmate, he said, "Hey, where are you going?" which means "你要去哪？". It is also an overused way of greeting in Chinese communicating habits. In fact, it is not a real question and it usually can be heard in Chinese society. This class of greeting has lost its literal meaning, and is only used to maintain a harmonious relationship among folks, so no one will regard it as a specific question. However, native English speakers do not understand this habit of Chinese. They often figure out an answer with detailed content, which often causes unnecessary embarrassment and disharmony. Thus the cross-cultural communication ends with pragmatic failure.

2.3 Pragmatic failure of form of address

Generally speaking, in habits of Chinese, form of address often includes addresses between relatives and quasi-relatives, addresses led by "老"、"大", social occupation addresses, title addresses, etc. Choosing proper form of address is the first step to start a pleasant conversation, and a wrong one will inevitably cause misunderstanding and hurt others' feelings. Therefore, when Chinese people talk to foreigners with English cultural background, they should pay special attention to the differences of imperatives in politeness.

2.3.1 Kinship address

The Chinese nation had attached great importance to the family relationship tied with blood since ancient times, and most of the families kept three to four generations in the house. Therefore, in Chinese there are many words that indicate kinship, such as: "舅舅, 舅妈, 侄子, 侄女", etc. These kinship terms must be based on oneself, with crystal clear relationship and distinction. If the younger

generation call the elder improperly, they may will be considered as a person without filial piety or being educated. In addition, as for the masses in modern society, sometimes they ignore these a little bit complicated terms. But in order to show respect, it is advised to use them. For example: "姐姐，我们去公园散步怎么样?"

Nevertheless, English native speakers do not think so, and many of them are unaware of it. The most of British and American families possess two generations, with a single structure. Therefore, the concept of kinship in Britain and the United States is relatively weaker. It is a manifestation of intimate relationship to call people by their first names. For example: "Tom, I wanna go for a walk." (You don't need to call your brother by the certain kinship address)

2.3.2 Non-kinship address

Chinese people are used to calling strangers by kinship addresses. Clan and hierarchy have been playing an essential role in Chinese culture, so people has been accustomed to using kinship terms to greet unrelated people. For example: "爷爷，您这儿有笔记本卖吗?" ("爷爷" here did not refer to grandpa in blood relationship, but was used to pay respect to the elderly.)

However, as opposed to the imperatives of Chinese, the British and Americans emphasize independence and equality, regardless of the old and the young. If we bring the Chinese addresses into it, it will produce awkward words like "Uncle, are you selling notebooks?". This kind of embarrassing words makes people feel at a loss and reluctant to answer. By the way, when we meet foreigners, we can simply call them "sir" or "madam".

2.3.3 Address begin with "大" and "老"

The words "老哥" and "大爷" are often used by Chinese to refer to strangers and elders. "老" symbolizes authority and fame in Chinese culture. It is a kind of cordial address making the elders feel comfortable. For example: "大爷，您在这儿干啥呀?"

However, in the western society, "old" stands for being backward and incompetent. (having less competitiveness) Young people are full of vitality, and they are regarded as the hope of the country at large, while the old people are often rejected. So people don't want to be considered as an old man, and they believe it gives offense. Therefore, when interacting with foreigners, Chinese people should utilize other words to euphemistically express the concept of old, instead of using the word "old" directly to call the elderly.

2.3.4 Address of occupation

In China, most occupations, such as teacher, doctor and coach, are often called by their professional titles directly. For example: "Teacher, I can't cope with this problem." It need to be pointed out that the structure of "surname + occupation" is very commonly used in order to show respect for each other's occupation and to better identify themselves. For example: "王医生，我这病严重吗?" But in terms of some occupations which indicate traditional handicrafts, the surname must be added before the title, such as "张木匠", "王铁匠", etc. (Wang Shuo 2009)

Nonetheless, the British and Americans often directly call the names to show their kindness. If you are not familiar with each other for the first time, you can also use "Mr.", "Professional" and other honorifics to show your respect. The most typical mistake is "Have you got a minute, teacher?", which seems really odd. The appropriate expression should be: "Have you got a minute, Professor Zhang?"

2.3.5 Address of title

Chinese culture is a custom of bureaucracy for millennial to some extent. Influenced by the rooted concept of hierarchy, officials have great influence and power. Therefore, almost all official positions can be used as address terms. For example: 市长, 区长, 县长, 部长, etc.

However, the role and prestige of the officials in the U.K. and the U.S. are not as same as that of China, so the terms of official posts are not often used as address terms. Only a few of them, such as "present", can be used as an appellation, but "director" is not. (Zhou Lingli 2006)

For example:

Xiaowang, I'm John Pitt, you can call me John.

Ohhh, no, sir.

Here, Xiaowang was frightened because he was asked to call his boss John directly. He would rather call John "my boss", considering that in the eyes of Chinese people, pet names are fit for close relationships;

2.4 Pragmatic failure of politeness

Politeness is an indispensable and effective means in the process of communication. Correct usage of polite expressions can enhance the communication and people's tolerance. Some scholars defined it as "politeness is a strategy to avoid conflict[2]". In order to reduce the expression of impoliteness, Leech, a famous British linguist, put forward six politeness principles[3]:

a. (Tact Maximum): Minimizes the cost to the listener and maximizes the cost to the speaker, for example: "Could I interrupt you for just one second?";

b. (Generosity Maximum): Minimizes the benefit to the speaker and maximizes the benefit to the listener, for example: "You must come and have dinner with me.";

c. (Approval Maximum): Minimizes dispraise of the speaker, for example: "Yes, I've seen your dress. It's so unusual.";

d. (Modesty Maximum): Minimizes praise of the speaker, for example: "I'm so stupid. I didn't get that. Did you?";

e. (Agreement Maximum): Minimizes disagreement, for example: "Perhaps we could agree to go at midday?";

f. (Sympathy Maxim): Minimizes antipathy and maximizes sympathy, for example: "I was sorry to hear you weren't well.".

People should follow these principles in their communication, but Leech believes that these principles have different priorities. For example, the principles of propriety and praise, which emphasize how to treat others, are more important than the principles of generosity and humility, which require how to treat yourself.

There is an asymmetry between Chinese and Western cultures in terms of appellation. For example, Chinese tend to use "occupation + surname" structure as a form of address to show politeness, while westerners prefer to use "title + surname" to show respect. A foreign teacher who came to China for the first time was confused because the students called him as teacher instead of Professor X. A foreign student who left for England and America for the first time made the professor feel unpleasant because he called a professor in his university as teacher X. This is a typical pragmatic failure of courtesy in cross-cultural communication. The author has made some comments on the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western addressing habits in the last chapter. In this chapter, the author concentrates on discussing the pragmatic errors in responding politely.

For example:

Aunt Wang: My cookery is not good. I'm sorry. Please make do with it.

Tom: Well, you can add more seasoning.

Aunt Wang: Oh, oh. (feeling upset)

Chinese people are tended to be humble, so Aunt Wang was apt to belittle herself that her dishes were not tasty. Tom obviously didn't realize it was out of politeness. It was rather impolite to say what he thought. The proper answer can be: "That's OK, your cooking is delicious!"

This example reflects the differences between Chinese and English thinking in responding to other people's polite expressions. Chinese culture pays attention to the principle of humility. Even if you are very skilled in your craft, you should belittle yourself as a sign of politeness. At the same time, you also want to get positive comments from others. On the one hand, Chinese people don't understand that foreigners are apt to respond directly with concrete substance; on the other hand, foreigners don't realize the relevant rules of how to express politeness in traditional Chinese ways. No wonder that conflicts are easy to occur during the communication.

2.5 Pragmatic failure of utterance

When people utter a sentence, it contains utterances, propositions and desires to do something. However, the problems in utterance may be mainly reflected in a certain speech [5]. The problems of Chinese speaking behavior include incorrect pronunciation, inappropriate stress, and fixed intonation,

etc. The most prevailing mistakes of pronunciation that the author heard when he studied abroad were to pronounce excuse as /iks'kouz/, bank as /ba:nk/, and ask strangers "Would you please tell me where the airport is?" without a rising tone. English learners should not neglect these problems in their words. Any problem in a sentence has more or less influence on the listeners' thinking. Because of the phonetic errors in speaking, foreigners misunderstood what did the speaker mean, so they could not react as the expectation of the speaker. For example: "Next Friday is my birthday." If there is no explanation, people will be quite confused: "Is it this Friday, or next Friday?"

From the perspective of speech and utterance, one of the typical mistake in Chinese intercultural communication is mixing pleasantry and formal invitation up. For example: "Where are you going? We invite you to our house for dinner." In general, the sentence refers to an invitation or a social intercourse. And it is part of indirect speech act because indirect speech act implies an instruction or a promise[6].

2.6 Pragmatic failure of non-linguistic activity

To some extent, nonverbal behaviors are recognized by people with different cultural backgrounds, and expressions such as smile, anger and cry can be understood by people all over the world. However, in real life, cross-cultural communication difficulties caused by inappropriate nonverbal behaviors are commonplace. People are tended to ignorant different meanings carried by a certain nonverbal conduct, assuming that everyone is able to understand it wherever they live in. Nonverbal behaviors include gestures, sitting, hugging, kissing, and eye contacts, etc. Among them, the most significant differences are in gestures and kissing styles between Chinese and English cultures.

Many gestures bear distinctive cultural attributes, and the meanings are multifaceted. You need to experience the relevant culture or understand the local customs in order to have a correct recognition of the gestures. For example, in Europe and the United States, the thumb and index finger crook, forming a circle, and it means OK and good. However, In Japan, the gesture represents money, and in France, zero[4]. The most typical example is that Chinese tourists are accustomed to using V-shaped gesture (palm inward) while taking photos in foreign countries, which is generally considered as a kind of obscene and insulting gesture by foreigners. Therefore, if you don't realize that the same gesture has different meanings in different cultures, there will inevitably be misunderstandings and conflicts in cross-cultural communication.

Kissing is a classic sort of behavior for westerners to show their close relationships. The elder kisses the forehead of the younger and males kisses the back of the hand of females. In some countries, kissing not only conveys love, but also expresses concerns and respects. In China, such intimate behavior is exclusively available for lovers. In this paper, the author need to point out that many Chinese people do have a misunderstanding while involving in cross-cultural communication with their peers: Friends of the same age, brothers and sisters can kiss each other when they meet. In fact, in western society, friends and relatives do kiss but in a polite way, even without any physical contact. They are not as casual as what has been described in the rumor.

2.7 The characteristics of linguistic pragmatic failure and social pragmatic failure

Chinese people's English pragmatic failure usually is the result of the combined effect of language pragmatic failure and social pragmatic failure. For example: "I have a question to ask." Neither uses an interrogative tone, nor utilizes more polite way to talk with the teacher, so it is not only a language pragmatic failure, but also a misunderstanding of foreign cultural practice (a social pragmatic problem). For example, while some Chinese talking to English speakers, they tends to ask, "Are you married?" or "How much do you earn per month?" or use "uncle" and "aunt" to call somebody who actually is not their relatives or friends. In Chinese people's minds, it is used to expand the topic, to shorten the distance, and to contribute to communication, while in foreigners' eyes, it is a rude invasion of privacy, and a kind of social pragmatic failure caused by the ignorance of social and cultural customs. The author has traveled overseas twice, and has learned that when you ask others about their marital status, you should euphemistically say: "Are you married, or..." It shows that you have no impure motive other than to know the basic information, and it also helps represent your politeness. In addition, the consequence of social pragmatic failure is consistent in speech and

behavior, because it will lead to the incomprehension or non response from native English speakers. When it disgusts people, a speech is doomed.

3. The causes of pragmatic failure

In the above chapters, the author analyzed various pragmatic failures involving cultural differences, the lack of language environment, and the lack of basic language knowledge. As we all know, language carries culture and then, culture resides in words. Cultural differences will certainly cause interference and negative language transfer in cross-cultural communication. The author's point of view is consistent with that of scholar Lu Wenhua and scholar Lu Jianji. "Considering the pragmatic rules and cultural factors of their mother tongue are acquired from childhood, it have become their way of thinking and conduct[7]."

3.1 Poor English foundation in primary and secondary school

In China, most of the children have received English language education since the third grade in primary school. Basic English education in primary and secondary schools is particularly critical. However, it is a pity that the present English education in primary and secondary schools in our country only focuses on examinations. Parents complain that their children still can not understand it after having been learning English for several years. There are several factors being responsible for this fact. First, we do not pay attention to practical application. The ultimate goal of English teaching is not to get high marks in tests, but to communicate. At present, English education in primary and secondary schools only focuses on the incomprehensible recitation, and there is no much feedback on the learning content. Secondly, the most basic knowledge is not well taught. For example, the meaning of "Mr." and "Mrs.": Most of the students don't even know that Mrs. Wang is referring to a woman whose husband's surname is Wang. In addition, only paying attention to reading and writing but neglecting listening and speaking can be a great obstacle for students to fully understand English. Many English learners are struggling to make up for the weakness in listening and speaking during the later stage of English learning.

3.2 Unfamiliarity with English culture and custom

The most effective way to learn a language is to immerse in certain cultural environment of the target language. But unfortunately, most English learners don't have much chances to communicate with native speakers, let alone immerse themselves in the English language environment. The author had communicated with many English learners and was informed that most of them had been learning English for several years. There is almost no effective way to communicate with native speakers except talking with foreign teachers in class. Cultural differences is one of the cause of social pragmatic failure. For example, "How many children do you have?" Such violations of privacy often cause discomfort to foreigners.

3.3 Negative transfer of Chinese thinking mode

Thinking mode is influenced by natural environment, religious belief, traditional culture and other factors [8]." According to the law of cognition, the cognitive stage begins with a intention to instinctively and concretely identify objects [9]." Chinese thinking mode tends to express abstract concepts with concrete words while English thinking mode is fuzzy and quite opposite to that of Chinese. For example: She wondered whether his outspokenness might be a liability to her boyfriend. In this sentence, the basic meaning of outspokenness is "坦白，直言", and liability is corresponding to "债务"; then according to the traditional Chinese thinking mode, it becomes: She doubts whether her straightforwardness will be a debt for her boyfriend. Obviously, the translation is not appropriate. In fact, outspokenness can refer to a person's rude remark without consideration, and liability here means mental burden. The correct translation should be: She doubts whether her throwaway remark is a mental burden for her boyfriend.

3.4 Lack of useful feedback on pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication

In the process of learning English, Chinese people mostly get along with their compatriots. The author had ever asked many English learners, most of them said that they did not have any foreign pen pals to help them improve English and correct their mistakes. In a word, they could not get useful feedback on pragmatic failure, which is exactly the problem in English learning. It's hard to realize one's mistakes when no one points out them. How can people correct errors without awareness of their mistakes? Just like bats, if they were not able to receive the feedback from ultrasound, they would become a horde of headless flies.

4. The strategies to avoid pragmatic failure

In the previous discussion, the author has introduced the common categories of pragmatic failure and the causes of these failures. Next, the author will talk about how to avoid pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication. The strategies are as follows:

4.1 Optimize English Teaching

Pragmatic failures are instructive for the design of English classroom teaching. First of all, there is no doubt that the ultimate purpose of language learning is to use it. In English classroom teaching, students are confined to exam oriented teaching, but indeed all aspects of English learning are required. Vocabulary is the very basis of language learning. In classroom teaching, students should endeavor to combine words with specific context, pay effort to the cultivation of sense of words with the teacher's help, they need encouraged to have a good command of different meanings of a single word. For example: "His skin burns easily under the sun." "Burns" in this sentence can not be literally taken for granted as "burning". According to the context, it should be understood as "sunburn".

In practical teaching, some teachers will match language form with social function, which can lead to students' unilateral view: Commands can only be expressed through imperative sentences, and questions can only be expressed by interrogative sentences. Therefore, it is suggested that in face-to-face teaching, students should be inspired to try different ways of expression after controlling the basic usage of various sentence structures. For example, imperative sentences are not necessarily used to give orders, such as "Go and have a cuppa."--it is an invitation.

4.2 Increase input of English culture and language

Considering that cultural differences is one of the major factors that causes pragmatic failure, it is particularly meaningful to explore as many relevant cultures and customs as possible. English learners should read more literary works or publications about western social customs and the ways of behavior, and pattern native speakers' authentic expressions when watching European and American films or videos. In addition, for college students, it is an attractive way to make international friends and enthusiastically communicate with each other. In course of time, they will have a specific understanding of foreign culture.

4.3 Study the contrasts between Chinese and English culture

Studying the instructive contrast between Chinese and Western culture is the key to understand the two different thoughts. Some expressions have completely different extended meanings.[10] For example, in cyberland Chinese people naturally consider "666" as "Good job" or "Well done", while it is an indication of "hell" and "evil" in western religion. Such different realization is the arch-criminal that brings about discord. The list of examples is too numerous to enumerate, hence, Chinese people is suggested to taste the subtle contrast through literature and assorted movies.

5. Summary

This paper only discusses and analyzes some typical pragmatic errors that Chinese English learners often encounter in cross-cultural communication. Besides, it lists the causes of these mistakes and gives referenced strategies. It is an attempt of the author to present an explanation of such an intricate

linguistic phenomenon. Many of the contents are based on the author's relevant travel-study experience, so here the author sends apology to the readers, considering that there may be some potential inaccuracies in this article. Many scholars have deeply discussed the measures to overcome pragmatic failure, so this paper does not elaborate it any more. Of course, only with a macro-control and detailed understanding of western culture, a solid foundation of language skills, and a mastery of authentic expressions can pragmatic failures be reduced or even eliminated from the very source. Given that English learning is mainly realized through classroom education for most Chinese English learners, it is strongly advised that learners recognize the significance of extra practice on listening ability and speaking skill through extended ways.

Acknowledgement

References

[1] Thomas, J. Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure[J]. Applied Linguistics, 1983(2).

[2] Kasper, G.& Shoshana, B. Interlanguage Pragmatics[M].NP: OUP, 1993.

[3] Leech, Geoffrey N. Principles of Pragmatics[M]. London: Longman, 1983: 131-138.

[4] Searle, J.R., 1969，Speech Acts: An essay in the Philosophy of Language[M].Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[5] He Ziran, 1997, pragmatics and English learning [M]. Shanghai: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. (In Chinese)

[6] Mu Yalin, 2011, analysis of pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication caused by non-verbal communication (Journal of Nanchang Junior College), Dalian: Liaoning University Of International Business. (In Chinese)

[7] Lu Wenhua, Lu Jianji, pragmatic failure of foreigners in learning Chinese [J]. Beijing Language and Culture University Press, BLCUP, 1993 (1) (In Chinese)

[8] Wang Lei, 2013, comparative study of polite expressions in Russian and Chinese[D]. Harbin: Heilongjiang University (In Chinese)

[9] Wu Xinmin, 2016, Journal of Nanjing University of Aeronautics & Astronautics (social science), 18(4): 1-6 (In Chinese)

[10] Shangqi, 2018, study of pragmatic failure of Chinese English learners from the perspective of cross-cultural communication [D]. Shenyang: Liaoning University. (In Chinese)