



# On Communicative Pragmatic Failure of English Learners—Take Honghe University as an Example

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## Abstract

A large number of English learners aware that one of the important purposes of learning English is to communicate. However, communication acquires speakers not only employing grammatically correct sentences, but also speaking English appropriately in specific context. On the basis of relevant knowledge about pragmatic failure, the thesis aims to help English learners understand their current level of pragmatic competence and improve their competence to adapt pragmatic context. After observing conversations between English learners in the English corner for several times, the author made a questionnaire for them. This research found that English learners in Honghe University frequently commit pragmatic failure, and the rate of pragmatic failure varies from grade to grade. The pragmatic failure of different speech acts is different. This paper reveals causes of pragmatic failure for English learners, including negative transfer, different culture and improper teaching methods. This thesis aims to provide reference for English learners who want to improve pragmatic competence.

## Keywords

Pragmatic failure, English learners, intercultural communication

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## 1. Introduction

Language is a part of culture and one cannot master a language if he lack of the models and principles of that language culture (Gass & Varonis, 1991). Thus, the input of culture is necessary to learn a foreign language.

Thomas (1983) developed the concept of pragmatic failure. Pragmatic failure can be divided into two categories: one is pragmalinguistic failure and the other is sociopragmatic failure. In pragmalinguistic failure, the speaker fits the structure of his own native language into the target language, which can not express intentions but leads to pragmatic failure. It is caused by different understanding to the language structure and symbols, usually manifested in speech sound, lexicon, grammar, syntax, expression and other aspects of the error. Sociopragmatic failure refers to improper language expression in communication in that the speaker does not understand or neglect the social and cultural background of the other party.

He (1996) proposed three research approaches to deal with pragmatic failure, that is, communication failure analysis, language comparative analysis and interlanguage investigation. Foreign language learners are used to expressing some thoughts and performing speech acts in their own culture to understand target language, which causes negative transfer of culture. The communication language learned under the influence of this negative transfer of culture causes a deviation in understanding between the listener and the speaker (Dai & Zhang, 2000). Long (2010) elaborated on the four achievements and eight deficiencies of language mistakes through taking English students from Shanghai Foreign Studies University as an example. Pragmatic failures are very common in the process of communication, and even the learners themselves do not pay attention to these failure, because textbooks which is

used to teach language always contain some taboos, such as topics on age and income (Li & Fan, 2002).

In recent years, many scholars have tried to study the problem of pragmatic failure in many fields. Wang and Hou (2021) took Quanzhou, Fujian Province as an example to study common pragmatic failure in the translation on environmental protection signs. Chen (2017) proved there is a correlation between learning time and pragmatic failure of speech sound. Zhao (2012) applied corpus to make a statistical analysis and concluded that Chinese learners made amounts of failure in the learning and use of transitional markers, and explored the cause for this kind of pragmatic failure.

Most learners learn English at school in China, so most researches about pragmatic failure were in the field of teaching and learning of language learners. Chen and Li (2015) classified pragmatic failure in the context of international lingua franca, and put forward suggestions for language teaching. Through the analysis of the questionnaire survey, Yang (2017) obtained the causes and performance of pragmatic failure of students of a high school in Chongqing province and found that explicit language teaching contribute to improve students' pragmatic failure. Zhou (2021) concluded that high school students' pragmalinguistic competence is higher than sociopragmatic competence, and proposed that this is largely due to exam-oriented education. Bi (2020) used a corpus of non-English majors in Shandong Province. She (Bi, 2020) found that 40% of 434 students from Shandong University made errors in the process of answering questions, with the largest proportion of verbal pragmatic failure.

There are few researches studied on English learners in southwestern China. It is apparent that different regions will inevitably lead to different scales of pragmatic failure. English learners in the southwest of China have been affected by exam-oriented education model and the limitation of regional education quality for many years, so they commit serious pragmatic failure, which should also be concerned.

## 2. Research Methodology

After observing general circumstance of spoken English in English corner, the study took 180 English learners as subjects, some of whom were students from English club or randomly selected students in the library, and collected 180 questionnaires, in which 160 effective questionnaires are chosen.

Considering that students usually took many courses and had an inconvenient time, the questionnaire were mainly distributed in library on weekends. Students were informed that they must finish by themselves, and they could look through dictionary if they met some difficult words and this questionnaire will never bring about any annoying problem in their study and life. After all questionnaires were done, the statistics were recorded and processed by Excel 2010. The results of questionnaires were presented in the form of tables.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Data from the Questionnaire

**Table 3.1. The rate of pragmatic failure in different grades**

Grade Speech Acts	Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior	Average rate
addressing	57.0%	53.0%	39.0%	30.0%	44.6%
greeting	60.0%	51.7%	39.2%	28.3%	44.8%
parting	58.1%	55.0%	58.8%	49.4%	55.3%
request	58.1%	58.1%	47.5%	47.5%	52.8%
apology	68.8%	52.5%	53.8%	48.8%	55.9%
compliment	48.3%	43.3%	36.7%	35.8%	41.0%
Average rate	58.3%	52.2%	45.8%	40.0%	49.1%

As is shown at table 3.1, pragmatic failure is frequently committed among English learners in Honghe University. Almost every student participating in this investigation commits pragmatic failure. The group having the highest rate of pragmatic failure is freshman. The group having the lowest rate of pragmatic failure is the senior. The average rate of pragmatic failure is 49.1%. Speech Act of apology has the highest pragmatic failure rate, while speech

act of compliment has the lowest rate.

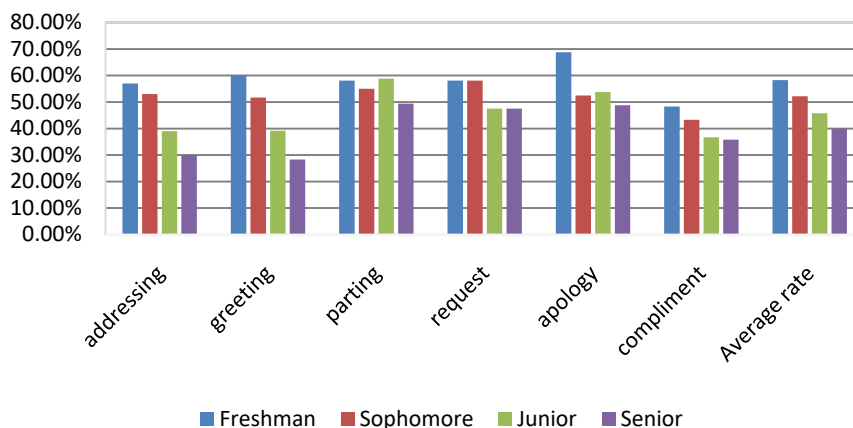


Figure 3.1. The graph of pragmatic failure in different grades.

In the Figure 3.1, after further analysis, pragmatic failure of different speech acts present different feature in each grade. The failure of addressing, greeting and compliment decreases with the increase of the grade, but other acts like parting, request and apology, do not show such feature.

## 3.2 The Causes of Pragmatic Failure

### 3.2.1 Intercultural cause

Language cannot be formed without culture, and culture cannot be transmitted without language. There are some examples applied to account for the influence of culture in the course of learning foreign language. Examples are taken from questions of questionnaire.

Example 1: Outside cinema, Li saw Professor Blake walking to the cinema.

Li asked, "Are you going to the film?"

Example 2: Browns said: "Your English is quite fluent."

Li answered: "Oh, no. I still have a long way to go."

Example 3: Lily said, "Do you like to stay at school?"

Li answered, "Yes, I do. I love school, I love teachers and classmates."

Example 4: On Tom's birthday party.

Li asked, "Happy birthday, Tom. How old are you?"

In example 1, in essence, the student could predict that the Black is going to cinema, but he still asks him in this way. It is apparent that the student got used to the Chinese etiquette, asking someone what is doing despite he knows. But this situation is peculiar for English native speakers and they will think now that you have seen me on the way to cinema why you ask me.

In example 2, as far as politeness is concerned, Chinese tend to follow the maxim of modesty, when they are praised by others, they tend to depreciate their own imperfect performance rather than accept praise.

In example 3, Chinese culture stresses unity. Chinese people reckon that the unity is powerful. There are some sayings about unity in Chinese, "Unity is the strength" "we are family deeply attached to each other." etc. In China, one is required to love home, country and nation when he or she is a child. When people are in school, no matter primary school or high school, they often say "we love school, we love teachers and classmates". However, English countries emphasize on heroism, individualism, and advocate freedom and equality. Westerners think students go to school for studying so they are confused why Chinese must love school, teachers and classmates.

In example 4, asking other's age is one of taboos in western culture. On the one hand, western people deem that age is exceedingly private topic. On the other hand, oldness indicates one can never enjoy a healthy body and lack of ability to make living. *lao* is literally translated into oldness, but the meaning of *lao* in Chinese is different from oldness. *lao* in Chinese culture is a symbol of wisdom and rich experience, even a respected hierarchy. There are several examples like *laorenjia*(Old man) *laoqianbei* (old-timers) *ninlao* ( a respected addressing for elders) etc.

### 3.2.2 Influence of negative transfer

A lot of language learners are missing the critical period to learning English. Native language will influence foreign language learning. A adult has been stable in thinking pattern of native language, which is difficult to overcome in the process of learning other language. There are two kinds of transfer during learning. One is positive transfer. When language pattern in native language are similar to target language, learners will feel easy for what they will learned. In contrast, negative transfer happens when language pattern in native language is not related to second language so that what one has learned in the native language will obstacle the learning of the second language. The negative transfer of native language will have a negative effect on pronunciation, diction, syntactic system and pragmatic competence for language learners. There are 4 examples to explain it.

Example 5: You met his English teacher, Rodney Johns, outside the classroom.

You said, ( )

“Good morning, teacher.”

Example 6: You had something to tell the manager Mr. Smith. So you went to Smith’s

Office, entering the office and said, ( )

“I’m terribly sorry to trouble you, Mr. Smith.”

Example 7: At a party or social occasion, how would you indicate that it was time for you to leave someone’s house?

( )

I’m sorry to have taken up so much of your time.

Example 8: Daisy said, “Look at my new shirt.”

You said: “Really beautiful!”

Literally translation was a way often used by many language learners. Too much emphasis on it will aggravate the influence of negative transfer. In example 5, students answer “good morning, teacher” in that they are used to addressing *laoshi*, *zaoshanghao* in the period of primary and secondary school. Thus, they literally translate “Teacher, good morning” or “Good morning, teacher”. In example 6, native speakers will say “Can I have a word with you?” and in example 7, native speaker would say “It’s been nice talking to you. I really have to go now”, but Chinese students are used to making an apology firstly so that they often say “I’m terribly sorry to trouble you”.

Jia (1997) discussed the difference between Chinese culture and western culture on the syntactic structure of compliments. It can account for example 8 clearly. According to Jia’s study “I really like/love NP” is regarded as a kind of way to express compliment in English, while it has not the force of compliment in Chinese. In addition, Chinese often adopts the way, a adverb plus a adjective, such as *zhenpiaoliang*, *taihaokanla*. Therefore, in example 8, students often use “Really beautiful” “Very smart” for compliments.

### 3.2.3 Improper teaching methods

Generally speaking, non-native speakers’ pragmatic competence of foreign language is gradually acquired when they are learning. In the course of learning a foreign language, teachers with professional knowledge and perfect pragmatic competence can provide students good foreign language context. However, in the actual teaching of middle and high school, majority of teachers blindly teach the language knowledge, asking students to master English words and grammar instead of teaching in the linguistic and situational context. Teachers ignore to cultivate students’ cultural awareness. What’s worse, some dialogues rarely used by native speakers are imparted by teachers and students memorize them repeatedly. Some examples are as follows.

Example 9: Bill said, “How’s everything going?”

You answer, “So-so.”

Example 10: Mike said, “Good Bye.”

You answer, “See you.”

Example 11: Mike said, “How are you?”

You answer, “I am fine, thanks. And you?”

In example 9, a large number of students commit pragmatic failure because they always memorize “Just so so” in the vocabulary list when they are in secondary school. Few students answer in idiomatic expressions like “So far so good” “Not bad” “Just as usual” “Sort of”, etc. In example 10, most Chinese students answer “See you”, which is an expression often spoken by native speakers. But other idiomatic expressions for parting rarely used by Chinese students, such as “Take care” “So long”, etc. In example 11, this dialogue is learned in the English textbook. Most Chinese students recite it and do role-playing in the process of learning. But native speakers hardly use it and they are peculiar when they hear the expression. Therefore, improper teaching methods are detrimental to pragmatic

competence.

#### 4. Conclusion

In English communication among English learners in Honghe University, the phenomenon of pragmatic failure is serious, among which freshmen are especially distinct and seniors are relatively good. The frequency of pragmatic failure has a certain relationship with the grade, but it is not positively related. In the speech of addressing, greeting and compliment, the frequency of pragmatic failure declines from freshmen to senior, while the speech of parting, request and apology do not present such characteristic. The author found the causes of pragmatic failure include negative transfer of mother tongue, culture divergence and improper teaching method.

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