



## Reasons and Solutions of Pragmatic Failures in Cross-cultural Communication

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### Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed and interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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### ABSTRACT

**Aims:** Pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication mainly indicates that language failure is due to inappropriate language use of people from different culture backgrounds in the process of communication. Although there are many related research about the reasons of pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication, the deep reasons are still need to explore. The author wants to give an analysis of pragmatic failures in cross-culture communication, combining both theoretical and empirical study.

**Study Design:** The author who summaries a lot of materials and tutoring experience about teaching Chinese and English students, gives a detail classification about pragmatic failure and then the author analyses the reasons and tries to give some suggestions for avoiding pragmatic failure.

**Methodology:** The author who had work as a tutor for both Chinese and English teaching observes some cross-cultural communications. She uses qualitative study to summaries different types of pragmatic failure and tries to find solutions to solve the pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication.

**Results:** Although many things which result in pragmatic failure are various, the main reasons are linguistic knowledge, culture backgrounds and values and ethnical principle and so on.

**Conclusion:** Declining and avoiding pragmatic failure play vital roles in achieving successful cross-cultural communication. Thus we can improve pragmatic competence and Cultivate Cross-cultural Awareness.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The year 1983 saw the publication of Jenny Thomas's "cross-cultural pragmatic Failure" [1] which arouses interests of lots of researches and scholars, both at home and abroad. He Ziran and Yan Zhuang [2], He Ziran [3], Hu Wenzhong [4] are Chinese scholar who have done a lot of research on pragmatic failures in cross-cultural communication. And the knowledge and awareness of pragmatics are playing an important role in language teaching and pragmatic failure is a very important source of cross-cultural miscommunication [3]. Much research on pragmatic failures has been done to solve this problem and various strategies have been proposed It is still a serious and urgent problem for college students to avoid the pragmatic failures However, most of the research is just introduction to pragmatic failure or brief analysis of reasons of pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication There seem to be few researches on discussing them from a cultural-pragmatic perspective in deep level. Pragmatic failure can be divided into two types: pragmlinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure. This thesis aims to explore pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication and attempts give deep reasons of pragmatic failure and suggest some useful strategies in avoiding such failures. That is what this thesis focus on and the author tries to find effective solutions to overcome the difficulties.

The thesis consists of 4 chapters. Chapter one serves as introduction, which presents the reasons for choosing the topic, the current situation of pragmatic failures in Chinese-English cross-cultural communication In this chapter, the purpose of writing the thesis and the main ideas of the thesis are disclosed Chapter two reviews the relevant theories of cross-cultural pragmatic failure which provides a general theoretical guideline. The definition of cross-cultural communication and pragmatic failure are displayed. Chapter three is the most important chapter, on basis of the presentation of previous studies on "pragmatic failure", and it probes into the detailed illustration in this specific field. This Chapter makes analysis of reasons of pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication alongside with its classification and provides strategies for avoiding pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication. The last chapter is the

conclusion of the whole thesis, which summarizes the major findings and the solutions to avoid such kind of Pragmatic Failures in Cross-cultural Communication.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Important Definitions

Cross-cultural communication is indispensable discipline in such field as language teaching and learning. The study of cross-cultural communication must make clear the following terms:

#### 2.1.1 Culture and its relationship with communication

Culture is a concept which appeared in a lot of fields and it influences people's beliefs and values and world views. There are many scholars do research in culture. Let review some influential views of culture.

1. In 1987, the founder of British Cultural anthropology scholar Taylor said, in the broad sense of ethnology, culture or civilization is a complex body includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, customs and the ability and habit which anyone as a social member obtained [5].
2. The culture we called refers to the things human beings product or create, then pass on to the next generation, especially each item, habits, ideas, systems, modes of thinking and behavior patterns [6].
3. Culture refers to the whole way of life of a certain group of people, including everything what they think, do and make. [7].
4. Generally speaking, culture can be defined as the sum of the material and spirit wealth created during the process of human social and historical practice (Cihai).

From the above definitions we can see that culture influence everywhere, everything and everyone. Culture can be learned, acted out, transmitted, and preserved through communication. Communication is our ability to share our ideas and feelings and it is the basis of all human contact. Communication is a dynamic, systemic process in which meanings are created and reflected in human interaction. Although culture and communication are two different

concepts, they are directly linked. The link between culture and communication is crucial to the understanding of cross-cultural communication because it is through the influence of culture that people learn to communicate. Culture is the foundation of communication. When cultures differ, communication practices also differ.

In modern society, different people communicate in different ways, as do people in different societies around the world; and the way people communicate is the way they live. It is their culture. Who says what to whom, when, where and how? These are questions of communication and culture. Communication and culture are inseparable [8]. Culture and communication are so inextricably bound that most cultural anthropologists believe the terms are virtually synonymous. But when people from different cultures meet; their communication practice differs from that of people in the same culture [9].

Thus communication problems arise. How to solve these problems in cross-cultural communication is a major concern.

### **2.1.2 Cross-cultural communication**

Generally, the definition of cross-cultural communication is that cross-cultural communication occurs when a member of one culture produces a message for consumption by a member of another culture.

More precisely, cross-cultural communication is communication between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to alter the communication event. Frequently, the term cross-cultural communication is used when referring to communication between people from different cultures. Because this term implies a comparison between cultures (for example, different styles of leadership), we find it too restrictive [10].

That is to say cross cultural communication should concern more about the exchange information among different cultural systems within a common environment. Thus, the key point there is to understand the other cultural and give appropriate reply and if people distort the cultural difference, they may easily failure in the communication.

### **2.1.3 Pragmatic failure**

The term "pragmatic failure" was first put forward by a British scholar Jenny Thomas. She points

out that interference in communication is generally referred to as pragmatic failure, which has nothing to do with grammatical mistakes but comes from inappropriate ways of speaking or the unconventional expressions resulting from different perceptions of what is considered as appropriate linguistic behavior, and she defines "pragmatic failure" as "the inability to understand what is meant by what is said" [11]. Thomas holds that pragmatic failure has occurred on any occasion on which B(the hearer) perceives the force of A's(the speaker's) utterance as other than the speaker intends or he should perceive it, at the same time offers the following example to illustrate the point:

A: Do you know who set the fire last night?  
B: No. it's not me.  
A: Oh. I don't mean that.

Actually only wanted to know who had set the fire. But B perceived the force of A's utterance as stronger than A had intended, so B responded very severely. At present, researches on pragmatic failure are carried out both at home and abroad are mainly conducted from the cross-cultural perspective. Many researchers in China have done a lot of contrastive studies on the difference between Chinese culture and western culture so as to prove that cultural discrepancy is the root cause of pragmatic failure.

## **2.2 Classification of Pragmatic Failures**

Based on the nature of pragmatic failure, Thomas categorizes pragmatic failure into two groups: Pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure. Thomas's classification is widely accepted in pragmatic research circles.

Pragmalinguistic failure occurs when learners do not express themselves in a linguistically appropriate manner.

In crossed cultured communication, it arises when the pragmatic force mapped by students onto a given utterance is systematically different from the force most frequently assigned to it by native speakers of the target language, or when speech act strategies are inappropriately transferred from L1 to L2 [12].

One kind of such failure arises when two languages share the same expression but it is used in different situations. For example, it is common for Chinese to give a response to "thanks" by saying "Mei guan xi". If, however, a Chinese learner of English was to translate "Mei

guan xi" into English literally as "Never mind" in response to an expression of gratitude such as "Thanks a lot". The English addressee would not be able to interpret the utterance as an acknowledgment of "thanks". Though the literal meaning of "Never mind" is equal to the Chinese "Mei guan xi", while the communicative conventions behind the two expressions are different. "Mei guan xi" in Chinese is uttered in response to either "thanks" or apology while the English expression "Never mind" is used only in declination to apology. Thus, the force of the utterance would be lost and the Chinese learner of English would have failed to make his or her words understood.

Moreover, this situation also violates the maxim of manner in Grice's cooperation principle in that the expression "Never mind" is an obscurity.

Sociopragmatic Failure is another kind of pragmatic failure. There is a saying, "To be bilingual, one must be bicultural." As we all know that language is a kind of social phenomenon which focuses on the communication function. And language use is closely related to the culture. However, every culture has its unique style and connotation. Under this circumstance, every culture is famous for its own series of value system, social convention, moral concepts, and thought patterns. All these play a decisive role in language using. If we have a poor understanding of the different cultural backgrounds, it is possible for us to convey our cultural ideology to the others. As a result, sociopragmatic failure arises. For example, people living in western cultures tend to speak out their gratitude and compliments more than the Chinese speakers and also they tend to accept thanks and compliments more than the Chinese. Thus, when a native speaker of English presents a compliment to a Chinese student like, "You speak excellent English", many Chinese students would feel embarrassed to show that they do not deserve the compliment, they would decline it directly with all emphatic "no", such as "No, no, my English is very poor". But in a similar situation, a native speaker of English would say, "Thank you for your compliment". In China, declining a compliment is considered a virtue of modesty. However, in cross-cultural communication, it may provoke the feeling that the compliment-giver has a poor judgment. Sociopragmatic failure is related to the rules of speaking—when and how conversation is initiated, what topic is appropriate to particular speech events, and how a certain speech act is

to be performed, interpreted and responded to. That is to say, every culture has its typical normal and convention. Some of the common usages cannot be utilized in other situations. Only if we have fully understand the various kinds of cultural backgrounds, can we perform smoothly and effectively in cross-cultural communication.

### 2.3 The Related Research

British Thomas published cross-culture Pragmatic failure in 1983 and she first use the term "pragmatic failure". she think that pragmatic failure occurs at the situation that listener feel differently from the meaning the sparker want to express which may lead the misunderstanding between the speaker and listener and harm their personal relationship and create intense relationship. That is because the grammar mistakes can easily be found by the listener while the pragmatic failures always lead to the listener think the speaker is rude and hold hostile attitude toward him.

In recent year, there are a lot of Chinese scholars started to pay attention to this problems and they published a lots of papers about this topics. Huang Cidong [13] in pragmatics and pragmatic failure first proposed the term "pragmatic failure" and he explain in details about ten categories pragmatic failures but do not give the deep reasons. From then on, Chinese scholar started to probe the reasons and try to give us some strategies to solve the pragmatic failure.

He Ziran & Zhuangyan [2] make a lots of research on pragmatic failure in English teaching. In Chinese students' pragmatic failures in English communication-Chinese and English pragmatic difference survey they make a deep research about 79 teachers' pragmatic failure in communication both in Chinese and English. They found that the both lacking in pragmatic and social communication knowledge can lead to pragmatic failure. They pointed that teachers always make emphasis about grammar and vocabulary and make a lot of practice about listening reading writing and ignore that English is a communication tools, which leads to lots of communication failures. Wang Dexing [14] in pragmatic problems in cross-culture communication mentioned about the pragmatic failure and make this pragmatic problem to cross-culture fields and make cross-culture become a new field in applied linguistics. Hao Qin Hai [15] in Cross -Culture Pragmatic Failures in Advertisements put forward the main reasons

are culture difference about the pragmatic rules, the transfer and generalization of pragmatic meanings, the association meaning difference, and the taboos and values in deferent culture etc. In china, the research on pragmatic can divided into qualitative and quantities research, and they analysis the reasons about the pragmatic failure. Many experts analyze pragmatic failure from both language and non-language prospects which important academic values but I have found that, about the reasons, many researchers confined to culture aspects from theoretical approach and others only analysis the empirical study ignoring the related theories. Thus a combing theoretical and empirical study in needed.

### **3. ANALYSES OF PRAGMATIC FAILURES IN CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION**

In this part, the author wants to give an analysis of pragmatic failures in cross-culture communication, combining both theoretical and empirical study. By reading lots of materials and communicating with foreigners during my intern as a Chinese tutor. And I will give a detail classification about pragmatic failure and analysis the reasons and try to give some suggestions for avoiding pragmatic failure.

#### **3.1 Categories of Expressions of Pragmatic Failure**

From pragmatic failure made by Chinese learners of English, we can conclude several categories of expressions of pragmatic failure:

##### **3.1.1 Pragmatic failure in phatic functions of language**

The "phatic function" refers to language being used for setting up a certain atmosphere or maintaining social contacts (rather than for exchanging information or ideas). Greetings, farewells, and comments on the weather in English and on clothing in Chinese all serve this function. Much of the phatic language is insincere if taken literally, but it is important. If you don't say "Hello" to a friend you meet, or if you don't answer his "Hi", you ruin your friendship. But if we do not know some basic cultural knowledge we may failure in communication. We can see in that example:

A Chinese graduate student asked his classmate from Canada, "Have you solved your personal problem yet?" In this situation, his classmate felt

puzzled and did not know what the Chinese student talked about. In China, when someone asks about somebody else's personal problem, the hearer would realize at once the implied meaning that is to ask if he or she has been married yet. It is common to ask this kind of questions in China while westerners could not understand what "personal problem" is. Even if they understand, it is a question of a person's privacy. Asking in this way would make westerners feel we are rude and impolite. They would respond to the question by asking: "What do you mean?" Obviously, in this case the communication would probably break down due to the cultural difference. Both participants in the conversation would feel unhappy.

##### **3.1.2 Pragmatic failure in invitation**

Some pragmatic failure may happened when we offer invitation which lead to impoliteness just as He Ziran mentioned that "As a social phenomenon, it is common that no matter in whichever group politeness would exist" [16]. Here is an example:

If Chinese people invite their western friends to dinner, they would say: Could you come to dinner on Saturday evening please?

The pragmatic force of the sentence is not all invitation, but a demand. Thus it becomes rather impolite. The right expression should be:

Would you like to come for dinner on Saturday evening?

So, this impolite expression of pragmatic failure violates the politeness principle. As early as in 1950s, Politeness Principle was first put forward by Lakoff. He states that there are two basic pragmatic rules that participants observe in conversation: (1) be dear; (2) be polite. "Be clear" is correspondent with Grice's Manner Maxim while "be polite" seems to be on higher level [17]. An English scholar Leech, is the one who makes a systematic study of politeness principle based on Grice's cooperative principle from the viewpoint of pragmatics.

He defines it as maxims dealing with polite behavior. He indicates that appropriate politeness in a given situation is largely determined by the additive weight of relative status, social distance and ranking of imposition [18].

Underestimation of the actual cost may give the impression that the speaker is rude or intrusive while overestimation will lead to over politeness which is usually interpreted as insincere, sarcastic or flattery or a "too polite" is impolite [19].

### **3.1.3 Pragmatic failure in address forms**

When people communicate to each other they first address each other. The address forms not only show the beginning of the conversation but also show the relationship between each other. In different culture we have different rules about address forms which can show people's social status, age and relationships and so on. But sometimes we may misuse the address term which make our conversation not polite at all.

For example, in china on the bus, a young man gives up his seat to an old lady.

The young man: "Grandma takes my seat, please!"

Old lady: "Thank you very much young boy!"

Or in other situation, Chinese people like to use the term "teacher" to show respect toward teachers.

This kind of thing happens a lot in china, and we can see a harmonious relationship among Chinese. If these things happened in western country, the meaning will shift a lot.

In western country, people rely on the principle that people are born equal, thus they like to call each other's name directly, which suit for people who work in different fields and are in different age period and are in different social status . For example, the child may call his patents name directly which are kind of rude and forbidden in china. Thus people can mistake this in cross-cultural communication. For example, when my students call my name directly in Chinese class, although I know it is their culture I still feel weird.

### **3.1.4 Pragmatic failure in reply for proposal**

For people from different culture, people's reply to a proposal is different. For example, in western country when people ask "do you want to eat something?" you should answer "yes, coffee" or "no, thanks" to reply. But in Chinese culture, the thing seems a little complicated. For example in china when a host receipts his guest:

Host: "do you want some tea?"

Visitor: "it too bothers you, and I am not thirsty."

Host: "it not bothers me at all and taste it, please."

Visitor: "thank you very much and I will drink a small cup!"

From this conversation, we can see that even though Chinese people want to drink tea, he would like to politely refuse one or two times. According Chinese culture, refusing is a kind of respect for others sometimes. Thus, in cross-cultural communication people show adjust the communication methods.

### **3.1.5 Pragmatic failure in greeting and goodbye**

Greeting and goodbye are effective communicate methods. But there are much difference in connotation and denotations in Greeting and goodbye language when express in Chinese and English. If people ignore the difference, it will lead to pragmatic failure in communication. For example, in china when people see each other, they say "have you eaten your food?" "Where do you want to go". The other one may answer " I have eaten my food already" " I go to school "and so on. But if this happened in western country, the meaning changed a lot. In western country, it is impolite. In western country, when you ask somebody "have you eaten?"They may think you want to invite them to dinner and ask somebody "where do you go" it is offence to others' privacy. When Chinese people express goodbye they'd like to say "walk slowly" "be careful" but when foreigners heard that they are unhappy they may answer in their heart "mind your own business and I know how to walk to my home". Communication is an effective way to promote relationships, but if we do not understand the culture difference we may make things mess.

### **3.1.6 Pragmatic failure in apology**

Apology is an important way to remedy what we have done wrong in the process of communication and it can effectively recover the contaminated relationship. How to apology to others and how to accept apology is very important in cross-cultural communication. Some apology words can make sense in both Chinese and English language. But others are not. For example "对不起" has actually two connotations in English. One is "sorry" which is used for when we hurt others intentionally, like "I am sorry to over you". The other is "excuse me" which is used for when we have to disturb others, like

"Excuse me, where is the library?" we Chinese people sometimes do wrong in cross-cultural conversation when we disturb others talking by saying "I am sorry to waste your time!" In this occasion, foreigners may get confused and keep wonder why they are waste time for helping you.

### **3.2 Reasons for Pragmatic Failure**

The pragmatic failure may result from a lot of aspects like knowledge in language and knowledge in social aspects and our cultural concept and our ethnical principle and so on. Here are the reasons that I found out:

#### **3.2.1 Lack of knowledge**

##### *3.2.1.1 Lack of linguistic knowledge*

Highly conventionalized usage often includes some useful expressions, verb phrases and so on, but no idioms or phrases which fall into the category of culture. For example, it is said that a Chinese student who studied in America was sitting by the window reading a book. Suddenly he heard somebody shouting: Look out! He looked out of the window at once to see what had happened. At the moment, a board dropped almost onto his head. He looked up and found somebody was repairing the roof. The man said: "didn't you hear me call 'look out'?" The Chinese student answered: "Yes, and that's what I did". "Look out" is a verb phrase and it not only means "look out of windows" but also means "be careful".

##### *3.2.1.2 Lack of culture knowledge*

Here, culture discussed in this section is restricted to psychological respect. Language is part of culture and is the carrier and container of culture. Language and culture weave together. When we think of communication among humans, we automatically think of language. What's more, culture, itself, can be considered "all interacting set of communication". Consequently, it is crucial importance that people from different cultural environments appreciate and tolerate behavior, non-verbal attitudes, values, customs and worldviews. If such tolerance is not achieved, there would probably be cross-cultural communication failure.

#### **3.2.2 Pragmatic transfer**

By transfer we usually mean that the process of using knowledge of the first language in learning

a second language. Odlin [20] summarizes that there are two factors affecting linguistic transfer: structural factors and nonstructural factors. Structural factor includes the relationship between forms and functions in language, such as phonetics, syntax. Nonstructural factor refers to all factors in extra linguistic knowledge such as cultures, social norms, and values. This is what scholars later call pragmatic transfer.

#### **3.2.3 Lack of cultural literacy**

What we call cultural literacy includes literary taste, moral culture and other culture aspects in establishing oneself and getting along with people in the world. In cross-cultural communication, the most ordinary phenomenon is that one party does not know appalling things or famous people the other party talks about. Consequently, their conversation cannot go on. For example, "乐山笑迎四方客" was translated into: "Smiles in Leshan City greet cubic visitors". Even if we do not discuss the word "smile" because it cannot be used as the subject in this sentence and smile cannot greet visitors. The word "cubic" also makes foreign people confused. Foreigners do not know what the utterance really means. The Chinese "四方客" indicates visitors coming from all directions. People who make such sort of mistakes are really lack of literal taste.

#### **3.2.4 Different ethnical principles**

Ethnical principles decide that what we can say during a conversation. In our daily life we use ethnical principles to judge what is appropriate and what not. If we ignore the difference in ethnical principles we may do a mess in cross-cultural communication. We Chinese people our ethnical principle are affected by confusions' traditional ideas. The core part of confusions is about politeness which reflected in how we treat others. For example, when others praise Chinese people, they always show our humble through self-deprecation. Thus, western people distort our intentions.

### **3.3 Suggestions for Pragmatic Failure**

How to avoid pragmatic failures? We need to do the following steps:

#### **3.3.1 Cultivation of cross-cultural awareness**

The diversities and distinctions of culture demand that communicators should be sensitive

to cultural awareness. Nowadays people have understood and recognized the importance of influence of culture on people's thinking pattern and behaviors. It is essentially necessary to cultivate and improve people's cultural awareness. Cross-cultural awareness can be considered as a process of attitudinally internalizing "insights about those common understandings held by groups that dictate the predominant values, attitudes, beliefs, and outlooks of individual" [21]. It is a particular way of thinking, a criterion for judgment or an acute sensitivity, to cultural elements consciously or unconsciously cultivated by the communicators. It acts as a guideline to people's thinking and behavior. From the perspective of Hanvey [22], cross-cultural awareness can be integrated into three levels: Awareness of superficial cultural traits; awareness of significant and subtle cultural traits that contrast markedly with another's; and awareness of how another culture feels from the insider's perspective. The first level is the understanding of another culture based mainly on stereotypes. The second level of cross-cultured awareness shows how significant and subtle cultural traits differ sharply from others' through direct or indirect experience. The third level of cross-cultural awareness requires the ability to see culture from an insider's perspective.

### **3.3.2 Improvement of pragmatic competence**

Cross-cultural communication competence is the ability to respect, tolerate and integrate cultural differences. In other words, people with cross-cultural competence know how to elicit a desired response in interactions and to fulfill their own communication goals by respecting and affirming the worldview and cultural identities of the interactions. Good cross-cultural competence factors can lead to effective cross-cultural communication. In general, cross-cultural competence factors are the skills and qualities associated with successful outcomes in a cross-cultured context as usual. Participants should understand and tell the different functions of different cultures, which can help them, find out the causes of pragmatic failures. Meanwhile, it is also very useful for communicators to pay attention to and accumulate different cultural backgrounds, social norms and other materials, so that they can have a better result when communicating with people from other cultures. Furthermore, communicators should be familiar with the daily lives of different people to make a solid foundation in communication.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

People with diverse and various cultural backgrounds come together with different values thought patterns social norms and so forth. The world has become a prominent setting for cross-cultural contact and felt substantial impact of cultural diversity.

This thesis mainly analyzes pragmatic failures and clarifies the significance of successful. Firstly, it analyzes some basic theoretical definition of culture and communication, which is mainly reflected in values, world views, knowledge of culture and cultural contexts. Then, it gives some important principles which we need to obey in the cross-cultural communication for avoiding some embarrassing situation and wrong understanding which may result in pragmatic failures. The most important part of this thesis is about classifications, expressions, reasons of pragmatic failure alongside with the effective strategies to avoid pragmatic failure.

Learning in pragmatic failure in Chinese-English cross-cultural also contributes a lot to language teaching. Since you have already known how a successful communication is formed and how to avoid unnecessary errors in the process of language learning, you would handle a butcher's cleaver skillfully.

## **COMPETING INTERESTS**

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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