

# Analysis of Pragmatic Failure in Cross-Cultural Communication

-- A Case Study of Business English Majors

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**Abstract:** In this work, focusing on pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication, taking 5 business English majors as respondents, and using a case study of five mock questions for cross-cultural communication scenarios, to explore the pragmatic failure between these respondents. Pragmatic failure can be divided into pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure. Although respondents master the basic knowledge of cross-cultural, it's inevitable for them to use the Chinese way of thinking when interacting with foreigners, so that they are prone to have pragmatic failures. To avoid business English majors having the pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication and improve their cross-cultural pragmatic competence, it needs both students and teachers endeavor to do.

**Keywords:** Cross-cultural communication, Pragmatic failure, Business English, Course.

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## 1. Introduction

Cross-cultural communication, namely the communication between people with different linguistic and cultural background. Because of these differences, people are prone to have pragmatic failures in cross-cultural communication. Pragmatic failure, proposed by the British linguist Thomas [1], means "the inability to understand 'what is meant by what is said'". In addition, according to the root of pragmatic failure, Thomas divided it into pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure.

Pragmalinguistic failure, refers to the mistakes caused by improper use of language in practical application, which can be manifested as mistakes in vocabulary, grammar, syntax, expression and so on.

Sociopragmatic failure, is the differences in social norms and social language caused by the diversity in cultural background and cognitive habits between the communicators. Sociopragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication is mainly manifested in greeting, saying goodbye, inviting, refusing, praise, address these six aspects.

Du [2] explored the causes of pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication. The causes respectively are culture difference, lack of context considerations, lack of cultural knowledge and identity. Except laying special stress on analyzing the reasons, many scholars, such as Gao, Li and Cai, focused on the strategies to avoid pragmatic failure. They attached great importance to teaching domain, through analyzing the pragmatic failure between students. According to Gao (2000), for avoiding pragmatic failure, it's crucial for teacher to cultivate students' pragmatic competence. There are similar findings as Gao, Li [3] proposed that teachers should approximately introduce some useful knowledge of pragmatics and develop students' adaptability towards cross-cultural communication. Cai [4] thought it is also meaningful to use pragmatic theory to guide college English teaching, for improving college students' intercultural communication competence and pragmatic competence.

Recent years, there are also some scholars exploring the pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication, based on business English background. Compared with the causes of pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication, the causes of that based on business English are somewhat different. According to Wang and Zheng [5], the different causes are the confusion of English and Chinese expressions, a difference in value. According to Deng [6], the causes also are ignoring adaptation to language users and adaptation to the social world, through Adaptation Theory. Shao [7] focused on exploring strategies for avoiding pragmatic failure, proposed the significance to enhance cross-cultural pragmatic awareness and sensitivity.

There are many papers explored students' pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication. But few scholar took business English majors as survey objects, and explored their pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication, based on the background of business English. So in this paper, through a case study of five mock questions for cross-cultural communication scenarios, choosing five business English students at a college from Canton to finish this case study. Hence, exploring the pragmatic failure among them, and give recommendations to business English students, college teaching of cross-cultural communication.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Respondents

Choosing five business English students from a college in Canton as respondents. They are all juniors who have passed CET-4, so they have a good foundation of English. And they have finished the English for Exhibition and Conference course (it refers to the knowledge of cross-cultural communication) taught by the same teacher.

### 2.2. Research method

Using a case study of five mock questions for cross-cultural communication scenarios. The reference to the design of these questions came from the papers of Li, Cai and Deng,

and also the book *the English for Exhibition and Conference*.

Collecting the data by recording the oral communications of these five students, and converted these audio dialogues into text for deeply analyzing.

### 2.3. Brief description of the case study

The focuses on these five mock questions in this case study are different.

Based on cross-cultural communication, they respectively are:

1. Question 1 focuses on an examination of greetings and language of concern.
2. Question 2 focuses on an examination of the pragmatic principle, based on business English.
3. Question 3 focuses on an examination of responding to thanks from the client.
4. Question 4 focuses on an examination of leave-takings.
5. Question 5 focuses on an examination of acquiring the knowledge of social distance, relative rights and obligation

## 3. Results

According to the converted text, finding that these five students had the pragmatic failure inevitably during the cross-cultural communication. Meanwhile, the pragmatic failure was divided into pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure to analyze.

### 3.1. Pragmalinguistic failure in the case study

In question 2, during a business negotiation, when respondents needed to express they could offer a 12% discount to their client, 3 out of 5 students used the first person to express the sentence, namely "We can give you a 12% discount." This expression is improper in business occasions. It is a reflection of pragmalinguistic failure. The remaining two used the second person, namely "You can get a 12% discount."

In question 3, after the client accepted the offer, he expressed gratitude for the warm reception. Respondents needed to respond to his thanks. Only one student mentioned "That's my job!" in the conversation, which is a pragmalinguistic failure. The remaining students expressed the sentence similar to "It's my pleasure." And they also added a sentence that showed a good vision, for instance, "Looking forward to the next cooperation."

### 3.2. Sociopragmatic failure in the case study

In question 1, examining greetings and language of concern, when receiving a foreign client in the airport. 4 out of 5 students had the same sociopragmatic failure. When they expressed the language of concern towards the client who had a long flight, their expressions were similar to "Welcome! It's tired for the long flight." The remaining student chose to express as "Welcome to China! I think you must have seen many beautiful scenery along the way." But this sentence contained a grammatical error, which was that "scenery" is an uncountable noun.

Before starting the case study, it was assumed that these students would also have sociopragmatic failure in question 4 & 5. But the result was, they all did well in these questions.

In question 4, when they said their farewell towards their superior to leave the party, they all expressed their thanks for this enjoyable party appropriately, such as "I'm very happy at the party today.", or "Thank you very much for holding this party." And they also genuinely expressed their reason for

leaving the party, such as "It's getting a little late now, I'm sorry to have to go."

In question 5, when they wanted to have a conversation with their superior, they kept their words from being too humble or too casual. They expressed the sentence similar to "Can I have a conversation with you, Mr. Green?", or "Mr. Green, do you have time now?"

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. The reasons for pragmatic failure among respondents

#### 4.1.1. Reasons for pragmalinguistic failure

In question 2, 3 out of 5 students used first person to express the sentence, namely "We can give you a 12% discount.". But the meaning of this sentence is to give the client a commitment that he can get such a discount. So generally speaking, it is better to use second person to let the client feel that he is taken seriously during the negotiation. The correct expression is "You can get a 12% discount." However, it is so usual that using first person to express our commitments or demands in Chinese context. So the respondents are influenced by this Chinese pragmatic principle, and use it habitually in English context.

In question 3, just one student mentioned "That's my job!", when the client expressed his thanks for the warm reception. It made the foreign client misunderstand the student and feel awkward, because this sentence seemed that the student was loath to accompany him. Actually, this student was intended to express the client didn't need to show his appreciation, as accompanying him was what this student should do. And It was a pleasure. So the student had a mistake in terms of expression, which meant it made the foreign client feel a negative attitude.

#### 4.1.2. The reasons for sociopragmatic failure among respondents

In question 1, 4 out of 5 students had the same sociopragmatic failure, when they saw that the client had a long flight. Their expressions were all similar to "Welcome! It's tired for the long flight." This expression made the foreign client feel a little uncomfortable, because it seemed that he was sickly or burned out easily. But it is ordinary to emphasize the "hard" on the trip for more than 10 hours, to express the gratitude for coming in Chinese context. So it's the difference of norms of communications between China and Abroad. The suitable expression to foreigners is "Welcome! Did you have a nice trip?", which let them feel delighted. Just like Deng said, students ignored the adaptation to the social word, so that applying Chinese norms of communications directly towards the foreign client.

For question 4 to 5, surprisingly, there were no sociopragmatic failures during their conversations. It showed that they had a good grasp of leave-takings and the knowledge of social distance, relative rights and obligation. Therefore, the five business majors have a good command of some knowledge of cross-cultural communication.

### 4.2. The advice to business majors and college teaching of cross-cultural communication

#### 4.2.1. The advice to business majors

Through the analysis for reasons of pragmatic failure among these business majors, it can be preliminary concluded that they use Chinese communicative thinking inevitably

during the cross-cultural communications. Although it caused that they had pragmatic failure in the case study, they have an overall understanding of cross-cultural communication to help them finish this case study. Hence, for business majors, there are five suggestions to avoid pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication, namely to improve their cross-cultural pragmatic failure.

1) Learn Western cultural background knowledge and values

Business majors in the case study had the pragmatic failure, which is largely due to unfamiliarity with the cultural differences between China and West. They are more familiar with Chinese culture, ignoring some expressions that are not suitable in West context. So it's essential for business majors to know Western cultural background knowledge and values. Students can learn them through Business English Journal, the courses of Cross-cultural Communication In Business, online articles and videos.

2) Use cultural empathy strategies

Using cultural empathy strategies, is to put yourself in the other's shoes, to feel their culture and choose appropriate expressions towards them. So business majors are required to consider the other person's cultural background, exchanging their Chinese way of thinking when they start a communication with foreigners, to avoiding the embarrassment happened between each other.

3) Use pragmatic principles correctly

Undoubtedly, in cross-cultural business communication, it's necessary to use pragmatic principles of business English to adapt this business occasion. As Wang & Zheng said[5], it requires business majors to temporarily abandon the use of their mother tongue and the way of thinking developed in the use of mother tongue. Thinking and expressing in the language environment of business English. This action will make students more acquaint with business English communication environment, improving their ability to accept business English. Thereby, letting them smoothly complete negotiations in business occasions.

4) Create a native-speaker environment

To quickly acquaint with communication environment, the best way is talking with the native-speakers. The words they choose, the expressions they use, all these are natural. When making a conversation with them, it's a direct way to feel how they speak, how they answer, and trying to imitate their native expressions. In this way, helping students know how to communicate with foreigners. Business majors can take part in the school's English corner, and direct contact with foreign teachers, to improve their competence of cross-cultural communication.

5) Participate in BEC level examination

BEC level examination, for business majors, to examine the ability of them to use English in business and general life environment. Students can learn a lot of business English knowledge and skills by preparing this examination. Especially, the speaking portion lets students practice their ability to cope in business situations, to improve their expression ability towards cross-cultural communication, so that helping them avoiding pragmatic failure based on Business English.

#### **4.2.2. The advice to college teaching of cross-cultural communication**

In addition to the student's own active learning to avoid pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication, college also need provide directional guidance to business majors, to

help them improve cross-cultural pragmatic competence.

1) Introduce pragmatic knowledge to students appropriately

To help business majors avoid pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communications, as Li said [3], teachers should appropriately introduce some practical and commonly used pragmatic knowledge combined with oral examples, based on traditional language teaching. The pragmatic knowledge includes "Cooperative Principle", "Face Theory", "Politeness Principle" and so on. These theories and principles assist students in understanding the concept of pragmatics, learning how to achieve good communication effect. Thus, improving their pragmatic competence.

2) Strengthen the introduction of target language culture

Even taking courses in cross-cultural communication, business majors are still more used to thinking in Chinese way when they have a conversation with foreigners. Hence, it's essential for teachers to enhance students' cross-cultural awareness. As Yuan said[8], this needs teachers to introduce foreign culture during the classes. By assigning homework of reading extra-curricular materials related to target language culture, to let students have an overall understanding. By showing English films or educational films, to lead students to pay attention to and accumulate the materials of background culture, social customs and social relations. It will make them gradually accept the way of thinking of the target language country, and use this thinking in cross-cultural communication.

3) Use a variety of communication activities

Teachers should let business majors practice in a specific cross-cultural communication. So during a class, teachers can arrange students into small groups, and students can do role play, pair work and group work together, to have actual oral communications. When they present their work, teachers are required to give feedback promptly. For example, teachers point out pragmatic failure from students, and explain the causes. Finally, it's crucial to give advice to fix the failure. So teachers need have good cross-cultural pragmatic competence, so that they can better guide students.

## **5. Conclusion**

The number of respondents under the case study is small, so this paper is a preliminary study of pragmatic failures of business English majors in cross-cultural communications. According to this case study, business English majors have a preliminary understanding of cross-cultural knowledge, but they need learn more knowledge of pragmatics and foreign culture to improve their cross-cultural pragmatic competence. Meanwhile, college teachers also are required to guide students to know how to solve the problems encountered in cross-cultural communications and make the communications smooth.

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