

# Pragmatic Failures in Social Network Communication as Learning Tool

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## Abstract

This paper aims to present an exploratory analysis of pragmatic failures in communicators' language and literacy practices in Facebook as an example of social network in English. The goals of the current study is twofold: One, to bring attention to pragmatic failures, by drawing on corpora in Facebook as well as analyzing them, so as to arouse concern from English education authorities in China; Two, to propose practical measures and strategies to solve this problem, hoping to provide some insight to the issue at hand.

**Key words:** Pragmatic Failure, Facebook, Pragmatic Competence, Pragmatic approach

## Introduction:

In the practical use of language, it's difficult to define the true meaning of some utterances out of context. For example, in "It's cold here", the speaker may refer to the fact that it's cold there; maybe he is suggesting to turn on the heating; or perhaps he is proposing to leave for another place. Only in the context can people infer its real meaning and the speaker's intention. Up till now it has been widely accepted that pragmatics is the study of speaker's meaning (Yule, 1996). Pragmatics is a subfield of linguistics which studies the ways in which context contributes to meaning. Pragmatics encompasses speech act theory, conversational implicature, talk in interaction and other approaches to language behavior in philosophy, sociology, linguistics and anthropology (Mey, 2001). Pragmatics distinguishes two intentions of meanings in each communicative act of verbal communication. One is the informative intention or the sentence meaning, and the other the communicative intention or speaker meaning (Leech, 1983; Sperber & Wilson, 1986).

In the context of globalization, interacting with native English speakers in appropriate ways socially and culturally is of utmost importance. Unfortunately, owing to the difficulties

in teaching pragmatics and culture, some unnatural English learning methods and lacking of real English communicative environment, most English learners in Chinese schools develop a habit of literally transforming what's in their minds in Chinese into English mechanically, which sometimes hampers cross-cultural communication with information-recipients' misunderstanding or even negative feelings. British linguist Jenny Thomas (1983: p91) first proposed the concept of pragmatic failure to refer to "the inability to understand what is meant by what is said". Thomas noted that pragmatic failure has occurred on any occasion (1983: p94) on which H(the hearer) perceives the force of S's(the speaker's) utterance as other than S intended he or she should perceive it. She further categorized pragmatic failure into two types: pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure. The former is closely linked with language itself, referring to the situations that learners unconsciously transfer native expression into English ignoring their pragmatic meaning, or using other inappropriate expressions of the target language. While the latter, sociopragmatic failure, in contrast to pragmalinguistic failure, is linked closely with culture. It involves lacking of awareness of the conventions and the socio-cultural norms of the target language, such as not knowing the appropriate registers and topics or taboos governing the target language community.

### **Misunderstanding caused by pragmatic failures in cross-cultural communication**

As second-language learners, due to the influence and interference of their deeply-rooted rules and norms in source language, Chinese English learners frequently violate some pragmatic principles unconsciously in real-life language use. Especially in certain specific daily speech occasions, such as greetings, compliments, making farewells, apologies, refusals and requests, pragmatic failures between English learners and native speakers are very common, even inevitable on some occasions.

Let's have a look of the following examples.

(Talking to a female old teacher from English): Teacher Margaret, How old are you? You look young and beautiful.

There are three kinds of pragmatic failures here. First of all, teacher can't be used together with a person's name according to pragmatic principles of English salutation. Furthermore, it violates western culture and social etiquettes to inquire into the age of an

English old woman. Finally, giving a compliment to an old lady about her appearance doesn't show her respect, it may be taken as an offence instead.

A: Is this coffee sugared?

B: I don't think so. Does it taste as if it is?

In this dialogue, by using a general question A expressed a certain illocutionary force, i.e., the language function of blaming at the same time of inquiring, which means you forgot to add sugar to the coffee. B only gets a one-sided understanding of A's implication and answers A's inquiry, neglecting A's blaming. Undoubtedly his answer will confuse A, for his communicative intention of asking B to add sugar to the coffee isn't satisfied. This kind of pragmatic failure can be attributed to one-sided understanding and fragmentation of language functions.

When interacting with native English-speakers, Chinese English learners instinctively answer people's greetings in denial with humble words to show their modesty according to Chinese customs. They inquire into their communicators' privacy such as age, marital status, address, income and other sensitive issues, which results in their native-English communicator's misunderstanding and embarrassment,

To solve this dilemma, it is necessary to promote a balanced approach between language knowledge and language skills, so that learners not only learn about English, but also learn how to use their knowledge in interactive situations.

In real communications, oral or written, people normally try to understand not only what the words mean, but what the writer or speaker of those words intend to convey, which is the 'intended speaker meaning' in pragmatics (Yule, 1985: p127) .

## **Main types of pragmatic failures and reasons**

Nowadays educators and language teachers are increasingly interested in the effects of social media on college students in their language acquisition, with a specific focus on the most popular social media website-Facebook. Recent years witnessed social networking tools becoming part of human daily work and conversation, and language excerpted from Facebook, MySpace and Orkut becomes reliable real-life data. More and more Chinese students become faithful users of Facebook as their communication tool with their friends in English.

The following are conversation examples from Facebook, and analysis is made on different kinds of pragmatic failure.

(1)

Garcia: Long day...Jesus makes things so hard on me.

Beth: Doesn't he? But it's for the best, just keep him in your heart and keep praying gurl... It will get better. Jesus works in mysterious ways....

Garcia: Beth, Jesus is my 14 year old son, he was suspended from school for punching a janitor again.

In this example, Beth misunderstood Garcia due to his lack of common sense by taking Jesus as the God, not realizing Jesus is a common boy's name in South America. So, pragmatic failure takes place.

(2)

Fan: Well done, Alkhatib. Thank you for your goal and assists in the match against Liaoning Hongyun. You are the best. Come on, Alkhatib. Come on Shanghai Shenhua.

Alkhatib: Thank you. But I did my job.

Cultural difference leads to pragmatic failure in this communication. Alkhatib didn't have a good command of English language and culture, so when the fan expressed appreciation and compliments and cheered him up, he awkwardly added "But I did my job." This intercultural pragmatic failure lies in differences in cultural mental representation. On such a specific occasion where one party praises the other's performance and hopes the other party to thank back to express acceptance, the addressee shows it's what he's supposed to do to show modesty out of requirements of his cultural mental representation. It's a typical sociopragmatic failure.

(3)

Floor Host: And wait for untethered iOS 5.0?! Oh sorry I am too slow thinking English :/ lol

Atif Mohammed Saleed: SHSH can not be saved on iOS 5.

Floor Host: 什么时候出 4.3.5 完美? 5.0 is bad.

Cydia & Jailbreak Help: 4.3.5 is not perfect - there is no untether jb for it - 5.0 is good???? But also no untether.

Floor Host: sorry my English is not good, but 5.0 have many bug? It is not very good for i4?

Besides many lexical and grammatical mistakes, the floor host used Chinglish in “but 5.0 have many bug?” which is a kind of pragmalinguistic failure.

(4)

朱思谨: Aniki, your fans in China they really want to talk to you, because of some Internet problem, they cant use facebook. But there is something like twitter in China, called Microblogging. Please, aniki, they really want to talk to you, if you want to use it, when I use computer, I can teach you how to use it. Oh please, aniki! Your fans in China really want to talk to you!

Billy Herrington: I’m gonna check it out for sure! Thank. Please tell everyone I said Hello!

In this interaction, the Chinese fan, Zhu is very enthusiastic in introducing the warm welcome Billy Herrington receives in China and asks him to use Microblogging to communicate with Chinese fans. There is obvious misuse of borrowing the structure and expression in Chinese. Moreover, Zhu ignores westerners’ cherish of their privacy and individual rights in urging and even forcing Billy Herrington to learn to use some social network he is unfamiliar with. To make matters worse, Zhu ventures to propose teaching Billy Herrington to use it, ignorant of the latter’s opinion. From perspective of pragmatics, this example belongs to pragmatic failure, which is caused by differences in culture and value.

### **Pragmatic approaches and measures to take in foreign language teaching to avoid pragmatic failure**

In cross-cultural communications people with different cultural backgrounds often encounter misunderstanding between each other even though they find little difficulties in understanding the literal meaning of their utterances.

As discussed in the above instances, pragmatic failure refers to the mistake that causes the breakdown of human speech communication. As a vital importance subject in pragmatics, it is of urgent significance to the teaching of foreign language in China. Online social networks such as Facebook store large amounts of user data and provide chances for

people from all over the world to communicate and share views and feelings. At the same time, they offer a platform for Chinese students to obtain first-hand English material and practise their English with native speakers freely and conveniently.

Thomas (1983) holds that in speech communication he who makes mistakes in grammar or diction would be regarded as “not speak well” at worst, while he would be labeled as “not behave well” if he violates pragmatic principles and causes pragmatic failure. The man/woman who does not handle utterances according to pragmatic principles would be viewed as an insincere, deliberately deceptive or ill-disposed person. Hence the failure of cross-cultural communication is unavoidable. Pragmatic competence does not improve naturally with the increase of human language knowledge.

As far as Chinese students who speak English are concerned, they can be understood and pardoned for their grammatical or diction mistakes in communication. On the contrary, if pragmatic failures occur, it is most likely that communicative atmosphere be spoiled in communicative failure.

It has been over a century since China launched foreign language teaching in large scale. During its development there are inevitably ups and downs, the implementation of English education for all people has flourished for long, which is a great progress under the background of global economy. The importance of English teaching is self-evident. A review of empirical research into the effects of formal instruction on SLA has indicated that although instruction has no apparent effect on the sequence of development and very little on the order of development, it does have relative utility where the rate/success of SLA is concerned (Ellis: p229). Different teaching approaches such as translation method, direct method, audio-lingual method, situational method, cognitive method, communicative method, task-based language teaching approach are adopted and practiced by teachers directed to different groups of English learners. The other side of the coin is that traditional view of language dominates foreign language teachers and learners for a long time and traditional teaching approaches prevail. Under the influence foreign language teachers lay emphasis on the teaching of language inner constructive system and demand learners to memorize large quantities of vocabulary and grammar rules. Hence English learners have a good command of English language foundation and achieve high scores in all kinds of examinations. What makes teachers and learners embarrassed is that in real verbal communication environment

Chinese learners show level and ability in English mastery not conforming to their solid English foundation. The frequent occurrences of pragmatic failures in communication between Chinese learners and native-English speakers are closely connected with the long-cherished emphasis on linguistic competence on the part of teachers and learners. Therefore, it is necessary to adopt the pragmatic theories to help develop learners' pragmatic ability and increase their communicative competence in the teaching and learning of foreign languages.

Concretely speaking, to solve the problem of learners' weak communicative ability and high frequency of pragmatic failures, it's worthwhile to try some new measures and strategies in English teaching and learning.

### **Adjust curriculum, bringing pragmatic knowledge into teaching plan**

The study conducted by Chinese foreign language teaching researcher Honggang (1991) shows that the pragmatic competence of freshmen and senior college students are of minor difference. In order to alter this circumstance, the priority should be placed on adjustment of curriculum, adding courses concerning history, culture as well as culture differences in China and English countries. Pragmatic knowledge being included in the teaching plan enables learners to comprehend differences in culture between source language and target language and better grasp culture-related concepts and guiding principles, effectively reducing the probability of occurrence of pragmatic failures in communication. English teachers and learners should cultivate and increase their pragmatic consciousness.

### ***Take attempt to change teaching philosophy and improve classroom teaching mode***

To change teaching philosophy means teachers realize language competence and culture competence complement each other and are indispensable of one another. Teachers are to instruct culture at the same time of teaching language. They are supposed to direct learners to master communicative competence, digesting and learning to apply "when and what to say, when not to speak and when and where and how and to whom to speak" (Hymes, 1972: p227). In his theory of communicative competence, the American linguistic-anthropologist Dell Hymes (1972) holds that culture consciousness and nurturance contribute greatly to communicative competence. Only when language acquisition and culture acquisition are synchronized will learners be able to obtain what Hymes called "communicative competence".

To improve classroom teaching mode refers to transform cramming teaching into communicative language teaching. Teachers not only play the role of knowledge instructor but also serve as the organizer, supervisor and enlightenment booster of teaching activities.

To be specific, in discourse teaching, grammar teaching and in vocabulary teaching, due attention should be paid to pragmatic elements respectively. Attaching importance to discourse teaching is to educate learners not to neglect the significance of context in communication. Teachers should integrate pragmatic knowledge into grammar teaching. In vocabulary teaching, different registers of English words in English and Chinese as well as their cultural connotations should be put emphasis on, such as the words individualism, privacy, independence, etc. Furthermore, teachers should go out of the way to explain the associative implications of certain words as sea, castle, nightingale and shepherd on the part of English people by comparison between English and Chinese.

### ***Launch diverse second classroom and after extracurricular activities***

It's comparatively easy to instruct and accept pragmatic knowledge, whereas there is no magic wand to grasp and skillfully apply it in cross-cultural communication. Consequently besides adjusting curriculum, changing teaching philosophy and improving classroom teaching mode, authorities and institutions should further launch diverse second classroom and after extracurricular activities to strengthen drills in practical application. For instance, educators and teachers should intentionally study pragmatic theories and use them as guidance in their teaching. Both teachers and learners should read popular journals and references with sense of times concerning politics, economy, history, culture, religion and local customs in English countries to enlarge the range of knowledge so as to diminish the influence of cultural differences on language. In addition, carrying out "English corner" activity with foreign language teachers as hosts helps a lot in improving learners' cross-cultural consciousness and pragmatic competence. Finally, emergence of many social network sites and tools provide English learners with good access to large amount of English corpus data, which learners have already taken advantage of.

## **Conclusion**

Instances of pragmatic failure prevail everywhere between English communicators

because of factors such as negative cultural transfer, lack of pragmatic competence, cultural conflict, short of English communication chance, etc. The fundamental aim of foreign language teaching and learning is nothing but teach learners how to succeed in communicating in the target foreign language. To carry out research on pragmatic failure contributes to cultivating learners' pragmatic competence to improve the learners' integrated ability of using foreign language in communication.

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