A Study on English Majors' Pragmatic Failure in Speech Act of Requests

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Abstract

There are few previous studies on interlanguage pragmatic failure in terms of speech act of requests. To bridge this gap, this study intends to investigate the pragmatic failures of English majors focusing on the speech act of requests. This paper investigated 30 English majors through questionnaire with Discourse Completion Discourse (DCT). After having reviewed the results of questionnaire, the present study has discussed the reasons causing these pragmatic failures based on Bardovi-Harlig's pragmatic input and Verschueren's adaptability of context, and provided some suggestions to help EFL learners avoid making pragmatic failure.

Keywords

Speech act of requests, pragmatic failure, context adaptation.

1. Introduction

Pragmatic failure, for one reason or another, often occurs in social interaction, especially in interlanguage. Interlanguage is a transitional language between the mother tongue and the target language. Here, interlanguage means Chinese EFL (English as Foreign Language) learners' English. A good many studies have researched interlanguage pragmatic failure (Chen, 1996; Hua, 2000), contrastive analyses on speech act of request between Chinese and English (Zhang & Wang, 1997), and contrastive analyses in terms of strategies (Ling, 2003; Yao & Qiu, 2003; Wu, 2017). However, there are few studies on interlanguage pragmatic failure in terms of speech act of requests. It is seems that interlanguage only exists in English learners who are not in English major or whose English proficiency performs not well. But it is not the case at all. It is true that English majors also use interlanguage, and also make errors in result of pragmatic failure, even thought they have passed TEM-8.

To bridge this gap, this study intends to investigate the pragmatic failures of English majors focusing on the speech act of requests, to illustrate the reasons causing these pragmatic failures based on Bardovi-Harlig's (2001) pragmatic input and Verschueren's (1999) adaptability of context, and to provide some suggestions to help EFL learners avoid making pragmatic failure.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Speech Act Theory

Historically, speech act studies originate in the philosophy of language. The basic insights offered by the work of the philosophers are based on the assumption that the minimal units of human communication are not linguistic expressions, but rather the performance of certain kinds of acts, such as making statement, asking questions, apologizing, requesting.

Speech Act Theory, proposed by John Austin, suggests that linguistic communication is composed of a succession of acts. Language is used to do things, to perform acts. A speaker, when speaking, is performing three acts simultaneously, i.e. locutionary act, illocutionary act

and perlocutionary act (Austin, 1962). The three speech acts manifest the whole process of doing something. A speaker says something, and then the hearer perceives the speaker's intention through literal meaning, accordingly, there will be some performance or act after the hearer recognizing the speaker's intention.

2.2. Speech Act of Requests

It seems that Austin's Speech Act Theory comprehensively illustrated the process from language to act, while some issues were not addressed by Austin. In the post-Austinian age, many linguists attempted to improve and systematize the Speech Act Theory. Searle (1976) points out six weaknesses of Austin's classification of illocutionary speech acts, and put forwards his taxonomy of illocutionary speech acts: 1) assertives/representatives, 2) directives, 3) commissives, 4) expressives, 5) declarations. This paper's topic is connected to directives that means the speaker attempting to get the hearer to do something. The directives involve request, advise, order, demand, etc.

Leech (1983) classifies illocutionary behaviors into four categories according to the interrelationship between illocutionary functions and the social goal of maintaining good interpersonal relationships in language, namely, competitive and convivial, collaborative and conflictive. Among them, the request speech act belongs to the competition category, which is "impolite" or "disrespectful" in nature, because as long as the speaker wants the hearer to do something according to his wishes, no matter how polite he is, the relationship between the speaker's intended purpose and the polite behavior is always discordant, and there is a competitive relationship between them. In Brown and Levinson's (1987) face theory framework, "requests" are face-threatening acts (FTAs) that threaten the hearer's negative face needs (negative face want). Negative face means that every member of society hopes that his behavior will not be interfered by others, or that others will not force him to do what he does. Humankind, however, neglects the nature of requests in usual, thus pragmatic failures occur.

2.3. Pragmatic Failure

Jenny Thomas (1983), who first put forward the concept of pragmatic failure, defines it as "the inability to understand what is meant by what is said". Thomas' definition is from the perspective of the hearer, and yet Chen Guangwei (1996) redefines pragmatic failure in the light of the speaker from two levels. If the words used by the speaker cannot convey the meaning and reference he/she wants to express (the first level), and if the sentences he utters are ungrammatical or irregular and cannot express the illocutionary force he wants to express (the second level), the hearer will misunderstand the speaker's intentions and cause communication glitches. Thus pragmatic failure occurs.

Linguistic competence is composed of grammatical competence and pragmatic competence (Thomas, 1983). Grammatical competence refers to such abstract knowledge as language, intonation, semantics and syntax, etc. While pragmatic competence has nothing with language form, in terms of conventions. Therefore, there are two kinds of pragmatic failures: pragmalinguistic failure and social-pragmatic failure. In cross-cultural communication, if nonnative speakers cannot use the correct or appropriate target language to accurately express the intention or illocutionary force of the discourse, pragmatic errors will occur. Such errors are called pragmalinguistic failure. On the other hand, the differences in cultural conventions and values between the two sides of the conversation often lead to mistakes in the choice of language form. This type of error is called a social-pragmatic failure. Social-pragmatic failure, for the speaker utters non-conventional words or expressions. This paper focus on social-pragmatic failure, for the all the participants are English Majors whose grammatical competences are comparatively higher than those EFL of non-English Majors.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Due to the geographical and academical limitation, this paper investigated 30 undergraduates and postgraduates of English majors from Nanning Normal University. Ten of them have passed the Test for English Majors-Band 8 (TEM-8), ten of them have passed the TEM-4, and ten of them have never participated the Test for English Majors.

3.2. Instruments

The instrument used in the present study was a questionnaire with discourse completion test (DCT) . Admittedly, DCT has been criticized because of a lack of authenticity and non-interactive nature. The hypothetical situations are scenarios that are not authentic, thus the data collected may not reflect learners' actual pragmatic proficiency. DCT, however, is an effective way of collecting plenty of data within a short period of time, involving various situations. The DCT in the present study included three social contexts—power, social distance, and weight of imposition (Brown & Levinson, 1978)—involving 25 interaction situations (see Appendix). Such typical relationships as customer-assistants, employer-employee, husband-wife, friends, etc. were not taken into consideration in this paper.

3.3. Procedure

Participants completed the DCT individually on line. The test involved 25 scenarios. After the 25 test items have been answered, the interlanguage data would be collected by the researcher.

4. Results

Speech act of requests contain three procedures, i.e., alerters, supportive moves, and head acts (Blum-kulka, 1989). Thus this paper is to illustrate the results of questionnaire from these three perspectives.

4.1. Alerters

Alerters, also called Address Term(s), serve as attention-getter in a request, the part to demonstrate a requestee (a person who is requested) and to get his/her attention. Such expressions as "Excuse me", "Hi/Hello", "John", "Sir/Mir", etc. belong to alerters.

The results (see Table1 : the percentage of the use of alerters) show that 74% participants use alerters in the context of teacher-student, 30% participants use alerters when requesting classmates, and 15% participants use alerters when asking roommates for help. The results of the questionnaire manifests that about 74% participants are able to use right language to communicate with others and appropriately or correctly use alerters. Obviously, 26% participants do not use any alerter when requesting teacher for help. It is true that there exits, to some extent, social distance between teacher and student, and as well the power of teacher and that of student are inequality. So it is not appropriate or polite for student to directly ask teacher for requests without any alerter. Thus 26% participants have made pragmatic failure in the context of teacher-student. The social distance between student and teacher is closer than that between classmates and roommates, and the power among classmates and roommates are equal. Therefore, a quite small proportion of participants use alerters when requesting classmates and roommates. Only in some contexts involving the weight of imposition (Situation 22: Tom asks his roommates to lend him money; Situation 25: Tom asks his roommates to help to buy his train ticket), participants, out of polite, use alerters to express the requests with some difficulty due to the weight of imposition or the face-threaten of the hearer. And the alerters the participants addressed to roommates are appropriate and conform to conventions.

Table1 : the percentage of the use of alerters

Context	Alerters	Percentage
Teacher-student	Excuse me, Sir/Madam, Professor, Dear teacher, Sorry teacher, Hey teacher	74%
Classmates	Excuse me, Hi, Dear, Hey	30%
Roommates	Sorry, Please, Hey, Honey	15%

4.2. Supportive moves

According to Blum-Kulka (1989), the modification of the speech acts of requests divide into internal modification and external modification. Internal modification lies in the head acts. The subjects in this study did not involve themselves in internal modification, due to few participants utilize it. Therefore, only external modification are under consideration. External modification comprises mitigating supportive moves and aggravating supportive moves. Since the speech act of requests are connected to the face-threaten, this paper only discusses mitigating modification or supportive moves. Mitigating supportive moves refer to the part to mitigate the face threatening force of the request act in order to satisfy the need of hearer's negative face. It comes either before or after the head act.

Table 2: the percentage of the use of supportive moves

Context	Supportive moves				Total percentage
	Preparator	precommitment	Providing grounder	Imposition minimizer	
Teacher-student	4%	5%	13%	3%	25%
Classmates	3%	3%	9%	3%	18%
Roommates	2%	2%	20%	1%	25%

The results of questionnaire described as table 2, presents that supportive moves involve preparator, getting a precommitment, providing grounder, and imposition minimizer.

Preparator means that the speaker announces that he or she is making a request by asking the hearer if he or she is ready. For example, "*May I ask you a question? …*"

Getting a precommitment refers that in order to reduce the possibility of being rejected after making a request, the speaker may first inform the hearer that he or she needs permission from the other party. For example, "*could you do me a favor? …*"

Providing grounder refers to the reasons and explanations provided by the speaker for his request, located before or after the request is made. For example, "Professor, *I want to improve my homework again*. Can I hand it in later?"

Imposition minimizer means that the speaker tries to reduce the burden on the hearer by making the request. For example, "It is hard to say, but can you lend me some money? *I will turn it back in 3 days.*"

Another two supportive moves, i.e. disarmer (the speaker's attempt to dispel the objection of the hearer's refusal to accept the request), and promise of reward (in order to increase the probability of the hearer accepting the speaker's request, the speaker promises a reward after the request is satisfied.), have not presented in the results of the questionnaire.

The results of the use of supportive moves are described in the table 2, which shows that in the context of teacher-student, 26% participants used supportive moves to help them to make requests, 18% participants used supportive moves when requesting classmates, and 25% participants utilized supportive moves to ask their roommates for help. The percentage of providing grounder is among the highest in the four supportive moves. Among the three context, in accordance with the social distance and power, supportive moves should have been used in

the context of teacher-student. Due to the weight of imposition, however, it is necessary to provide grounder in the two situations (22: asking roommate to lend money; 25: asking roommate to buy him train ticket) of the contexts of roommates. Thus, the total percentage of the use of supportive moves in the context of roommates is higher than that in the contexts of classmates.

However, Situation 1 (asking teacher let him turn in his homework late), situation 8 (ask classmate to lend the cellphone), situation 22 (asking roommate to lend money) and situation 25 (asking roommate to buy him train ticket), all of the four situations involve the weight of imposition or face-threaten of the hearer, so it is inappropriate for a student to directly ask his teacher, classmate or roommate without any supportive moves for help with difficulty. After reviewing the results of the questionnaire, the author finds that only 39% participants used supportive moves in situation 1, 22% participants used in situation 8, 52% participants used in situation 22, and 34% participants used in situation 25. Therefore, there still be a quite portion of students making pragmatic failures.

4.3. Head acts

Head acts refer to the part forming the nucleus of a request sequence and indicating the illocutionary force of request, which might serve to realize the act independently of other elements. For example: "Could you please lend me some money?" "Can I borrow your ID card?" "Please close the door."

Head acts, in accordance with the degree of the directness of requests, can be divided into three categories: direct requests, conventional indirect speech act of requests, and hint. Conventional indirect speech act of requests are composed of suggestory formula and query preparatory (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989:17-19).

The strategies of the use of head acts of questionnaire in present study are to be manifested as follows.

According to the results of questionnaire, direct requests involve three sentence patterns: imperative, performative or goal statement, and want statement.

Example 1: Return my *book together. (imperative)*

Example 2: Let's hang *out together. (imperative)*

Example 3: Do you know the *answer to this question? (performative or goal statement)*

Example 4: I want to ask you a question. (want statement)

Conventional indirect speech act of requests can be divided into two categories: suggestory formula and query preparatory.

Example 5: Why don't we hang out together. (suggestory formula)

Example 6: Could you help me buy the train ticket? (query preparatory)

There are also some participants use hint to express requests.

Example 7: LOL, *go, go, go! (hint)*

Example 8: I'm hungry. (hint)

Example 7 means that the participant hints his roommates to go to the internet cafe with him to play game named LOL.

Table 3: the strategies of the use of head acts

Context	Head acts			Total percentage
	Direct requests	Conventional indirect requests	Hint	
Teacher-student	15.9%	78.3%	5.8%	100%
Classmates	37.5%	60.9%	1.6%	100%
Roommates	68.5%	29.9%	1.6%	100%

According to the results of table 3, all of the participants have used head acts to express their different requests. And they utilize different strategies of requests to request different person in different contexts. The social distance between teacher and students is farther than that between classmates, and likewise, the social distance between classmates is farther than that between roommates. Thus, when students make requests for teacher, most students request their teacher indirectly except some contexts not relating to weight of imposition, such as situation 5: asking teacher a question. It is not impolite for students to express in a direct or explicit way their demands to ask their teacher a question. In the context of teacher-student, 15.9% participants choose direct requests strategy, classmates 37.5%, and roommates 68.5%. From teacher-student to roommates, the percentage of using direct strategies are increasingly rising, which contrasts with the indirect strategies whose percentages are descending. These figures conform to the social distance, power and weight of imposition. Thus, in terms of the part of the strategies of the use of head acts, participants have made relatively successful pragmatic interaction.

5. Discussion

According to the brief illustration of the questionnaire results in the previous text, it is obvious that though most participants can make successful pragmatic interaction in most context, yet a small proportion of participants have made pragmatic failure when making requests to others using English in different contexts. This part intends to indicate the pragmatic failures the participants made from the three procedures, i.e., alerters, supportive moves, and head acts. And then some reasons for these failures and suggestions to teaching will be presented.

Firstly, the errors existing in the alerters mainly focus on the context of teacher-student. Apart from 26% participants having not addressed teacher, nearly half of alerters were "teacher", "dear teacher" or "sorry, teacher". It is more appropriate for students to call their teacher "Sir/Madam" or "professor" in the target language, because "teacher" is a kind of profession, instead of address. It seems that there is few nuances between "老师" (Sir/Madam/professor) and "教师" (teacher). Thus some students are inclined to be confused with the usage of them.

Secondly, though supportive moves in the speech act of requests, not like head acts, are not the indispensable part, yet in some contexts they need to be accompanied with head acts to express the requests with the vexed. There are 4 embarrassing situations (1, 8, 22, 25) in terms of weight of imposition in the questionnaire, but less than half participants used supportive moves to express their requests.

Thirdly, when it comes to head acts, the results seem to show that every participant has made successful pragmatic interaction, but there still be some problems. The sentence patterns participants used extremely unitary. Especially the use of conventional indirect requests, the sentence patterns practically are "Would you...?", "Could you...?", "Do you mind if...?", etc. And there some participants only use one single sentence pattern in all the contexts.

Bardovi-Harlig (2001) believes that the factors that affect learners' second language pragmatic competence include: available pragmatic input, classroom instruction, and learners' level of proficiency, length of stay in target-language country, and mother-language transfer. Verschueren (1999) put forwards his conception of context, i.e., physical world, social world, mental world, and communicator factors. Human beings communicate in context, Thus Verschueren's conception of context are of importance to EFL learners when they make communication using target language. This paper is to illustrate the reasons that learners make pragmatic failures from the light of Bardovi-Harlig's pragmatic input and Verschueren's adaptability of context.

Pragmatic input mainly are provided by teaching materials, especially textbook, which deeply influences learners. The speech act of requests is related to interaction, and school or education

institute usually provides functional syllabus organized around communicative functions-requesting, complaining, suggesting, agreeing..., etc. This syllabus lists lots of sentence patterns for learners to communicate with others in target language. Thus it should hardly comes as a surprise that so many participants have used the single unitary sentence patterns to express their requests, and that learners cannot change their patterns in different contexts. Therefore, the teaching material is advanced to renew its contents timely and introduce some authentic materials and interaction contexts. In the class, teacher also can instruct some pragmatic rules to students to help them make successful pragmatic interaction.

The culture between mother language and the target language are certainly distinct. Culture is connected to context. When language changes, the culture or context will change accordingly, and some conventional ways to requests should change too. According to Verschueren (1999), if the context changes, the physical world, social world, mental world, and communicator factors will change. When communicating with others, learners are advanced to use different communication strategies according to different contexts. Speaker should choose one of the most appropriate words, sentence patterns and strategies to utters his or her requests, and the choice are made on the basis of highly flexible principles or strategies and subject to context.

6. Conclusion

This paper through questionnaire has made a brief investigation on the pragmatic failure focusing on the speech act of requests of EFL learners, and then illustrated the reasons causing pragmatic failure based on Bardovi-Harlig's (2001) pragmatic input and Verschueren's (1999) adaptability of context, and to provide some suggestions.

There are some limitations in this paper. First, the participants are limited to intermediate-high level. Further studies can include more levels (e.g., basic, intermediate, and advanced levels) to depict the whole picture triangulation. Second, the instrument, DCT (Discourse Completion Test), has been criticized because of a lack of authenticity and non-interactive nature. The hypothetical situations are scenarios that are not authentic, thus the data collected may not reflect learners' actual pragmatic proficiency. Further studies should design a more interactive task using more methods (e.g., oral DCT, role play, field observation). In addition, the reasons causing pragmatic failure should be illustrated in more lights.

Despite the above limitations, the present study has filled the gap of previous studies by making investigation on interlanguage pragmatic failure of EFL learners in terms of speech act of requests and also provided some suggestions for teaching.

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