

# Research on the pragmatic failures in the EFL writing of Chinese students

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## Abstract

Writing is an instrument of communication; the Chinese students' English writing belongs to intercultural communication. Pragmatic failure occurs mainly because the lack of the cultural awareness and knowledge, and it offers an angle for the discussion in the thesis. This thesis is intended to probe into how to develop Chinese students' English writing from the perspective of pragmatic failure. There is an experimental study with a questionnaire is analyzed to infer the students' opinions and habits in English writing and culture learning and teaching. All the data and results of the research are analyzed to infer the causes of pragmatic failures in students' English writing.

**Key words:** writing, pragmatic failure, cultural difference

## 1. Introduction

### *1.1 The pragmatic failures in Chinese students' writing*

Of the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), writing has always been the most problematic part for Chinese students and difficult for their teachers to tackle. Writing is a complex process, and learning to write in a second language is not a simple matter of knowing how to "write things down" in the new code. Most English writings of Chinese students read so much like translation of Chinese, and one can fairly easily tell whether an article was written by a Chinese or by a native speaker of English. The biggest problem with the English composition is that most of Chinese students just translate Chinese expression and writing patterns literally into English, which certainly cause pragmatic failures in the writing.

Since writing is a means of intercultural communication, in which pragmatic failures are more difficult to identify mainly because the problem of establishing which cultural norms should serve as the point of the reference and of knowing what the learners' exact intentions were. "Most of our misunderstandings of other people are not due to any inability to hear them or to parse their sentences or to understand their words ... A far more important source of difficulty in communication is that we so often fail to understand a speaker's intention." (Miller, 1974: 106) Therefore, in order to communicate successfully in a target language through writing, pragmatic failures deserve a special attention.

### *1.2 The Purpose of the Research*

This thesis is intended to observe the present situation of college students' pragmatic competence in L2 writing and the causes of the pragmatic failure in their writing. The differences in language and culture can lead to negative cultural transfer when Chinese students write in English. The problems occurring in the students' English compositions show that their writing process is interfered by their mother language and culture. People have attempted to explain these problems from various perspectives such as students' English proficiency, the difference between Chinese and English styles, and the dissimilarities of cultural

thought patterns between Easterners and Westerners. Pragmatic failure, which also occurs in students' writing, offers a perspective for the study in the thesis. Author conducted an investigation on their opinions on writing and culture, which will make us more aware of the importance of sensitivity to cross-cultural pragmatic failure in the English writing and the urgency of enhancing culture teaching.

## **2. A literature review**

"Most significantly, research points to the fact that written texts and the ways they are used vary according to cultural group" (Ulla, 2001, 100). So we can regard writing as an activity embedded in a culture. College English writing course surely needs to stress the cultural aspect, especially in the light of the nature of writing.

Pragmatic failure is first proposed by Jenny Tomas (1983: 91) to refer to the inability to understand what is meant by what is said. It includes the language and behavior that is inappropriate to most native speakers. Because the inappropriateness caused by cultural difference would create ill feeling between native speakers and Chinese learners of English, they are often worse than linguistic mistakes. "No 'error' of grammar can make a speaker seem so incompetent, so inappropriate, so foreign, as the kind of trouble a learner gets into when he or she doesn't understand or otherwise disregards a language's rules of use" (Rintell-Mitchell, 1989, cited in Trosborg 1994, p. 3). In real language use, both spoken and written, kinds of pragmatic failures are always interwoven together. So, the study of pragmatic failures becomes more involved.

Purves and Hawisher (1990, 183) inferred that "good writing" is a "culturally defined phenomenon" and that "written tests, and the ways in which they are used and perceived, vary according to the cultural group to which an individual belongs". Thus, pragmatic failures certainly occur in L2 writing, and they are more difficult to identify because of establishing which cultural norms should serve as the point of the reference. In order to express appropriately in L2 writing, pragmatic failure need to be noticed and in this way more effective expression achieved and writing ability be well developed.

## **3. Research design and methodology**

This research will aim at finding the inadequacy of the traditional approach to college English writing course and students' awareness of cross-cultural aspects in English writing by analysis of students' viewpoints in their former and present English writing learning and teaching.

This research intends to investigate the following questions:

- A. Is there any difference in each item choice in questionnaire among different groups?
- B. What is the relationship between the students' opinions on English writing and their pragmatic competence in English writing?
- C. What are the reasons for the pragmatic failures the students produce in English writing?

The subjects for the survey in this thesis are 202 university students of non-English majors studying in China-west Normal University. They were divided into two groups for research. Group 1: 86 students from class A. Group 2: 116 students from class B. The class type of students in this university is depended on their scores of College entrance examination. Students in class A got the score up 120 in College entrance examination, and students in class B got the score between 80 and 119. So the class type of the subjects can be a valid criterion to identify their language proficiency to some degree.

The instruments involved a questionnaire designed by researcher herself. It consisted of 20 items which asked the students about their awareness of cross-cultural aspects in writing and opinions on English writing learning and teaching. The questionnaire was conducted in normal class time. Before the students start with the questionnaire, it was made clear to them that it is not a test and it would be used only for

research purpose. They had to do the test individually and the papers were gathered immediately after they finished.

All the data of questionnaire are inputted correspondingly for each participant firstly. And Chi-Square Test and the Percentage Analysis for each choice are conducted to analyze the students' opinions and habits on English writing and check if there is any difference for each item choice among different research groups. In this way, the author continues to analyze the factors causing pragmatic failure in students' English writing. In the whole process, the statistic system SPSS is used.

#### 4. Data analysis and discussions

In this part, the collected data are analyzed by different statistical methods and the results of the investigation in relation to the research questions are reported here. And the discussions will also be presented along with the reporting of the results. Students from class A have higher language proficiency than students from class B more or less. The following comparison and analysis of some item choice between the two types of classes would help to find the relationship of language proficiency and their ideas about English writing and practical writing habits, especially about the pragmatic failures in their writing.

Table 1: The comparison of item choice between class A and class B

item	Class A					Class B					$\chi^2$ value			
	A	B	C	D	E	A	B	C	D	E				
1	n	31	41	14	0	0	n	31	55	27	3	0	4.814	
	percent	36.0	47.7	16.3	0	0	Percent	26.7	47.4	23.3	2.6	0		
2	n	33	26	25	2	—	N	48	33	29	6	—	1.482	
	percent	38.4	30.2	29.1	2.3	—	Percent	41.4	28.4	25.0	5.2	—		
3	n	4	49	27	6	0	0	n	5	56	46	9	0	1.705
	percent	4.7	57.0	31.4	7.0	0	percent	4.3	48.3	39.7	7.8	0		
4	n	53	30	1	2	0	0	n	49	56	2	8	1	3.687
	percent	61.6	34.9	1.2	2.3	0	percent	42.2	48.3	1.7	6.9	0.9		
5	n	30	23	25	8	0	0	n	59	12	40	4	1	14.567**
	percent	34.9	26.7	29.1	9.3	0	percent	50.9	10.3	34.5	3.4	0.9		
6	n	1	16	11	36	22	—	n	6	19	9	55	27	4.142
	percent	1.2	18.6	12.8	41.9	25.6	percent	5.2	16.4	7.8	47.4	23.3		
7	n	27	50	1	8	—	—	n	23	65	1	27	—	3.319*
	percent	31.4	58.1	1.2	9.3	—	percent	19.8	56.0	0.9	23.3	—		
8	n	48	35	3	0	0	0	n	41	57	14	4	0	12.755**
	percent	55.8	40.7	3.5	0	0	percent	35.3	49.1	12.1	3.4	0		
9	n	18	19	23	26	—	—	n	27	44	28	17	—	9.857*
	percent	20.9	22.1	26.7	30.2	—	percent	23.3	37.9	24.1	14.7	—		
10	n	41	31	10	4	—	—	n	36	74	5	1	—	17.328**
	percent	47.7	36.0	11.6	4.7	—	percent	31.0	63.8	4.3	0.9	—		

item	Class A					Class B					$\chi^2$ value			
	A	B	C	D	E	A	B	C	D	E				
11	n	4	37	43	2	—	n	13	61	41	1	—	6.716	
	percent	4.7	43.0	50.0	2.3	—	percent	11.2	52.6	35.3	0.9	—		
12	n	5	30	51	—	—	n	10	19	87	—	—	9.277**	
	percent	5.8	34.9	59.3	—	—	percent	8.6	16.4	75.0	—	—		
13	n	34	33	17	2	0	0	n	77	24	13	2	0	14.476**
	percent	39.5	38.4	19.8	2.3	0	percent	66.4	20.7	11.2	1.7	0		
14	n	29	32	21	3	1	—	n	28	59	24	4	1	4.004
	percent	33.7	37.2	24.4	3.5	1.2	percent	24.1	50.9	20.7	3.4	0.9		
15	n	8	29	28	18	3	—	n	9	33	42	28	4	1.000
	percent	9.3	33.7	32.6	20.9	3.5	percent	7.8	28.4	36.2	24.1	3.4		
16	n	9	38	27	12	0	—	n	18	42	38	18	0	1.847
	percent	10.5	44.2	31.4	14.0	0	percent	15.5	36.2	32.8	15.5	0		
17	n	6	10	56	14	—	—	n	30	19	57	10	—	15.469**
	percent	7.0	11.6	65.1	16.3	—	percent	25.9	16.4	49.1	8.6	—		
18	n	25	43	15	2	1	—	n	18	62	30	6	0	3.305
	percent	29.1	30.0	17.4	2.3	1.2	percent	15.5	53.4	25.9	5.2	0		
19	n	6	11	21	42	6	—	n	1	7	23	66	19	12.464*
	percent	7.0	12.8	24.4	48.8	7.0	percent	0.9	6.0	19.8	56.9	16.4		
20	n	3	10	67	5	1	—	n	1	16	76	19	4	3.653
	percent	3.5	11.6	77.9	5.8	1.2	percent	0.9	13.8	65.5	16.4	3.4		

\*: P<0.05

\*\* : P<0.01

##### 4.1 The analysis and comparison of items about teachers' teaching in students' view

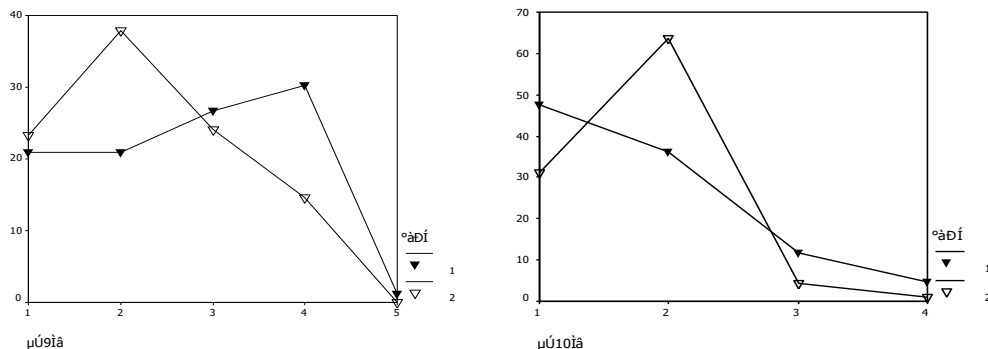
It can be inferred from item 2 and 3 that teachers often give students the cultural background in English class in both types of classes. But there are more students from class B mainly depend on teachers' introduction to get the culture knowledge, and there are more students from class A are able to get these cultural differences from other mediums by themselves out of class.

Item 5 is about what teachers value most in English writing teaching and assessing, the difference between the two groups is greatly significant ( $\chi^2_{(3)}=14.567$ , P<0.01). It shows that teachers pay more attention to vocabulary and sentence structure in class B, and they value the coherence, arrangement and cultural introduction more in class A. However, in both types of classes, teachers value the culture

introduction, which would help to reduce the pragmatic failures, least in English writing teaching and assessing.

4.2 The analysis and comparison of items about students' view on English writing

Item 16 and 18 in the questionnaire are to test their awareness of the importance of the cultural difference and culture teaching in English writing. In both item, the difference of two groups is not significant between class A and class B. So we can infer that most of the students in both groups are aware of and admit that the cultural difference has impact on English writing and the culture teaching in English writing class is important more of less.



Apart from the items about students' opinions on English writing, there are some items about their practical writing habits. In item 9, which is to get their ideas about what is the most difficult part in English writing, there is significant difference between class A and class B ( $\chi^2_{(3)}=9.857, P<0.05$ ). It is able to infer that most of students in class B, who have lower language proficiency than students in class A, think the vocabulary and grammar are the most difficult in English, whereas there are more students in class A are aware of difficulties caused by the cultural difference in English writing.

The difference in item 10 about what do students think of most in English writing is greatly significant between class A and class B ( $\chi^2_{(3)}=17.328, P<0.01$ ). It shows that most students in class B think of the vocabulary and grammar most, and there are only little of them thinking about the cultural difference in English writing. While, there are more than half of students in class A think of the main body and arrangement most, besides, there are a part of them think of the cultural difference most in English writing.

The item 17 is about which aspect the students hope to improve most in English writing. The difference of the two groups are greatly significant between class A and class B ( $\chi^2_{(3)}=15.469, P<0.01$ ). It shows that most of students in class A hope to improve their English writing from the aspect of the coherence and arrangement, while there are more students in class B hope to improve their English writing from the aspect of vocabulary and grammar. And there also a part of students in class A hope to improve their English writing by understanding more related cultural background, which would help to reduce the pragmatic failures in the writing.

In item 19, which is about how difficult they think to improve their English writing competence, there is significant difference between class A and class B ( $\chi^2_{(3)}=12.464, P<0.05$ ). There much more students in class A (44.2%) than students in class B (26.7%) choosing A, B and C, which said it easy to improve their English writing to some extent. And most of students in class B (73.3%) choosing D and E, which said it

difficult to improve their English writing, while there are less students (53.8%) in class A choosing it. Although there are more students in class A think it easy to improve the English writing competence than class B, there are more than half of them think it difficult.

#### *4.3 Summary of the research*

According to the comparison and analysis of some item choices of the two types of classes, which have different language proficiency respectively, author reduces that there is relationship of language proficiency and their ideas about English writing and practical writing habits. On the whole, most students in both groups are aware of and admit the existence of cultural difference among different nations, and also think that the cultural difference has impact on English writing and the culture teaching in English writing class is important more or less. However, most students in class A with higher language proficiency, pay more attention to the coherence and arrangement in English writing, while most students in class B with lower language proficiency, pay more attention to the vocabulary and grammar in English writing. And there are more students in class A are aware of the difficulties caused by the cultural difference than students in class B. But there is little of students in both groups pay enough attention to the cultural difference and pragmatic failures in their practical process of writing and checking. The most of them in both groups think it difficult to improve their English writing competence and not clear about how to improve it.

It seemed that in order to promote the students' pragmatic competence in English writing, it is necessary to raise their cultural awareness. Teachers' emphasis on English writing class would influence students' opinions and practical writing habits. And students' comparatively low level of pragmatic competence in English writing is mainly because of their insufficient or vague understanding and recognition of the target culture. Therefore, enhancing culture teaching and put more emphasis on pragmatic failure in English writing class is of great importance.

### **5. Conclusion**

From the research, author deduces that students' ideas on English writing, their writing habits and their language proficiency are related to their pragmatic competence in English writing. The unawareness and the confused understanding of cultural difference among languages certainly would cause the pragmatic failure in English writing. Besides, the proper writing habits, such as paying enough attention to the cultural barrier and think more about pragmatic failure except for vocabulary and grammar in the process of writing and assessing, would help to reduce the pragmatic failure in English writing. Finally, the proper understanding of the purpose of writing also has positive relation to the pragmatic competence in English writing.

Author also deduces that teachers' English writing teaching have influence on students' opinions on English writing and their writing habits. In the English writing process of students, what they value most and regard the most difficult are consistent with the teachers' emphasis in English writing classes. Most of teachers usually do not value culture introduction in English writing course and pay little attention on it. Teachers pay much attention on the vocabulary and sentence structure and proper arrangement. And in both two types of classes, teachers value the culture introduction, which would help to reduce the pragmatic failures, least in English writing teaching and assessing. On the impact of teachers' English writing teaching, most students only put emphasis on vocabulary and grammar and neglect the pragmatic failure in writing, although many of them are aware of the cultural differences among different languages. Besides, students' comparatively low level of pragmatic competence in English writing is mainly because of their insufficient or vague understanding and recognition of the target culture. Therefore, enhancing

culture teaching and put more emphasis on pragmatic failure in English writing class is of great importance.

In all, the pragmatic failures in Chinese students' English writing are always caused by several factors. And these factors are only the central ones as a complicated intertexture but not the all. In order to improve and upgrade students' pragmatic competence in English writing, attention to these factors is needed.

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