

Cross-Cultural Discourse of Giving and Accepting Gifts

SHARI KENDALL
GRACE HUI CHIN LIN
LAWRENCE PERKINS

Texas A & M University College Station, USA

ABSTRACT

This study emphasizes it is important and necessary that an English as a foreign language (EFL) speaker should develop their knowledge in pragmatic and sociolinguistic rules in order to avoid failure and misunderstanding in intercultural communication. This paper proposes to raise the EFL speakers' pragmatic awareness in cross-cultural communication and to investigate and appreciate the rich diversity in language productions of giving and accepting gifts between different cultures. Based on the various expressions in polite discourses produced by American, Chinese, and Indian students at Texas A&M University, this study reveals the typical patterns of polite discourses in the Eastern and Western World.

PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE

The ultimate goal of English language learning is to use it as a practical tool of communication with either native or non-native speakers in the real world. Just like Dewey (1897) remarks, the true center of correlation on the school subjects is not science, nor literature, nor history, but for the learner's own social activities. Hence, the EFL learners have to learn how to communicate smoothly and comprehensibly with people of different cultures in a social setting.

When discussing the term, "pragmatic competence," the term, "communicative competence," needs to be introduced. "Communicative competence" is first credited to Hymes (1972: 277), and then Canale (1983) judges it to consist of four competences, including grammatical

competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. Canale (1983) defines pragmatic competence in communicative competence: "Appropriateness of utterances refers to both appropriateness of meaning and appropriateness of form. Appropriateness of meaning concerns the extent to which particular communicative functions (e.g. commanding, complaining and inviting), attitudes (including politeness and formality) and ideas are judged to be proper in given situations" (1983: 7). That is, the English speakers should not only achieve their intended meanings for different functions such as commanding, complaining, and inviting, in a comprehensive way, but they also have to interact in an appropriate and polite fashion that fits the surrounding atmospheres in their societies.

More detailed, Kasper and Rose (2001) reword the definition of pragmatic competence this way:

Pragmatics is defined as the study of communicative action in its socio-cultural context. Communicative action includes not only using speech acts (such as apologizing, complaining, complimenting, and requesting), but also engaging in different types of discourse and participating in speech events of varying length and complexity. (p. 2)

In other words, pragmatics is the study of various types of speech and interaction from all the English language uses, including native and non-native speakers', diverse social and cultural perspectives.

INTERCULTURAL DIVERSITIES OF POLITENESS

Communication between individuals from different cultural backgrounds may be influenced by their different mental sets. Culture-specific aspects of communicative competence affect what goes on in situations of communication between people from different backgrounds (Zegarac and Pennington, 2000). Therefore, it is significant that an English speaker has to learn to comprehend the underlying implications of subtle polite features in the speech production of an interlocutor from different cultures.

Watts, Ide, and Ehlih (1992) propose there are countless polite expressions in different cultures around the world. They conceive that the politeness is expressed by both verbal and non-verbal means. Sometimes a tap on the shoulder means more than a thousand words. Also, to be polite is to look at your interlocutor in the eyes, or to smile at him/her.

THREE SCENARIOS OF POLITE DIALOGUES

Indeed, sometimes it is not effortless to recognize the polite expression in non-native speakers' language production if a native speaker is not informed about a certain pattern of politeness in a different culture. For clarifying the multi-patterns of politeness, this article provides three sets of dialogues displaying an intercultural misunderstanding caused by a polite expression in Chinese. The data were gathered from a Taiwanese student and two Chinese students, who shared with the author their experiences of culture shock caused by an inter-cultural misunderstanding. They portray the significant different features in interview, compliment, and invitation.

A. Example of a cross-culture talk in a scenario of job applicant

A Taiwanese EFL speaker had her teaching job interview conducted by American director in a bilingual (English/Chinese) kindergarten in Taiwan.

Interviewer: How well do you speak English?

Applicant: I have studied English for ten years.

Interviewer: Do you play piano?

Applicant: I have learned before.

In above dialogue, the Taiwanese job applicant, in reality would, like to express that she is capable in English and the piano; however, she had to humbly and politely convey this idea due to her conservative Chinese upbringing. She has to avoid a boasting image according to her Confucianism education background. Contrastingly, the American kindergarten director was confused about the applicant's ability and judged her to be incapable in English and the piano. Generally speaking, in the American society, the job hunting field is extremely competitive, and most Americans have to establish their positive personal impression to their interviewers. In the above case, typical American applicants should answer, "I am good in English" or "I can play Beethoven's the maiden's prayer"

B. Example of a cross-culture talk in a scenario of compliment

A Chinese student was praised by her American classmate about her in-class presentation.

American: Your presentation is excellent, two thumbs up!!

Chinese: Where, where.

American: Oh, everywhere.

The Chinese student in this dialogue responded to the American student by “Where, where”, which is Chinese people’s accustomed answer to the other’s laud. Because the American student might not have been taught about any kind of Chinese humble expression as well as Chinese’s appropriate reaction to the other’s praise, she misunderstood her Chinese classmate’s modest response and thought “Where, where” was a real question. This dialogue actually implies that either the Chinese EFL speaker has to avoid using too much Chinese traditional expression to the American native speaker, or the American native speaker should develop knowledge in pragmatic and sociolinguistic rules.

C. *Example of a cross-culture talk in a scenario of sharing food*

A Chinese student was invited to share cookies with her American classmate after their one-hour discussion for doing homework.

American: Would you like to have some cookies? (Then, he opened a box cookies and showing cookies in front of the Chinese student.

Chinese: No, thank you. I am not hungry yet.

American: Oh. OK. (Then, he ate the cookies himself).

This dialogue matches Chen’s statement that:

Most of the learners knew that in Chinese culture, one is not supposed to accept an invitation or an offer right a way. They commented that one should refuse several times before accepting, i.e., the students realized that the ritual refusal is almost obligatory in an invitation/offer event. (Kasper and Zhang: 1995: 5)

Indeed, to reject the other’s invitation of sharing food and then finally accept is a customary polite pattern in Chinese culture. In the above situation, the Chinese student in fact, would like to share the cookie, but she responded her American classmate with a polite pattern in Chinese tradition. As a result, she in truth felt hungry and did not know how to explain this miscommunication to her American classmate.

METHODOLOGY

For a purpose of exploring more significant differences in the Eastern and Western polite discourses, the researcher had conducted an empirical study. It attempts to demonstrate the culturally different concept in giving and

accepting gifts. From the diverse perspectives of American local students and overseas students, this study briefly reports the multi-patterns of polite discourse in giving and accepting gifts.

A. Subjects

The subjects were 14 students at Texas A&M University, including four Taiwanese, three Chinese, five Americans, and two Indians in undergraduate school and graduate school. These students were selected because they represent the populations of the Eastern and Western cultures. Also, they, themselves, are students, who might be more interested in the designed scenarios of "giving gifts to their teacher".

B. Scenario

All of the students were asked three questions about a situation of how a teacher in their hometown would react to a new student's visit. When the new student gives the teacher three bunches of grapes, how the teacher would react to it? The 14 students were requested to provide the polite customs in their languages and cultures according to this scenario, which people in their language and cultures regard as a method of making the process of visiting more smooth and peaceful.

C. Data collection

The data were collected either through telephone interview or face-to-face interview. Each interview lasts for approximately ten minutes.

D. Research questions

The research questions were as follows: (1), If giving a gift to a teacher is regarded as bribery? (2), If you were the teacher, how would you judge the student's motivation? (3), What kind of conversation the teacher in your culture would create, and why?

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that each area has its own distinctive features of polite language in giving and accepting gifts. This study displays several differences and similarities in the languages of giving and accepting gifts between Eastern and Western cultures. It was found that the attitudes of accepting gifts and meanings of giving gift in the Eastern and the Western cultures are quite assorted. However, the positive

interpretation for the behavior of giving and accepting gifts is very much the same. The transcribed data for students from three cultures are as follows:

A. Three Chinese and four Taiwanese:

— Six students (86%) responded that giving three bunches of grapes are not bribery, because they are not valuable. If the gifts are golden laces or a bottle of OX, then it is bribery.

— Four students (58%) believed that the teacher would accept by saying, “thank you” and “I appreciate it,” or “don’t be so polite”. One (14%) Taiwanese Master’s student mentioned giving a gift is not related to politeness and the teacher will reject it by saying, “I can not accept them, please leave them to your family or you can eat them.”

— Two Chinese PhD students (28%) answered the teacher needed to pretend to reject for a while than finally accept, which is a custom of politeness. One Chinese male PhD student responded that the teacher will accept by saying, “don’t do it next time”. One Chinese PhD female student thinks that the teacher needs to orally reject it when he wants to accept it, which is regarded as an appropriate way for receiving presents from the others in Chinese culture. For people in mainland China, the sentences used before accepting a gift usually are “I do not need them” or “Why bother?” Most educated Chinese people agree by implication with the teacher’s customary sentence that has a rejecting indication. They understand that he means to accept the gifts, but he has to act in a proper polite manner to accept gifts from students who have a lower social status than his.

— Two (28%) students responded giving gift is for establishing nice relationship. 4 (56%) students’ responded giving gift is for showing respect and politeness.

B. Two Indian students:

— Two students replied that giving a gift of food is common in India and it is not bribery. One (50%) female student considered this is for showing respect and politeness, especially in Teacher’s Day, September 5th. One (50%) male student considered this is for building nice relationship with teacher.

— The female Master’s student responded the teacher might say, “Why did you go to so much trouble to get it for me, but thanks a lot”.

— Two (100%) of them think that when the teacher says thank you, it means he/she will pay more attention to the student.

C. Five American students:

— 5 students (100%) all believed the teacher would accept and answer, “thank you” or “I appreciate it”.

— 4 (80%) of them selected gift giving is a nice way to build relationships, and 1 (20%) of them selected gift giving is a trick to gain attention. No one thinks it is related to respect or politeness.

— One Huston undergraduate male student responded if a Chinese professor answers, “you don’t have to do that,” he would think that the teacher rejects the gift. He does not think there is any other implication. The sentence for him has a “pure” meaning.

— One Maryland undergraduate male student responded to the Chinese professor’s sentence “you don’t have to do that” as a function for “avoiding conflict and making compromise with the student”. It is a tip for giving the receiver time to ponder over if he should accept or reject. The teacher needs to consider for a while because he knows that the student’s motivation may be complicated.

— One San Marcos female undergraduate student responded if a Chinese professor answers, “you don’t have to do that,” it means he does not accept the grapes. In San Marcos, it is never a hint or clue that he will accept. Giving fruit to teacher from a new student is not a usual part of culture of San Marcos.

— One Kentucky female undergraduate student responded that the teacher might taste the fruit and say, “It is delicious,” in order to make the process more peaceful and interesting. It is a typical American polite custom when accepting a gift.

— One Pennsylvania PhD male student’s interpreted, “you don’t have to do that” as “I feel uncomfortable to accept.” There is no connotation in this sentence. He mentioned in Pennsylvania, there are many types of languages and cultural manners to make the socialized interaction in giving and accepting the gift successfully and smoothly. They may smile, hug, and small talk in order to avoid awkwardness. For example, the teacher may shake hands with the student and say “how nice of you to give me this.”

| Situation: A new student gives three bunches of grapes to his teacher. | | |
|--|----------------|---------------|
| | Acceptance (%) | Rejection (%) |
| Chinese & Taiwanese | 86% | 14% |
| Indian | 100% | 0% |
| American | 100% | 0% |

Table 1. *Analysis of main research questions*

| Situation: A new student gives three bunches of grapes to his teacher. (analysis focused on traditional fixed discourse) | | | |
|--|---|--|-----------------------------------|
| | The teacher simply says "thank you" or "I appreciate it". (%) | The teacher applies polite customary fixed discourse. (%) | The teacher rejects the gift. (%) |
| Chinese & Taiwanese | 58% | 28% "You don't have to do this!" "Don't do it next time!" "Why bother?" | 14% "Take them back!" |
| Indian | 50% | 50% "Why did you take pain to do that?" | |
| American | 100% | 0% No pretending and accepting by saying rejecting sentence. | |

Table 2. *Analysis of customary languages*

| Situation: A new student gives three bunches of grapes to his teacher. (analysis from perspective of polite cultural form) | | |
|--|--|---|
| | Language (%) (Scale:100%) | Action and Behavior (%) (Scale: 100%) |
| Chinese & Taiwanese | 100% Thank you. You don't have to do that. Why bother. | Did not mention. |
| Indian | 100% Thank you. Why did you take pain to do it? | Did not mention. |
| American | 100% Thank you. I appreciate it. | 40% Taste it, open it, smile, Small talk, Shake hands, eye contact. |

Table 3. *Analysis of verbal and non-verbal expressions*

First, some Chinese people might feel embarrassed to receive another's gift and they need to masquerade, pretend, and reject for a while, then accept the gift finally. Second, Chinese, Taiwanese and Indian people give gifts to elders in order to show politeness and respect, but Americans give gifts only for building social relationships.

Through face-to face interviews, American students reflect that the polite model of the Eastern society and their inconsistency of behavior and language become a challenge to native speakers who are not familiar with the Eastern traditions. Americans might misunderstand the language when interacting with Asians because they do not have any concept about their accustomed and traditionally fixed customary sentences,

CONCLUSION

The 14 participants in this study all consider the polite mark in language of giving and accepting gift is as important as their image of civilization. Although these students of Texas A & M University from different places have their different interpretations for what the appropriate interlocution is, they tend to address that in the cultural settings at home, something positive needs to be done or some criticism and appraisal needs to be expressed when people give and accept gifts.

Hondo and Goodman (2001) have argued it is unavoidable that the English educators have to teach the learners pragmatics and sociolinguist rules: "... the teachers need to help students comprehend the implicit cultural difference distinguishing their own experience from that which is embodied within the speech acts of speakers of a target language" (P. 163). Accordingly, this study proposes to remind the EFL learners and educators about the fixed culture forms of politeness features.

In sum, while interacting with people from different civilization backgrounds, both native and non-native speakers have to respect the others' routine language usages and overcome the interacting constraints caused by lack of knowledge in pragmatic strategies. Accordingly, our expectation in this study aims on raising the English native and non-native speakers' understanding of the underlying implications of subtle courtesy features and informing them about the existing traditional gaps in languages and customs between difference countries.

REFERENCES

- Canale, M. 1983. From Communicative Competence to Communicative Language Pedagogy. In J. C. Richards & R. W. Schmidt (Eds.), *Language and Communication* (pp. 2-28). New York: Longman Inc.
- Dewey, J. 1987. *My Pedagogic Creed*. Washington, DC: Progressive Education Association.
- France, P. 1992. *Politeness and Its Discontents, Problems in French Classical Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hondo, J., & Goodman, B. 2001. Cross cultural varieties of politeness. *Texas Paper in Foreign Language Education*. 6/1, 163-171.
- Hymes, D. H. 1972. On Communicative Competence. In J. B. J. Pride & Holmes, (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics* (pp. 269-293). Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Kasper, G., & Rose, K. R. 2001. *Pragmatics in Language Teaching*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- , and Zhang, Y. Y. 1995. It's Good to Be a Bit Chinese's Foreign Students' Experience of Chinese Pragmatics. In G. Kasper (Eds.), *Pragmatics of Chinese as Native and Target Language* (pp. 1-22). Honolulu, Hawaii: Second Language Teaching & Curriculum Center.
- Pan, Y. 2000. *Politeness in Chinese Face-to-face Interaction*. Stamford, C.T.: Ablex Publishing Cooperation.
- Watts, R. J., Ide S., & Ehlih, K. 1992. *Politeness in Language, Studies in Its History, Theory, and Practice*. Berlin: Mouton De Gruyer.
- Zegarac, V., and Pennington, M. 2000. Pragmatic Transfer and Intercultural Communication. In H. Spencer-Oatey (Ed.), *Culturally Speaking: Managing Rapport Through Talk across Cultures* (pp. 165-190). London: Continuum.

SHARI KENDALL

GRACE HUI CHIN LIN

LAWRENCE PERKINS

TEXAS A & M UNIVERSITY COLLEGE STATION,
USA

E-MAIL: <LINGRACE@NEO.TAMU.EDU>