A Study of Pragmatic Transfer in Suggestion Strategies by Chinese Learners of English

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Abstract

This study investigates pragmatic transfer in suggestion strategies by Chinese learners of English. The subjects of the study include ten native English speakers, ten Chinese learners of English and ten native Chinese speakers. All of them are university students. The classification of suggestion strategies is mainly based on Hinkel's study. The data is collected by means of a discourse completion test questionnaire. The Chi-square test is used to compare frequencies of the use of suggestion strategies by the native English group, by the Chinese learner of English group and by the native Chinese group. Results indicate that although all three groups use opting out suggestion strategies the most frequently and direct suggestion strategies the least frequently, the Chinese learner of English group displays direct suggestion strategies and hedged suggestion strategies more frequently than the native English group. Such pragmatic transfer is transferred from Chinese culture and teaching-induced errors respectively, which provides pedagogical implications for both language teachers and language learners.

Key words: Interlanguage pragmatics; Pragmatic transfer; Suggestion strategy; Chinese learner of English

INTRODUCTION

Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP) is a branch of second language acquisition research. One of its aims is to study how non-native speakers perform a particular speech act in a target language (Kasper 1992). Research in interlanguage pragmatics has shown that English language learners' performance of speech acts is often different from that of native English speakers because the learners have limited knowledge of L2's pragmatic rules and transfer their native pragmatic rules into their L2 communication. According to Zegarac and Pennington's definition, pragmatic transfer is the influence on newly-learned second language knowledge by the existing native language knowledge in mind. Such pragmatic transfer is shaped by culture-specific knowledge (Zegarac and Pennington, 2000). When people from different cultures communicate with each other without perceiving their different culture, miscommunication may probably happen and pragmatic transfer may probably occur. Since Chinese language and English language belong to two different language systems, evidence of pragmatic transfer of Chinese into English by Chinese learners of English is most likely to be identified in their intercultural communication.

One pragmatic transfer which can possibly occur in the intercultural communication of Chinese learners of English is suggesting speech act. According to Searle suggestion is recognized as a directive speech act, of which the speaker's purpose is to get the hearer to commit him/herself to some future course of action (Searle,1976). Put it more simply, suggestion is an attempt to make the world match the words. Although suggestion is made in the best interest of the hearer, according to Brown and

Levinson's politeness theory (1987), this speech act is regarded as a face threatening act since the speaker is in some way intruding into the hearer's world by performing an act that concerns what the latter should do. In this sense, suggestion is regarded as an imposition upon the hearer by affronting his/her negative face (Banerjee and Carrell 1988). Since Chinese and English speakers have different perceptions of how suggesting speech act should be conducted, it is more likely that pragmatic transfer of Chinese will occur in the their intercultural communication of Chinese learners of English.

Since pragmatic transfer in suggesting speech act by Chinese learners of English can cause the breakdowns in their intercultural communication, it is needed to investigate Chinese learners' pragmatic transfer in suggestion strategies in order to know how learners' culture-specific backgrounds affect their pragmatic competence in English. In so doing, the pedagogical implications can be brought forth and inspire both language teachers and language learners.

1. PREVIOUS INTERLANGUAGE PRAGMATICS STUDIES ON SUGGESTING SPEECH ACT AND SUGGESTION STRATEGIES

The study conducted by Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford in 1990 is the first one to address suggesting speech act. In this study, they examine the authentic conversations between the advisors and the students in order to pay attention to the status congruence between both parties, that is to say, whether the linguistic forms employed by the two interlocutors are congruent with their respective status. They define congruence as "the match of a speaker's status and the appropriateness of speech acts given that status" (1990, p.473). They address suggesting speech act as a non-congruent speech act for students according to their status and, at the same time, they also show the importance of using status-preserving strategies, especially downgraders, to minimise the threat of students' suggestions. By comparing the linguistic negotiation of status between native English-speaking students and non-native English-speaking students, they conclude that native English-speaking students and non-native English-speaking students differ in their pragmatic competence, since non-native English-speaking students, although highly competent linguistically, do not have the ability to employ the status-preserving strategies in accordance with their status. (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford, 1990).

On the basis of their previous study, Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1993) carry out a longitudinal study for suggestions and rejections within the same framework of status congruence. The subjects consist of 16 graduate students (6 native English-speaking students and 10 non-native English-speaking students) and 7 native English-speaking faculty members. Both groups of subjects are taped in 35 advising sessions over the course of a semester in order to examine the change over time in the students' ability to develop their pragmatic competence. Results from this study show that non- native English-speaking students' pragmatic competence have improved over time by their making better suggestions and achieving a better status balance. However, non-native English-speaking students do not show a better ability to employ appropriate linguistic forms of suggesting speech act, which could be due to a lack of appropriate input regarding suggestion formulae. Although Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1990, 1993) do not provide a specific typology regarding the linguistic forms of suggestions, their studies identify certain congruent speech acts in a specific setting (that of the advising session) and attribute different speech acts for the advisors and the students.

Based on the above two studies of Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford, Alcón (2001) develops a cross-sectional investigation that also examines suggesting speech act within the framework of status congruence in an English as second language setting. In her study, she tapes 30 sessions involving 15 Spanish learners of English and analyses the suggestions in terms of frequency and form. Results from this study indicate that, although these Spanish learners of English receive positive input by teachers, the students' percentage of direct forms and the absence of mitigators show their lack of pragmatic competence. In this sense, Alcón (2001) suggests that being exposed to the language is not enough to develop students' pragmatic competence and, thus, she points out that pedagogical intervention is necessary in the context of academic advising sessions.

Koike (1994, 1996) conducts some studies focusing on whether negation can be regarded as a mitigation device when performing suggesting speech act and on the effects of proficiency in a study of pragmatic transfer. Koike's (1994) analysis about negation in suggestions compares Spanish language and English language. Results from her study indicate that the use of the negative in English suggestion makes the suggestion more forceful than in Spanish suggestion because the negative (negative question forms) in English is optional and therefore is an appropriate way to mitigate suggestion. However, she finds that no negation in Spanish suggestion is used to soften or mitigate the utterance. In another study, Koike (1996) develops a cross-sectional study focusing on the awareness of suggestions by 114 English learners of Spanish at different levels of proficiency and on pragmatic transfer from their mother tongue to the foreign language. The data is obtained from responses to a questionnaire that students have to complete after watching a videotape with 7 speech acts. Results show that proficiency is important, since advanced students understand the true

intention of the speech acts, whereas the other students fail to comprehend it. There are no proficiency effects at play in pragmatic transfer since transfer occurs at different levels of proficiency. Koike (1996) concludes that learners of a foreign language need to be exposed to contextualised language in order to recognize speech acts at both grammatical and pragmatic levels of use.

Matsumura (2001, 2003) does some research on advising speech act. Following Hinkel's (1997) study, Matsumura (2001) carries out a longitudinal study comparing two groups of Japanese learners of English in two different learning environments, namely those of the target speech community (English as second language setting) and their home country (English as foreign language setting). The research focuses on the degree of change that has taken place over time in the perception of social status in advising speech act. The data is collected by means of a multiple completion test with 12 scenarios and four response choices for each scenario, which is administered four times throughout the academic year. Results from this study indicate that living and studying in an English as second language setting have a positive impact on students' pragmatic development. Japanese ESL (English as second language) students' perceptions of social status in advising speech act improve more considerably in comparison to Japanese EFL (English as foreign language) students because Japanese ESL students have relatively more opportunities to understand how native English speakers perceive advice depending on social status than Japanese EFL students. In view of her results, she suggests that learners in an English as foreign language context may require some pedagogical intervention to become pragmatically competent. In another study with a latent longitudinal design, Matsumura (2003) examines learners' pragmatic development on the basis of their approximation to native English speakers' preferences for advice type depending on different social status. On the one hand, this study pays attention to the role played by learners' proficiency in the target language in their pragmatic development, that is, the cause-effect relationship between target language proficiency and pragmatic development. On the other hand, this study is also interested in analyzing whether the amount of exposure, rather than the length of stay, is also an indicator of learners' pragmatic development. Results illustrate that the amount of exposure is potentially of great importance in learners' pragmatic development in contrast to the level of proficiency. This finding supports previous research (Bardovi-Harlig 1999) that has demonstrated that students' having a high level of proficiency in the target language does not necessarily correlate with a high level of pragmatic improvement.

From the foregoing review of the literature, we can see that there is little research literature on suggestion strategies used by Chinese, and there is even less research literature about pragmatic transfer in suggestion strategies by Chinese learners of English. For this reason,this paper aims to investigate pragmatic transfer in suggestion strategies by chinese learners of English, which will contribute to literature of interlanguage pragmatics of Chinese learners of English. This paper will give a better understanding of what suggestion strategies are like for Chinese learners of English and will help language teachers to develop Chinese students' English pragmatic competence.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Questions

This paper aims to answer the following two questions:

◊ What kind of pragmatic transfer in suggestion strategies by Chinese learners of English as a foreign language occurs in their intercultural communication ?

◊ How does pragmatic transfer in suggestion strategies by Chinese learners of English as a foreign language occur in their intercultural communication?

The first research question can be answered through the investigation of the following three assumptions:

◊ There are significant differences in strategy use in suggestion by native English speakers and by Chinese learners of English as a foreign language.

◊ These differences can be explained by the similarities in strategy use between Chinese learners of English and native Chinese speakers if Chinese learners of English use suggestion strategies with a similar frequency to native Chinese speakers and more frequently than native English speakers.

◊ These differences can be explained by their overgeneralization of English pragmatic rules by Chinese learners of English as a foreign language if Chinese learners of English employ suggestion strategies more frequently than both native English speakers and native Chinese speakers.

The second research question can be answered through the exploration of the cultural causes or the overgeneralization causes of pragmatic transfer in suggestion strategies by Chinese learners of English as a foreign language. By answering these two research questions, we can get a better understanding of not only what kind of pragmatic transfer in suggestion strategies by Chinese learners of English occurs in their intercultural communication, but also how it occurs.

2.2 Subjects

The subjects are composed of three groups, the native English group, the Chinese learner of English group and the native Chinese group. Each group consists of 10 subjects. They are second-year university students, ranging in age from nineteen to twenty years old. So they show homogeneity in terms of age, education and profession. All subjects give consent for their data to be used for this research purpose by signing the consent form

prior to data collection.

2.3 Instrument

A discourse completion test (hereinafter referred to as DCT) questionnaire is used to elicit the required data in this present study. Eight situations are included in the questionnaire (see Appendix). The situations are designed on the basis of the situations in Banarjee and Carrell's study (1988) and Hinkel's study (1997). Modifications are made in the situation designing process in order for the situations to be more plausible in both Chinese and English cultures. In interlanguage pragmatics study, it is necessary to make sure that the situations in the DCT are equivalent cross-culturally. Therefore, in this study, after the situations are designed, the researcher consults with several native Chinese speakers and native English speakers to confirm whether these situations are feasible in their daily life. And then, these situations are further modified to achieve cultural equivalence. In order to avoid native Chinese speakers' misunderstanding of what they are required to do in the DCT questionnaire, the questionnaire given to them are translated into Chinese. In order to achieve the equivalence in the questionnaire translation, back translation technique is employed so as to reduce threat to the reliability and validity of the research.

2.4 Classification of Suggestion Strategies

The classification of suggestion strategies in this study is mainly based on Hinkel's study (1997). It divides suggestion strategies into four levels, depending on their directness. The four categories are direct suggestion strategies, hedged suggestion strategies, indirect suggestion strategies and opting out suggestion strategies. Direct suggestion strategies are suggestions in which the speaker's true intentions are clearly stated. Direct suggestions are performed by means of performative verbs (advise/ suggest/ recommend), obligation model verbs (shall/ should/ ought to/ had better/ must/ have to), imperative sentences or the specific formulae like you forget to/ you did not (Banerjee & Carrell, 1988). Hedged suggestion strategies are suggestions in which hedging devices can be employed to soften the force. Such hedging devices are weakeners, minimizers, question forms, tag questions, if-clause and impersonal forms. Indirect suggestion strategies refer to those expressions in which the speaker' true intentions are not clearly indicated. These indirect forms for suggestions do not show any conventionalized forms, that is, there is no indicator of suggestive force in the utterance, so the hearer has to infer that the speaker is actually making a suggestion. Opting out suggestion strategies are strategies in which subjects' choice of remaining silent is made. Table 1 presents the coding scheme for suggestion strategies.

Table 1
The Coding Scheme for Suggestion Strategies

Category	Sub-category	Example
Direct	a. performative verbs obligation model verbs	I suggest you correct it… You should follow that format…
	imperative sentences formulae	Please follow that format You didn't correct that mistake
Hedged	Um, I think you should follow that format.	
Indirect	The classroom is really noisy	
Opting Out	No response	

Hedging devices which are used to soften the imposition force of the suggestion can be classified into two categories: syntactic downgraders and lexical downgraders. Syntactic downgraders are hedging devices which mitigate the imposition force of the suggestion by syntactic structures, and lexical downgraders are ones which soften the force by certain lexical or phrasal items. The hedging devices used in this study are mainly based on Blum-kulka, House and Kasper(1989), Hinkel (1997), Guerra and Martinez-Flor (2006) and Zhan (1992), and are listed in Table 2.

Table 2
Classification of Hedging Devices

Syntactic Downgraders	
Question Forms	Why don't you…? Don't you…? Do you want….?
Probability Modals	Can/Could…….? May/Might………?
Conditional Clause	If you……., you can……
Subjunctive Clause	If I were you, I would……
Impersonals	It is a good idea to …….
Lexical Downgraders	
Subjectivizers	I think…, I suppose…, I am afraid that…
Downtoners	Maybe; possibly; It's likely that……
need to	You need to follow the teacher's format.
Inclusive "we"	Maybe we should follow that formats.
others	Appealers: isn't ……? Past Tense:I thought…. Passive Verbs: your mistake has not been corrected

2.5 Data Analysis

This study involves a questionnaire survey of 30 subjects. 20 copies of the English version of the questionnaire are administered to the native English subjects and the Chinese learner of English subjects, and 10 copies of the Chinese version of the questionnaire are given to the native Chinese subjects. All the distributed questionnaire copies are completed and returned. The total number of data collected is 80 suggestions in English by the native English subjects, 80 suggestions in English by the Chinese learner of English subjects and 80 suggestions in Chinese by the native Chinese subjects. The native Chinese subjects' 80 suggestions are translated into English.

According to the Table 1 and Table 2, the data are coded according to their categories. The frequency data derived from the coding scheme in this study are quantitatively analyzed by employing SPSS 11. The Chi-square test is used because it is an appropriate statistical instrument for frequency data (Brown, 1988). To know whether there are differences among the use of suggestion strategies across the group, the test of homogeneity is made. The significance level is set at 0.05 for all the analysis in this study. When the statistically significant difference is found, the standard residual is used to identify the major constructors to the differences (Hinkel, Wiersma, & Jurs, 1994). For the analysis of hedging devices, the descriptive statistics are employed to count the frequency of each strategy for each group.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 The Results of Suggestion Strategies

Four mutually exclusive suggestion strategies are identified in this study. The frequencies and percentages of each strategy by the three groups are shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Frequencies and Percentages of Each Strategy by the Three Groups

Group/ Strategy	Native English Group	Chinese Learner of English Group	Native Chinese Group
Direct	8(10%)	10(12.5%)	10(12.5%)
Hedged	16(20%)	22(27.5%)	12(15%)
Indirect	24(30%)	18(22.5%)	16(20%)
Opting Out	32(40%)	30(37.5%)	42(52.5%)
Total	80(100%)	80(100%)	80(100%)

x^2=20.524 df=6 p=0.002**
Note: The percentage of each suggestion strategy is provided in parentheses after the frequency. The percentage numbers are rounded to one decimal, so the sum of the percentages may be more or less than 100%.
 *P<.05   **P<.01   ***P<.001

According to Table 3, all three groups use opting out suggestion strategies the most frequently and direct suggestion strategies the least frequently. The second frequently used strategies by the native English group and the native Chinese group are indirect suggestion strategies. It is hedged suggestion strategies that are frequently used by the Chinese learner of English group second to opting out suggestion strategies. The result of Chi-square test shows that there is a statistically significant difference among the three groups (x^2=20.524, df=6 , p=0.002**). The standard residuals of each strategy are provided in Table 4.

Table 4
Standard Residuals of Each Strategy by the Three Groups

	Native English Group	Chinese Learner Of English Group	Native Chinese Group
Direct	-0.6	0.3	0.3
Hedged	-0.5	2.1	-1.4
Indirect	1.7	0.2	-1.7
Opting Out	-0.5	-1.6	2.3

Table 4 shows that the Chinese learner of English group uses hedged suggestion strategies statistically significantly more than the other two groups (R=2.1), while the native Chinese group employs opting out suggestion strategies statistically significantly more than the other two groups (R=2.3)

3.2 The Results of Hedging Devices

The frequencies of different hedging devices are provided to show how different groups use the hedging devices in their suggestion act. Table 5 illustrates the frequencies and percentages of each hedging devices by each group.

Table 5
Frequencies and Percentages of Each Hedging Devices

	Native English Group	Chinese Learner of English Group	Native Chinese Group
Syntactic Downgraders			
Question Forms	3(9.1%)	7(13.7%)	10(41.7%)
Probability Modals	7(21.2	11(21.6%)	4(16.7%)
Conditional Clause	2(6.1%)	1(2.0%)	2(8.3%)
Subjunctive Clause	1(3.2%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)
Impersonals	2(6.1%)	5(9.8%)	1(4.2%)
Lexical Downgraders			
Subjectivizers	6(18.2%)	8(15.7%)	1(4.2%)
Downtoners	4(12.1%)	12(23.5%)	3(12.5%)
need to	7(21.2%)	3(5.9%)	1(4.2%)
Inclusive "we"	0(0.0%)	1(2.0%)	1(4.2%)
Others	1(3.0%)	3(5.9%)	1(4.2%)
Total	33(100%)	51(100%)	24(100%)

x^2=189.763 df=18 p=0.002**
Note: The percentage of each hedging device is provided in parentheses after the frequency. The percentage numbers are rounded to one decimal, so the sum of the percentages may be more or less than 100%.
 *P<.05   **P<.01   ***P<.001

As shown in Table 5, the native English group uses probability modals, need to and subjectivizer the most frequently, while the Chinese learner of English group employs downtoners, probability modals and subjectivizers the most frequently. None of the subjects in the Chinese learner of English group use subjunctive clause as hedging device, neither do the subjects in the native Chinese group. For the native Chinese group, subjects in this group use question forms as hedging device almost exclusively to modify suggesting speech act.

3.3 Differences in the Frequency of Suggestion Strategies Used Between the Chinese Learner of English Group and the Native English Group

The quantitative analysis shows that subjects in the Chinese learner of English group use direct suggestion strategies and hedged suggestion strategies more frequently than the subjects in the native English group, which means that the most of the subjects in the Chinese learner of English group prefer to employ either direct suggestion strategies or hedged suggestion strategies. On the contrary, the subjects in the native English group prefer to use indirect suggestion strategies, simply inform the hearer of the problem or send regards to the hearer. Such differences may result from two different perceptions of suggesting speech act. In Chinese culture, making suggestions is regarded as rapport-building strategy (Hinkel, 1994, p.73) that can be a token of solidarity (Du, 1995; Lii Shih, 1994) . In society with collectivism value system like China, the group harmony is valued to a great extent (Hofstede, 1991; Kim, 1993). The suggestion after informing of the problem is a way of keeping the interpersonal relationship harmonious. However, such positive perception of suggesting speech act is not prevailing in English culture. In English culture, suggestion-making in an unsolicited way is considered a speech act with an imposition or offence. Such negative perception of suggestion in English culture is not surprising because English society is one of typical individualism society (Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey & Chua, 1988; Hofstede, 1991). In societies where individualism is held, individual autonomy and personal territory are sensitive and are not allowed to intrude (Hofstede ,1991; Hsu, 1981; Miller, 1984). Therefore, subjects in the native English group need to be cautious about an unsolicited suggestion so as not to impose on the hearer and not to be considered rude. As found in Table 3, the subjects in the native English group use indirect suggestion strategies more frequently than the subjects in the Chinese learner of English group, and the subjects in the native English group choose indirect suggestion strategies to mitigate the imposition force of their suggestions.

As for hedging devices, it is shown in Table 5 that the subjects in the Chinese learner of English group employ question forms as hedging device more frequently than the subjects in the native English group. This pragmalinguistic convention is transferred from the English language learner subjects' native language of Chinese into their use of English. This is due to the fact that suggestions made in question forms presuppose that the hearer's right to accept suggestions is optional, and therefore suggestions made in question forms are less threatening and less coercive, which results in the Chinese learner of English group's preference for the use of question forms as a suggestion strategy. The subjects in the native English group use questions to simply make the hearer aware of the situation, which presupposes that the speaker and the hearer share

a common concern for the matter in question and gives the hearer his responsibility for dealing with the situation. Therefore the subjects in the native English group seldom consider question forms to be an appropriate suggestion strategy. These two explanations give the reason that the subjects in the Chinese learner of English group display question forms more frequently than the subjects in the native English group.

The present study also finds that there are differences between the use of downtoners and probability modals between the Chinese learner of English group and the native English group. These differences may result from the teaching-induced errors. As noted by Jiang (2006), learners are taught the forms and grammar of probability modals without being informed of how to appropriately use them in the right context for the right speech act. This is also the case for downtoners. Such kind of teaching-induced errors leads Chinese learners of English to be overgeneralization of knowledge of probability modals and downtoners in English, which makes the subjects in the Chinese learner of English group use probability modals and downtoners more frequently than subjects in the native English group.

3.4 Similarities in the Frequency of Suggestion Strategies Used Between the Chinese Learner of English Group and the Native Chinese Group

The general picture that Table 3 gives is that frequencies of strategy use by the subjects in the Chinese learner of English group and the native Chinese group are the same in direct suggestion strategies. This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that Chinese society is considered to be a collectivism society. In this kind of the society, harmonious social relationship is highly valued. Suggestion-making is not only one method of keeping good relations among people, but also one duty of benefiting the society. This positive culture orientation of suggestion-making results in the tendency that Chinese learner of English group and the native Chinese group use direct suggestion strategies more frequently than the native English group. The similarity in the use of direct suggestion strategies between the Chinese learner of English group and the native Chinese group can statistically significantly explain the difference in the use of direct suggestion strategies between the Chinese learner of English group and the native English group.

No evidence of the similarity in the application of hedged suggestion strategies is found between the Chinese leaner of English group and the native Chinese group when they make suggestions. In fact, it can be seen from Table 3 that the subjects in the Chinese learner of English group use hedged suggestion strategies more frequently than the subjects in both the native English group and the native Chinese group. Table 4 also indicates that the Chinese learner of English group uses hedged suggestion strategies statistically significantly more

frequently than the other two groups (R=2.1) . This is due to the reason that, as discussed in the previous section, the Chinese learner of English group has a tendency of overgeneralization of knowledge of hedged suggestion strategies, which can be seen from Table 5 that the subjects in the Chinese learner of English group use five hedging devices of probability modals, impersonals, subjectivizers, downtoners and others more frequently than the other two groups. This is due to the fact that English language proficiency of the Chinese learner of English group is lower than both English language proficiency of the native English group and Chinese language proficiency of the native Chinese group. English language learners are not informed of how to use hedging devices in the right context for the right speech act when they are taught the grammar. Therefore the Chinese learner of English group tends to overuse their English linguistic knowledge and pragmatic rules, especially hedged suggestion strategies, which is a typical feature of their interlanguage pragmatics. This has proved the previous studies that English learners, especially advanced learners tend to use more linguistic forms than native speakers do (Bergman & Kasper, 1993; Blum-Kulka & Olstain, 1986; Chen, 2006; House, 1989; Lin, 2008; Olshtain & weinbach, 1993). According to Blum-Kulka & Olstain (1986), language learners' verbose linguistic forms can be one of pragmatic failures. In this present study, the subjects' verbosity in the Chinese learner of English group exists in their more frequent use of hedged suggestion strategies and hedging devices than the subjects in both the native English group and the native Chinese group.

4. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

According to the above findings, the subjects in the Chinese learner of English group display more frequent use of direct suggestion strategies and hedged suggestion strategies than the subjects in the native English group. Such pragmatic phenomenon is transferred from Chinese culture and teaching-induced errors respectively. In view of pragmatic transfer revealed in this study, two pedagogical implications are proposed below.

First, language teachers need to incorporate cross-cultural differences into their instruction syllabus for teaching of suggesting speech act. As shown above, the Chinese learner of English group transfers the pragmatic features from Chinese culture into their use of English. The suggestion realizations by the subjects in the Chinese learner of English group deviate from English norm. Such deviation may possibly result in misunderstandings in intercultural interactions with native English speakers. Therefore, it is needed for teachers to make learners aware of the differences between the perceptions of suggestions in their native culture and the target culture before teaching the suggestion formulae or expressions. As noted by Yu (2004), in addition to grammatical language forms,

learners need to pay attention to appropriate language use in order to achieve successful communication with native speakers of target language.

Second, language teachers and language material designers should present the suggestion formulae or the linguistic forms with as much contextual information as possible. According to Jiang (2006), most language textbooks simply provide a list of linguistic forms or structures for a specific linguistic function without information about context appropriateness. Such textbooks may result in misleading inputs for language learners and consequently become the cause of pragmatic transfer in learners' interlanguage. As shown in the results, there are the differences between the use of hedging devices by the Chinese learner of English group and by the native English group. The Chinese learner of English group tends to use downtoners, but it is scarcely used by the native English group. This suggests that a list of linguistic structures without contextual information can be misleading and can result in learners' inappropriate use of target language. Such flaw in textbooks should be corrected and teachers should make every effort to provide as much context-dependent information and as many real life conversations as possible. For example, in addition to providing a list of probability modals, teachers should further specify that suggestion utterances with can/could are more directive and thus may not be polite enough when suggestions are not requested by hearers. In the context where making suggestion is simply offering ideas for hearers to consider instead of accept, the modals may/might are more appropriate modals.

CONCLUSION

This paper contributes to cross-cultural understanding in that it identifies the cross-cultural and linguistic differences between the Chinese learner of English group and the native English group in suggesting speech act. The subjects in the Chinese learner of English group in their performance of the English suggestions are highly assumed to share some of the two languages' cultural features and have different perceptions of appropriateness and politeness in suggestion- making from the subjects in the native English group. This paper shows that there is pragmatic transfer, to some extent, in suggesting speech act by the Chinese learner of English group. It is found that although all three groups use opting out suggestion strategies the most frequently and direct suggestion strategies the least frequently, the Chinese learner of English group uses hedged suggestion strategies more frequently than the other two groups, which is supported by the frequencies of the three groups' hedging device use in which the Chinese learner of English group uses five hedging devices of probability modals, impersonals, subjectivizers, downtoners and others more frequently than the other two groups. This phenomenon is transferred

from the English language learners' overgeneralization of English pragmatic rules which results from their not being informed of how to use linguistic forms appropriately in the right context for the right speech act.

It is important to note that this study focuses on university students whose social variables of status and distance are equal. Further research may investigate other situations in which social variables such as status, distance, gender, and level of formality are different. In addition, the present study uses DCTs as a research tool which might yield data different from naturally occurring data. Future studies may collect data from a corpus of natural spoken language or employ ethnographic methodology so as to broaden our understanding of suggestion behaviours in natural settings. A longitudinal approach may be applied for a better understanding of the development of pragmatic competence in suggesting speech act by Chinese learners of English.

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Appendix

DCT Questionnaire

Instruction: In the following situations, if you would like to say something to your classmate, please write down the exact words you have said. Thank you for your cooperation.

1. You are using a computer at the computer centre on campus. Your classmate sits next to you. He would like to use the printer but fails to get it to operate because he does not know that the printer requires clicking a certain button before printing can be proceed. What would you say to him?

2. You are walking on campus. A classmate walks by. You see that the classmate has an ink stain on his sleeve.What would you say to him?

3. You are sitting in the classroom, waiting for class to begin. One of your classmates walks into the classroom and sits right in front of you. You notice that the price tag of his T-shirt has not been removed and it can be easily seen. What would you say to him?

4. Your classmate would like you to help him with an electronic file. After he copies the file from his USB flash drive to the computer, he directly unplugs the USB without using the safe removal procedure. This could damage the USB flash drive and the computer. What would you say to him?

5. A classmate is going to have an oral presentation in tomorrow's class. At the beginning of this semester, the teacher has distributed the outline format for the oral presentation. However, you find that the outline your classmate has prepared is different from the one the teacher requires. You think that it is better to follow the teacher's format. What would you say to him?

6. Your classmate is delivering his presentation in class. You are interested in the topic and you have enjoyed the presentation very much. But you notice that there is a mistake in one of his PowerPoint slides. What would you say to him?

7. You are walking down the hall on campus. You encounter a classmate. He is going to the reading room in the library. You are aware that the reading room is undergoing repairs and therefore noisy. What would you say to him?

8. In the library, a classmate would like to borrow a novel and you know there is a more interesting one. What would you say to him?