

AM I BEING POLITE?

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*An
investigation
of Chinese
students'
pragmatic
competence in
the realization
of politeness
strategies in
English
requests*



Abstract

Second language learning is difficult when social context is involved, especially if the culture of the target language is inherently different from the native one. A full command of a second language involves a linguistic and ideological 'reframing' process. At this stage, pragmatic competence is crucial to interlanguage learners. The realization of speech acts, such as implementing politeness strategies, requires a high command of not only linguistic but also social knowledge. This research investigated Chinese English learners' command of making polite requests with regard to applying different politeness strategies by conducting tests amongst Chinese high school and university students. After analysing the results, some problems are displayed and explanations are ventured.

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1. Introduction

Learning a second language is a challenging task. The actual linguistic production in a non-native language—the command of positive knowledge in language acquisition—is perhaps the most difficult part. These difficulties arise probably because languages are prominently involved in specific cultural and social settings. Therefore, without a competent cultural background, it is common for language learners to make what is termed ‘pragmatic failure’. It is not unusual for second language learners to speak the language grammatically perfect yet still sound inappropriate, incorrect or ‘foreign’. Often the mistakes they make are not linguistically orientated but pragmatically or culturally. From personal experience, I have had difficulties expressing myself ‘appropriately’ in English, especially when making requests to my western friends. I used to say ‘pass me the salt’, ‘I need a pan’, or ‘give me that pepper’ when cooking with my western housemates. Even though they acted okay with it, they would later jokingly call me a ‘bossy Chinese chef’. Then I suddenly realized it is perhaps impolite to make requests so boldly and directly within their culture. However, it is impolite to make such direct requests in Chinese, which I do not do, and I’m not considered impolite amongst my Chinese friends. Also, I was surprised when a friend told me that when he was in London, a local taxi driver complained to him about those ‘impolite Chinese travellers’ as they requested to be taken to places by providing the address boldly without even say ‘please’. Such misunderstandings or even disputes, I presume, have generated the fascination of the study of cross-cultural pragmatics. This current paper, too, is going to focus on interlanguage pragmatics specifically on the realization of requests by Chinese learners of English. The aim of this study is to find out whether there is a trend that Chinese students have trouble in forming requests in English, and try to give some linguistic as well as non-linguistic explanations for it. It is hypothesized, specifically, that linguistic and ideological differences between Chinese and English are highly likely to result in interruption thus creating difficulties in the process of learning English as a second language for Chinese students.

The paper begins by introducing a theoretical background specifically with regard to grammatical differences between Chinese and English on realization of politeness strategy as well as providing an overview of relevant literature on pragmatic competence in second language learning. Thereafter follows the research procedure and discussion about research results. Finally, informed by both research data and previous studies on the topic, the author proposes some practical suggestions as to improve English education in China at intermediate as well as advanced levels.

2. Theoretical Background

In this chapter a theoretical framework for the paper will be established. The framework will be explained in two approaches—a grammatical one followed by a pragmatic one. First of all, the notion of politeness strategy is briefly introduced and then a specific introduction of politeness strategies in Mandarin Chinese is presented. In light of several special Mandarin Chinese politeness strategies, a pragmatic approach towards the treatment of politeness strategy in second language learning is introduced. Besides purely grammatical differences in the formation of requests between Chinese and English, dissimilarity in ideology creates difficulty in producing appropriate requests in English for Chinese students. Finally, in order to analyse the procedure of application of politeness strategies in English by Chinese students, a model of linguistic production regarding politeness in requests is illustrated at the end of the chapter.

2.1 Politeness theory and requests

Despite the wave of criticisms against the universality of Brown and Levinson's (henceforth referred as B & L) (1987) politeness theory (e.g., Ide, 1989 & 1993; Matsumoto, 1989; Gu, 1990; Mao, 1994), the model still holds ground as a reliable model regarding researching within the field of politeness theory that has been most frequently cited as academic reference within the field of language and politeness. Briefly, Brown and Levinson proposed the concept of 'face' in interpersonal communications:

The public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself, consisting of two related aspects: (1). '**negative face**: the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction—i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition; and (2). **positive face**: the positive consistent self-image or 'personality' (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants.' (B&L 1987: 61)

With regard to the definition of *face*, B & L brought upon the notion of 'face-threatening acts' (FTA) which refers to speech acts that could potentially threaten the maintenance of both the speaker's and/or the hearer's face. Therefore, to avoid such threats from happening, and to preserve faces, the speaker will adjust his or her language, referred to as applying politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

2.1.1 Politeness strategies and requests

Among the FTAs that are identified by B & L, *requests* are regarded as a speech acts that would inherently threaten the hearer's negative face on the ground that requests could potentially violate their rights of freedom.

Therefore, individuals apply different linguistic or even non-linguistic strategies to avoid negative consequences of face-threatening acts by showing awareness of either the speaker's or the

interlocutor's face wants. These strategies are categorized as 'positive' and 'negative politeness strategies' according to Brown and Levinson's theory. Positive strategies focus upon the positive face wants of interlocutors while negative strategies pay attention to negative face wants of interlocutors. The application of positive politeness strategy is often displaying friendliness whereas in order to achieve negative politeness strategy people often show deference or create distance between parties of conversations. In theory, therefore, face threats connected with requests could be softened by the applications of either positive or negative politeness strategies. B & L (1987) presented a system of politeness strategies which could be divided into four levels based on how serious face threats are: bald on-record, negative politeness, positive politeness and off-record (hint). Requests in their most bald form, namely imperatives, would be categorized as a clear FTA without any mitigation because they necessarily include imposition on interlocutors' actions by asking them to do things they might not have intention to do with no softening. In task-oriented situations and cases where speakers of very different social/power status feature, requests in plain imperatives are most likely to occur (Brown and Levinson, 1987). The following example is taken from Brown and Levinson (1987):

(1) Pass me the hammer.

However, in the majority of human communication situations, requests are most likely to occur with certain redressive action. One strategy of redress is *positive politeness strategy* which functions to make the hearers feel good about themselves. Brown & Levinson (1987) outlined several specific linguistic strategies that attend to hearer's face wants including attending to the hearer's interests. Some examples are as follows (adjusting to the request of example 1),

(2) Be optimistic:

I'm sure you won't mind passing me the hammer.

(3) Attend to hearer's interests, needs, wants:

Do you know what you can do to help me build this beautiful bookshelf? –Simply by passing me the hammer behind you.

Also, it is common to implement negative politeness strategies in forming requests. Some specific examples from B & L (1987) are presented below, with adjustments on request (1):

(4) Be conventionally indirect:

Can you please pass me the hammer?

Here the use of 'please' together with 'can you...' excludes the interpretation of questioning the addressee's ability of taking the action.

(5) Use hedges or questions:

Perhaps you could pass me the hammer.

Could you pass me the hammer?

(6) Be pessimistic:

I suppose you could not help me get the hammer, then?

(7) Minimize the imposition:

I *just* want to ask if you could pass me the hammer.

In English this is usually applied by using the word ‘just’ (e.g., Can you just...) which slightly narrows the extent of the request.

(8) Give deference:

I must be very annoying but can you pass me the hammer?

Here by the humbling of oneself, the speaker gives the hearer a higher social status thus deference is realized.

Finally, if a speaker still feels uncomfortable making mitigated requests applying either of the strategies mentioned above, then they might avoid the FTA completely by staying off-record (for instance giving hints or simply keeping silent).

(9) There is a hammer right behind you.

Although B & L’s politeness strategies are mostly based on the English language, this does not necessarily exclude its applicability on other languages, at least in concerning the basic framework of analyzing politeness strategies

This section briefly introduced the politeness model proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), especially in terms of the implementation of politeness strategies on requests. This research will use this particular politeness theory framework. In the next section politeness strategies on requests in Chinese will be discussed, especially with regards to its unique linguistic properties.

2.1.2 Politeness strategy in Mandarin Chinese requests

As has been mentioned before, requests are often characterized as a kind of FTA act in that by making requests the hearer’s right of freedom is somehow violated. In the Chinese language, there are also politeness strategies that could be interpreted using B & L’s theoretical model. However, when it comes to specific linguistic strategies, Mandarin Chinese also has several unique features.

2.1.2.1 Attend to hearer’s interests, needs, wants

According to Zhan (1992), the Mandarin Chinese linguistic strategy that accommodates B and L’s (1987) politeness strategy for expressing sympathy, cooperation and understanding is the use of certain particles including ‘欸’ *ei* or ‘嘞’ *lei*. Examples are as follows.

(10) 快上这边来欸，这边风景可好嘞。

Kuaishang zhebian lai **ei**, zhebian fengjing ke hao **lei**

Quick here come PAR here view very good PAR

‘Quick, come over here, the scenery here is very good.’

Here, by using particles, the speaker is trying to raise the hearer’s interest by attracting his/her attention.

(11) 借光嘞，借光嘞，别碰了您欸。

Jieguang **lei**, jieguang **lei**, bie peng le nin **ei**

Excuse PAR Excuse PAR not hit ASP you PAR

‘Excuse me, excuse me, don’t let me hit you.’

Similarly, *lei* in this situation indicates the speaker’s attention of not wanting to clash into the addressee.

In addition, particles like ‘呕’ *ou* and ‘喽’ *lou* are used in Mandarin Chinese to catch the hearer’s attention, especially in warning potential dangers. For example,

(12) 小心呕，别摔着喽。

Xiaoxin **ou**, bie shuai-zhe **lou**.

Watch out PAR, not fall over PAR

‘Watch out, don’t fall over.’

2.1.2.2 Give deference

Similar to English, Mandarin Chinese also has linguistic strategies for showing deference; however those strategies are different from those in other languages, mainly by way of softening the tone of speech (Zhan, 1992).

In Mandarin Chinese if reduplication of verbs occurs, a request will appear less demanding. For instance,

(13) 妈，帮我开开门。

Ma, bang wo kai-kai men.

Mom help I open-open door

‘Mom, can you open the door for me?’

2.1.2.3 Minimize imposition

Mandarin Chinese speakers add a phrase ‘一下’ *yixia* (once) after verbs to minimize the imposition of demands or requests. The construction has for a long time attracted a great deal of attention from researchers (Chao, 1968; Lv, 1981; Zhu, 1982; Liu, 1984; Lu & Wu, 2005; Gan, 2005). Among them, Liu (1984) for the first time proposed that the construction V+ ‘一下’ has a similar function as verb reduplication in making polite requests. For instance,

(14) 等一下。

Deng yi xia

Wait YIXIA

‘Wait a moment, please.’

In the same year, another scholar Xiangyuan (1984) presented an in-depth discussion regarding the function of the construction V+ ‘一下’, which proposed two forms of the construction, namely Classifier V+ ‘一下’ (CLA) and Temporal Adverbial V+ ‘一下’ (TMA). He also suggested that both forms are linguistic tools to soften the intonation of sentences. Example (15) is a CLA construction and (16) consists of a TMA construction.

(15) 哥哥，抬一下桌子。

Gege tai yi xia zhuozi

Big brother lift YI XIA table

‘Brother, please lift the table a little.’

(16) 你过来一下。

Ni guo lai yi xia

You come over YI XIA

‘Please come over here.’

Clearly, from the translations of the examples above, the V + ‘一下’ construction indeed eased the tension of the requests. Specifically, in (15), by stressing the short duration of the action ‘hit’, the incidence described in the sentence became less serious. Similarly in example (16) the construction indicated a kind request instead of a demand—as presented in the English translation ‘please’, which did not occur in the original Mandarin Chinese text.

Another strategy for softening the tone to minimize the imposition of a request in Mandarin Chinese is to use particles such as ‘啊’ *a*, and ‘吧’ *ba*. If ‘啊’. This appears after a vocative, for instance, subsequently the tone of the utterance becomes softer (Zhan, 1992). Example (17) illustrates the difference between a request in Chinese with and without the particle ‘啊’.

- (17) A. 李明啊，给我倒杯水。
Liming a, gei wo dao bei shui.
Liming A give I pull cup water
‘Liming, pour me a cup of water please.’
- B. 李明，给我倒杯水。
Liming, gei wo dao bei shui.
Liming, give I pull cup water
‘Liming, pour me a cup of water.’

Clearly, by using the particle ‘啊’, the request is less demanding—just like adding a ‘please’ in the English sentence.

Similarly, the particle ‘吧’ gives a sentence a suggestive tone which makes it less blunt. For example,

- (18) 这篇论文你再写一遍吧。
Zhe pian lunwen ni zai xie yibian ba.
This CLA essay you again write once BA
‘Could you write the essay once again?’

2.1.2.4 Be optimistic

Thirdly, Mandarin Chinese has a unique way of making a request sound optimistic, namely a speaker holds an optimistic attitude when making requests or giving suggestions. This strategy is also included

in B & L's (1987) politeness strategy. Linguistically, Mandarin Chinese speakers apply auxiliary verbs including '得' *dei* (must, have to) and '应该/应当' *yinggai/yingdang* (should, ought to) to avoid FTA in particularly strong commands. According to Zhan's (1992) categorization, examples are as follows:

(19) A. 你得帮我这个忙!

Ni dei bang wo zhege mang!

You AUX help I this help

'You have to help me on this.'

B. 你应该多穿点衣服。

Ni yinggai duo chuan dian yifu.

You should more put-on little clothes

'You should put on a little more clothes.'

Interestingly, a native English speaker will probably still find the English translation of the above sentences rude or impolite while a Chinese speaker would not feel offended. In fact, the second sentence appears quite often between generations in Chinese families when parents or grandparents say something like that to youngsters inside the family expressing care and love, or even between mere acquaintances. This is because these auxiliaries imply intimacy between the speaker and the hearer that one can feel free to give advice or suggestions.

To summarize, there are politeness strategies in Mandarin Chinese following B & L's (1987) politeness theory. However, the linguistic strategy applied is somehow unique in terms of grammar. Thus, difficulties might occur for Chinese speakers learning English if there is a lack of pragmalinguistic awareness towards these differences.

2.2 Politeness strategy in second language learning

As previously mentioned, politeness strategies in languages are largely associated with speech acts and their effects on people involved in conversations. For second language learners, therefore, they need to develop linguistic competences including what Thomas (1983) terms sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic competence in order to 'reframe' politeness in another language. This section will give an introduction with regards to the pragmatic skills that students of a second language would need to master, especially in choosing politeness strategies.

2.2.1 Linguistic competences in second language learning

To begin with, research in the field of speech acts and pragmatics is based on a fundamental principle that we use language for the purpose of communication (Harlow, 1990). Hymes (1964) introduced the term ‘communicative competence’ which refers to the linguistic knowledge that a speaker must possess in order to communicate successfully in a language. Amongst the five basic assumptions about the nature of language communication by Richards (1983), two of them are particularly interesting when it comes to second language learning. The first is the assumption that communication is conventional, which means every language has its own rules that constrain speakers’ creation of encoding semantic meanings. The other assumption, perhaps of most importance to the paper, is that it is subject to social norms. In other words, while learning and perhaps trying to master a foreign language, speakers have to acquire sufficient sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge. In short, linguistic, social and pragmatic skills are of equal importance in second language acquisition. However, several studies (cf. Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1986; Faerch & Kasper 1989; Hassall 2001) have suggested that because of an imperfect control over the second language, learners tend to undermine the pragmatic factors and opt for clarity in their second language speech act performance. Before researching into this phenomenon, several theoretical concepts need to be explained.

2.2.1.1 Pragmalinguistic competence in second language learning

Pragmalinguistic competence, by definition, means the ability to perform appropriately in verbal communication (Thomas, 1983). With regard to second language learners, sufficient pragmalinguistic knowledge equips them with linguistic resources to evaluate and produce appropriate language use when having conversations in a foreign language. For example, in the case of a request for help, interactants have several forms of linguistic choices such as *Help me*, *Can you help me?*, *Could you help me?*, *Could you possibly help me?*, etc. These constructions of requests are of different levels of politeness (out of context, the degree of politeness of the examples increases); a second language learner with sufficient pragmalinguistic competence would be aware of those forms and know the differences in terms of politeness.

However, a mere pragmalinguistic competence is not enough for learners of a foreign language to produce or perform appropriate speech acts in a language of imperfect control. Another crucial skill they must acquire is that of sociopragmatic competence.

2.2.1.2 Sociopragmatic competence in second language learning

The term ‘sociopragmatic’ refers to the speakers’ ability to differentiate speech act strategies and apply them with accordance to various social or situational factors engaged in communications (Harlow,

1990). For second language learners, more specifically, sociopragmatic competence means that they are aware of the appropriate social rules a foreign language applies and how to use linguistic strategies correctly in specific social situations. This, according to Harlow (1990), is more complicated for them since there is for the most part little or at least not enough information regarding social constraints in language textbooks. As has been presented above, it is normal that their native language implements different linguistic strategies upon specific speech acts from a second language; for instance the Chinese way of expressing care and love (between mere acquaintances) through making a 'request' of asking people to wear more clothes might be considered rude or impolite in English speaking societies. Such misunderstanding caused by pragmatic incompetence is termed 'pragmatic failure' by Thomas (1983). In addition to Thomas' (1983) theory, Leech (1983) in the same year explained the notion of sociopragmatic failure and pragmalinguistic failure in detail. According to both of them, sociopragmatic failure results from differences in cross-cultural perceptions in terms of what constitutes the correct way of constructing conversations. However, evidence has shown (Wolfson, 1981) that detecting social norms on language production as well as their influences on language construction are largely based on native speakers' intuition upon what effects speech acts would have in their mother tongues. However, those intuitions are not consciously known by speakers. Several studies (Brower, Marinell and Dorian 1979; Labov, William and Tucker 1972; Manes and Wolfson 1981; and Wolfson 1981, 1983) indicated that appropriate speech acts are formed naturally but not recognized. As a result, when communicating in a second language, speakers are highly likely to be influenced by their native tongue possibly leading to inappropriate behaviour. When it comes to politeness strategy, in particular, Koike (1989) conducted a research aiming at detecting whether first language politeness rules would have effects on second language speech act production. Her study illustrated that even though speakers had some pragmatic knowledge of politeness; they sometimes chose not to apply it and opted for clearer structures that might be considered impolite. In short, even second language learners who already possess sociopragmatic competence would tend to take priority in getting messages through over concerns for politeness.

To summarize, in order to perform linguistic acts appropriately in a foreign language, pragmatic skills are crucial for second language learners in terms of a good combination of both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence.

2.2.2 A model of 'reframing' politeness in second language learning

This section of the paper gives an outline of a modified model for the analysis of second language learning of politeness proposed by Brown (2010), which is based on Terkourafi's (2005) 'frame-based' approach. Before that, it is important to point out that the model has a consensus with Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory regarding speakers' application of politeness in languages is motivated by the concept of 'face'. However, 'face' here refers to a broader understanding as individual (or

group) images or identities that are realized through interactions within verbal communications in speech communities. In other words, ‘face’ in this sense is no longer a fixed concept; instead it is a social production that is actively constructed through cooperation. Therefore, the implementation of politeness strategies would not depend entirely on speakers’ own choice; instead, on social rationality (e.g., Terkourafi, 2005). As will be illustrated in this paper, social contents of speakers’ first language would insert crucial influences on their evaluation and thereafter production of politeness strategies especially in a second language setting.

2.2.2.1 Developing politeness in a foreign language as ‘re-framing’

To begin with, the ‘frame-based’ view is largely correlated with the theories mentioned in previous sections regarding the formation of linguistic competence in a socio-cultural specific context. In line with this theory, Brown (2010) identifies the process of acquiring linguistic and pragmatic competence for producing speech acts—politeness acquisition in particular—in a second language as ‘re-framing’.

The notion of ‘framing’ has been increasingly recognised by researches within the field of sociocultural theory in second language acquisition (cf. Lantolf, 2000). In this view, students gain sociopragmatic knowledge by engaging in interactions within culturally oriented practices. Specifically, through those practices, learners gradually familiarize themselves with social norms and then they acquire the correct knowledge internally. Thus, as the students are equipped with sufficient social knowledge, they get used to specific social concepts applied in a speech community and ultimately produce language in the same way as native speakers do.

Nevertheless, there is an important difference in the process of developing politeness between one’s mother tongue and a foreign language. This difference is that instead of acquiring such linguistic competence from scratch, like children learning their first language, second language learners have already been preoccupied by social norms attached to their native language which will definitely influence the development of politeness in the other language that they are learning. The notion of ‘re-framing’, therefore, is best interpreted as the enrichment of existing frames (Brown, 2010).

This process, therefore, involves an interaction between two different politeness frameworks. The degree of (dis)similarity between those two frames (or social ideologies as it will be termed in the following subsection) would most likely play a central role in terms of how well second language learners adopt politeness strategies in a non-native tongue. Therefore, it could be expected that learners from a Chinese cultural background might encounter greater difficulty in learning politeness strategy in English than those from a similar society to the English speaking ones.

2.2.2.2 Negotiating ideologies of politeness

When encountering differences between socio-cultural ideologies (the concept of politeness in this case), the procedure of ‘re-framing’ would inevitably be influenced by the basic definition of ‘speaking in a polite way’ in both languages. Thus, Brown (2010) argues that the feeling of a clash between ideologies is particularly intensified for second language learners. This is because not only do learners hold a predominant ‘framework’ of politeness related to their first language that instruct their speech act behaviour, they also have been unconsciously immersed in an overall ideology influenced by that language for a long period of time. Evidence has shown (e.g., Siegal, 1994; Du Fon, 1999) that on occasions when they are exposed to second language behaviours that are different from or even contradict their own, they are likely to be reluctant to correct their linguistic performance.

As previously mentioned, and more specifically related to this current investigation, the differences in specific linguistic strategies of expressing politeness between Chinese and English are obvious. Besides pure linguistic/grammatical differences that may hinder second language learners’ achievement, ideological differences in Chinese and English culture also play an important role. Previous studies on Chinese politeness/indirectness (Zhang, 1995) suggest that that ‘rules operating on the directness-indirectness distinction were different in English and Chinese’. The ideology that is associated with the Chinese way of expressing politeness could even overrule the seemingly impolite request (such as the caring ‘request’ of putting on more clothes by Chinese parents). Moreover, linguistic resources (or pragmalinguistic knowledge) in the Chinese language are clearly different to those in the English language. Pan & Kadar (2011) concludes that in the Chinese language, politeness is realized at lexical/discourse level with realization by small talk or supportive moves instead of the syntax level as in the English language. In addition, Zhang (1995) states that Chinese politeness for the most part is in line with ‘information sequencing’, which is also testified by Scollon and Scollon (1991) claiming that topic instruction often includes a rather long period of small talk in conversations in Asian culture as a whole.

Nevertheless, regardless of the significance of lexicon in the realization of politeness in Chinese, it is worth noting that there has been a change or even loss of many lexical realizations regarding politeness in Chinese language together with their influence on polite behaviour in the Chinese language (Pan & Kadar, 2011). One aspect that is closely related to the current paper is the derogation of several conventional politeness expressions such as *qing* 请 (‘please’), *xiexie* 谢谢 (‘thank you’), and *duibuqi* 对不起 (‘sorry’). Such terms are nowadays, according to Pan & Kadar (2011), largely associated with an impression of ‘old China’, and have been kept for only extremely formal discourse situations while in daily conversational interactions the use of these terms have been seen as old-fashioned or even ‘*petit bourgeois*’.

In short, it is reasonable to assume that Chinese students would encounter troubles in terms of ideology when they are learning the correct way of expressing requests in a polite way in English.

2.2.2.3 Applying politeness strategies in a second language

The final stage, as has been discussed in the previous subsection, of complete command of politeness strategies in a second language is to apply them *appropriately*. Here the appropriateness would have to be evaluated in context of the second language and in the view of native speakers of that particular language (English in this case). The evaluation of linguistic competence in terms of speech act performance could be conducted in this stage. However, as has been illustrated in previous sections, since differences occur in specific treatments of politeness strategies between Chinese and English, it is reasonable to predict that difficulties will occur in the production of politeness strategies in English by Chinese learners. The following research analysis, specifically, will be based on the requests produced by research subjects and in an English language context.

3. Methodology

In order to find out whether learners of English in China have difficulties in realizing requests in their L2, an empirical design of data collection that tackles cross-culture speech act realization is required. The following sections explain the methodology of the research.

3.1 Subjects

First of all, this research will include two different groups of English learners—intermediate and advanced learners. According to the current Chinese national education system, English is a nationwide compulsory subject until high school. In other words, up until the end of high school education, Chinese students have a more or less similar English course throughout the nation, which qualifies them as the most representative group for this research paper. In total 89 participants in this research are in their final year of high school, preparing for the national college entrance examination at the time when the test was conducted. Furthermore, a group of 20 advanced English learners are investigated—normal university (universities specifically providing education related programmes) undergraduate students who are prospective future English teachers.

3.2 Procedure

The aim of these tests was to yield some qualitative perspective into the second language learners' ability to adjust their politeness strategies in a non-native language setting. Therefore it is important to present tests to them in a form that they are familiar and feel at ease with. Also, taking participants' English language competence into account, it is reasonable to use different test forms for the two groups—discourse completion test and translation tasks.

3.2.1 The translation test

When it comes to the high school students, since a comparison of the two groups of participants is not relevant to the research aim of the paper, we decided to use a simple translation test as our method of data elicitation. We provided ten requests in Chinese and asked the students to translate them into English. The reason for not applying DCT for these participants is that they are not at all familiar with the DCT form of test—questions in English—thus it is possible that they would produce unnatural speech acts in an unfamiliar language setting. On the contrary, a translation test is one of the test forms which the subjects deal with on a daily basis so that they will be less consciously aware of their language production under such circumstances. In other words, in order to be as precise and natural as possible, we opted for a language setting that they feel more at ease with. The questions are selected based on the different strategies that the Chinese language apply for forming requests, as has been mentioned in section 1.1.2 in the current paper. The author formulated the questions according to the examples illustrated earlier in the paper, see appendix 2 for a detailed list.

The translation test was presented as a normal pop quiz during a random English class in a middle school in the author’s hometown, Leiyang City, Hunan province. In order to extract as much naturally produced utterances from participants as possible, we integrated our test as part of a quiz that they take at a daily basis so that the participants had no knowledge of taking part in a questionnaire.

3.2.2 Evaluation of the translation task

70 out of 89 responses were evaluated and scored by a native speaker and the author (with specific instructions provided by the native English speaker) on a scale of 1-5 with 1 for the most polite translation and 5 for the least polite answer. Then the average score per question is calculated and I will use that as the primary data for the analysis in the following sections. The reason for the deletion of the other 19 responses is that there are grammatical mistakes in the answers, which makes it less valuable to conduct evaluation for these answers on the level of politeness. Table 1 illustrated the scoring index applied in this procedure:

Interpretation	Very (or too) polite	Polite	Acceptable	Slightly acceptable	Impolite
Score	1	2	3	4	5

Table 1 Evaluation scoring Index translation tasks

In addition, in order to quantify the evaluation in terms of the comparison between Chinese and English to see whether there is a discrepancy on Chinese students’ perception on level of politeness between Chinese and English, another group of 20 Chinese high school students who did not participate in the translation task was asked to evaluate the level of politeness of the 7 sentences in the translation task on the same scale of 1-5. Presumably the grades assigned to the Chinese sentences by this group of participants represent their perception on level of politeness on such requests in general. The reason for not asking them to evaluate translated sentences by their fellow students is that their standard of evaluating English sentences is more likely to be influenced by their perception of grammatical correctness rather than level of politeness that this research aims at. The purpose of selecting students who did not take the translation task is to avoid interference one their performance during the task, that is, to extract naturally produced speech act examples.

3.2.3 The DCT

The instrument used for testing the advanced group is the Discourse Completion Test (henceforth DCT), initially designed by Blum-Kulka (1982), in order to compare the production of speech acts of native speakers and language learners. A DCT generally consists of a short description of the discourse situation, including the setting as well as the relationship between the interlocutors—and an incomplete dialogue sequence. The students were asked to complete the conversation, reacting in a

way they thought that would best fit the given discourse situations; at the same time they are implementing politeness strategies in requests.

Despite the fact that the DCT has been a major data elicitation instrument for research project on speech acts (e.g., the Cross Cultural Speech Act Realization Project 1984) and a great number of cross-culture/linguistic researches (e.g., Faerch & Kasper, 1989; Fukushima, 1990; Turnbull, 2001; Yuan 2001), it is still necessary to point out that there are criticisms with regard to the validity of this instrument. Perhaps the most widespread concern is how representative those elicited data are compared to respondents' natural spontaneous reaction in real-time conversations, or how reliable written answers are as an indication of their speaking style. Nevertheless, keeping its limitations in mind, the DCT is still widely accepted as an effective and valid research method for data collection in the field of speech act study (Billmyer & Varghese, 2000; Turnbull, 2001; Golato, 2003; Yuan, 2001). Therefore it is reasonable to conclude that as long as the weakness of DCT are acknowledged and considered, it still remains a good tool for the current research.

In the present research paper we used a modified version of the DCT in The Cross Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989). The CCSARP project was established aiming at cross-cultural investigations of speech act realization. The version by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), more specifically, focused on the linguistic realization of requests and apologies. Considering the relevance to the current paper, it is reasonable to apply the same DCT tests in our research questionnaires. Eight discourse situations were presented in the questions; however, instead of providing a specific sequence of conversation, our questionnaire asked participants to write down their own response under each discourse situation. In other words, we used a semi-DCT test that only short situational descriptions were provided. Specifically, the eight same request situations in the CCSARP investigation were included in the current research. They were as follows:

- 1). A student asks his roommate to clean up the kitchen which the other left a mess.
- 2). A girl tries to get rid of a boy pestering her on the street.
- 3). A student asks another student to lend her some lecture notes.
- 4). A student asks people living on the same street for a ride home.
- 5). Applicant calls for information on a job advertised in a paper.
- 6). A policeman asks a driver to move a car.
- 7). A student asks a teacher for an extension for finishing a seminar paper.
- 8). A university teacher asks a student to give a lecture a week earlier than scheduled.

Social relationships between interlocutors vary in those situations in order to level out influence on participants' bias in terms of social distance. Also we changed the original 'her car' in question 6 to 'a car'— and the same for question 7— to avoid potential gender influence on subjects' speech act realization. Students were asked to make their own requests under all situations. In order to avoid long paragraphs, we provided two lines under each situation hinting that they should, if possible, keep their answer in a certain length (see appendix 1).

The DCT test was formed in google docs online and was made accessible to participants for a whole week so that they could freely arrange a test time.

3.2.4 Evaluation of the DCT

The data was transformed into a questionnaire and in total 12 English native speakers who come from the UK who are currently university students in the UK took part in the evaluation procedure on a basis of 1-5 score, 1 as in most appropriate request and 5 as the least acceptable in terms of politeness.

Each of them evaluated 10 responses per question and average scores for each task were calculated and used for the current paper. In addition, they were asked to leave their comments where they want to give some explanation on their grades.

3.3 Extra evaluation experiment and interview

A random sample of 20 responses of translations was selected and graded by 4 teachers in the same high school where the translation task took place. 2 of them were asked to grade (on the same grading standard as the evaluation procedure mentioned above) those 20 responses according to their own standard and the other 2 were provided with answers given by a Chinese-English bilingual speaker. This extra interview is designed for the purpose of testing a possible change in the teaching process for the purpose of improvement in students' performance with regard to sociopragmatic competence of English as a second language.

In addition, 4 interviews (2 female interviewees and 2 male interviewees) took place via phone call between the author and 4 high school students who took part in the translation task by asking them why they graded those Chinese sentences provided. This interview is designed for the purpose of collecting relative information regarding 'ideology' of politeness perceived by Chinese high school students under specific discourse situations. Thus, with this information, a comparison of ideological difference between Chinese and English in forming specific requests can be conducted with necessary consultation from native English speakers.

4. Results and discussion

The following chapter includes firstly a detailed display of results from the tasks and interviews for the current paper together with discussions on the collected data. Also some suggestions on issues noted in the data are provided.

4.1 Data analysis: high school students in China

In the following chapter, data collected from tests in the Chinese high school will be analyzed. The aim of this chapter is to come up with a qualitative image of the competence in terms of the realization of politeness strategies in English.

4.1.1 Pragmalinguistic incompetence

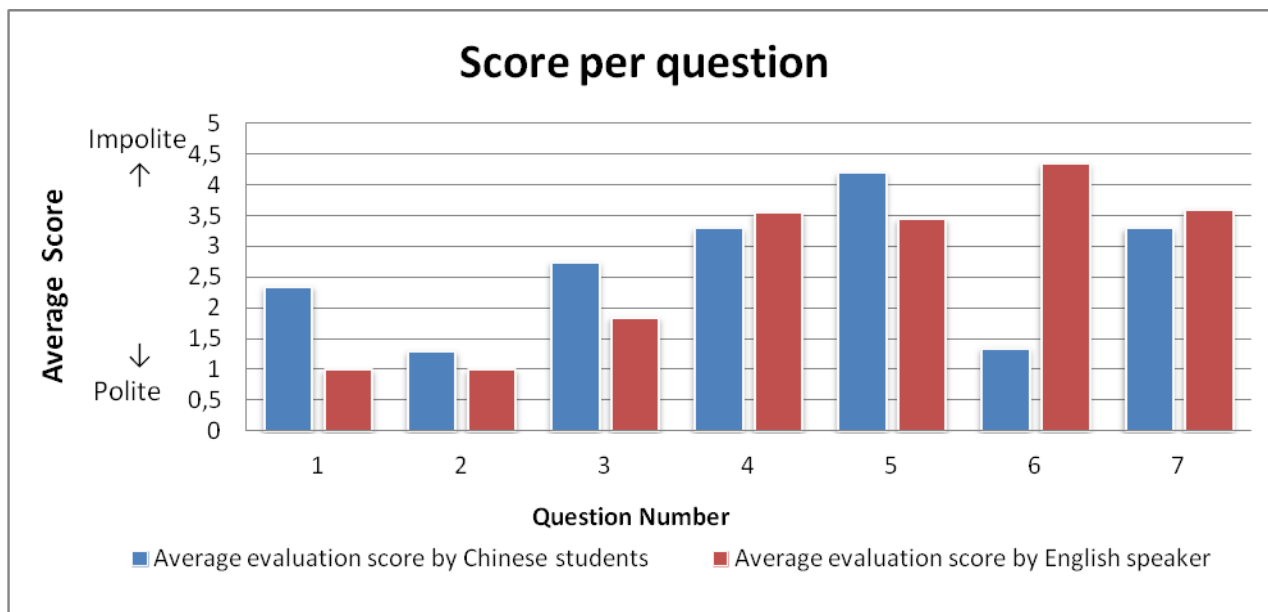
Pragmalinguistic incompetence is extremely common amongst the 19 responses that were excluded from the evaluation procedure. For instance, 17 out of 19 answers for question 3 where they were asked to translate a sentence asking his/her mother to open the door is more or less identical to ‘Mom, help me open the door.’ Clearly it is a word-by-word translation since there is a word *bang* 帮 (‘help’) in the Chinese sentence but is not necessary if translated into English. In addition, a considerable part of those participants answers do not contain a single interrogative sentence, which is highly likely an indication of pragmalinguistic incompetence in that subjects are probably not aware of the differences amongst different linguistic forms (i.e. sentence structures) for constructing requests in English especially when they are actually instructed to avoid word-by-word translation (see appendix for instructions included in the example translation task). Taking into account that this is a relatively large group—accounts for 23.4%—within the overall subjects for the current paper, and a few similar mistakes were spotted in answers by the rest of the high school participants, potentially a considerable amount of Chinese high school students may have difficulty in their English learning at a very early and fundamental stage.

4.1.2 Sociopragmatic competence

Despite the fact that some participants illustrated certain levels of pragmalinguistic incompetence through the translation task, the majority of high school students that took part in the research are able to conduct requests without making grammatical mistakes. In the following chapters, a thorough analysis on data collected regarding those students’ sociopragmatic competence—that is their command of social knowledge needed in the production of appropriate speech act strategy in English—is included.

4.1.2.1 Data evaluation: translation task

First, data collected regarding evaluation of the translation task is illustrated in the following graph.



Graph 1 Score per question

As we can see, the graph illustrated average evaluation scores conducted for both Chinese and English (translated) sentences in each question. Specifically, the blue charts represent the average evaluation score (on the level of politeness) of the Chinese requests per request given by Chinese students as described in section 2.4.1. The red charts, correspondently, illustrates average evaluation score (on the level of politeness) of the translated English requests per request by the author and an English native speaker. The scores are given regarding level of politeness for each request with 1 for the most polite translation and 5 for the least polite answer. Taking into consideration that there are differences in terms of grammatical and ideological difference between Chinese and English in the realization of polite strategies in requests, it is expected that there will be a discrepancy on the two sets of scores shown in the above graph, especially for type of requests where there is a big difference between the two languages in terms of the perception of politeness. The following section will provide a detailed analysis of the data by differentiation in terms of politeness strategies implemented in each question together with some extra findings.

4.1.2.1.1 Attend to hearer's interests, needs, wants

Firstly, if we only look at the scores evaluated by the English speakers, it indicates that the students have a particularly good command of performing requests using the politeness strategy of *attending to hearer's interests, needs, wants*. Specifically, questions 1 and 2 corresponded with the Chinese politeness strategy of attending to hearer's interests, needs and wants by application of particles 嘞 *lei* and 哦 *o*, which made the requests more polite since they express intention of cooperation thus minimizing the imposition of possible violation towards the interlocutors' right of freedom. Regarding the scores towards this type of politeness strategy, the high school participants performed perfectly

according to the English standard—on both questions they scored an average of 1 point. Interestingly, however, the Chinese sentences themselves are considered not as polite as their English translations by Chinese students. The evaluations result of the level of politeness on those two sentences yielded an average score of 2.35 and 1.3 respectively. This discrepancy indicates that while those students view those requests in Chinese slightly impolite, they made those requests in English as polite as possible. One possible explanation towards this is the ‘hypercorrection’ in speech act performance in their second language. For example, they translated the first request—which is a nice invitation between friends where one asks the others to come to him/her as he/she found a beautiful spot—as ‘please come here’. The use of ‘please’ between friends, according to the native English speaker who helped me grading those answers, under such circumstances sounds ‘strange and unnecessary’, and indeed ‘overly polite’. In fact, sentences such as ‘come over, it’s so beautiful’ is perhaps the most appropriate expression as suggested by the English evaluator. In other words, the degree of face threats are identified differently in Chinese and English culture. Therefore, despite the fact that the students scored (at face value) very well in such setting of the English language, the relatively big differences between their conception in terms of the degree of politeness of those two requests and their performance in a foreign language suggests that it is likely that those participants do not have a perfect command of forming these type of requests appropriately or, as mentioned in previous sections, they do not have an adequate sociopragmatic knowledge in terms of such types of requests in English. This, especially between friends or school peers, might lead to an impression of distance from others or even cause problems making friends with people from a western background.

On the other hand, question 2, a reminder of something that is hot to the hearer, scored on average 1.3 in its Chinese form and 1 in its English form which possibly illustrates the difference in the criteria of level of politeness between Chinese and English. Combining sentences one and two together, it might be true that in the English language, definitions in terms of the degree of politeness are somehow more in accordance to the relationship between speakers whereas in the Chinese language it relates more to the content of the request. Both requests 1 and 2 are between friends or people that are close to each other. For English, as referred from the data collected that illustrated the same score on both cases, it is basically the same level of politeness regardless what the specific content of the request is. However, as evaluated by the Chinese students, request 2 is more polite than request one, probably because request two is a presentation of care between people that are close to each other while request one is less polite as it is merely a friendly suggestion of a better scene to see. This pattern is perhaps more obvious in the results of question 6 which we will be discussed later. Nevertheless, such discrepancy, as was mentioned in the theoretical chapter of this investigation, calls for the negotiation between ideologies of politeness between Chinese and English if perfect performance were to be presented—the third and ultimate stage in the reframing in a second language. In short, from the first two

questions, we can detect a slight lack of pragmatic competence in the reframing procedure by Chinese high school students in learning English as a second language.

4.1.2.1.2 Give deference

Question 3 is designed in correspondence to the strategy: give deference. The Chinese sentence is the exact example, namely ‘妈，帮我开开门。(Mom, can you open the door for me?)’, that was analyzed in the theoretical chapter of this paper. The repetition of the verb ‘to open’ makes the request more polite by giving deference. Regarding the result from the data we collected in the evaluation for the English sentences (the red chart), the participating high school students performed fairly well in this translation test: an average of 1.85. The most frequent answers given by Chinese students are ‘Can you open the door for me, mom?’ or ‘Can you please open the door for me, mom?’ The formation of a question in itself indicates a fairly reasonable competence in terms of pragmatic skills in forming this type of request in English by those Chinese high school students as they did not opt for a word-by-word translation. Nevertheless, it is also true that only a few of the responses provided the perfect answer—according to the native standard—sentence such as ‘Could you (please) open the door for me, mom?’ or ‘Open the door for me mom, would you?’. One possible explanation for this is that the students are trying not to be ‘too polite’ in their requests, since ‘would you’ or ‘could you’ are considered highly polite in English in the process of English education in Chinese high schools—according to the author’s own experience. However, it is also likely to be the result of avoidance of mistakes—it is true that sentence structure such as ‘would you...’ or ‘could you...’ are grammatically more complex than other forms of giving a polite request. It is useful, therefore, to compare the result of the evaluation to the degree of politeness of the Chinese sentence. An average score of 2.75 by Chinese students validates the first explanation to some extent. Specifically, as they do not view the Chinese sentence to be as polite, it is highly likely that when it comes to the translation into English, they decided not to use these ‘more polite’ structures as what they taught in classes. Again, we can probably interpret the result as evidence of them demonstrating the negotiation of ideologies of Chinese and English. However, the result of the negotiation hindered their performance in the final stage of applying politeness strategy in English as a second language, as shown in our data at least. The appearance of perfect answers, however only a rather small amount (around 5%), which included politeness markers such as ‘would you please’ and ‘could you please’ suggests that they somehow have a sufficient command of pragmalinguistic knowledge as in producing grammatically perfect sentences, so that the main trouble for them is perhaps a lack of good grasp of sociopragmatic knowledge in the ‘reframing’ process as discussed in section 2.2.2.

4.1.2.1.3 Minimize imposition

Question 4 and 5 are examples of the application of minimizing imposition in Chinese. The context provided in both questions is asking someone else to do something. In question 4, the addressee was asked to come over to the speaker and in question 5 the speaker is asking the hearer to get him/her a glass of water. With regards to the specific politeness strategy applied in the Chinese sentences, the phrase ‘一下’ *yixia* (once) in sentence 4 softened the tone of the demand, whereas in sentence 5 particles ‘啊’ *a* and ‘吧’ *ba* appeared after a vocative and at the end of the utterance respectively. Examining the collected data, it is interesting to point out that these two types of requests are considered to be the least polite by Chinese students; especially for sentence 5, the average score for degree of politeness by Chinese students is 4.2, the highest of all 5 sentences. However, their translation for question 5 is relatively acceptable in English (an average score of 2.85). Also, the results on question 4 for the Chinese and English sentences are worth further examination since they yielded rather close scores—3.3 and 3.55 respectively. Taking the limitation on sample size into consideration, a possible interpretation of the relatively high score they get in the translation task is that under such discourse situation Chinese students’ realization of speech act performance in terms of the application of politeness strategy in English is influenced by their first language and native culture—in Chinese the requests are somehow impolite and in English translations they are supposed to be of the same level (of politeness). Specifically, some statements gathered from interviews with Chinese students revealed a possible reason for their choice of politeness strategy in English.

On answering the question ‘what kind of situation did you imagine looking at the Chinese sentences? And why did not you use ‘please’ in your translation?’:

The requests seems to happen between a teacher and a student when the teacher is about to say something to the student...It seems the teacher was asking him/her to come over and about to talk to the student... So I figured that I should sound strict and direct to the addressee...that’s why I did not use the word please. I think it is not necessary for a teacher to use the word ‘please’ with a student.

Yeah it sounds like a boss asking an employee to come over and have a conversation with him/her... So I guess ‘please’ is not necessary or the boss will lose his/her authority...

(Chinese, male interviewees (translated by the author from Chinese))

It is clear from the above statements that there are some stereotypes regarding the content of the requests. More importantly, they revealed some ideological differences between Chinese and English culture. Specifically, in western culture, according to my own experience as well as conversations with native English speakers, the relationship between teachers and students is rather different from that in China wherein a request from a teacher to a student tends not to be taken as a face-threatening act. Therefore, even though I explained to the English speaker who scored the English translations that

they translated the sentence under a situation involving a teacher and a student, the result turned out to be rather impolite anyway. Hereby it is obvious that during the negotiation phase, Chinese ideology greatly influenced those high school students in the reframing process. In addition, it is also evident that they do not have adequate sociopragmatic knowledge in an English language setting as they take the relationship between Chinese teachers and students into consideration and applied it in a second language by using the bald on-record strategy in English.

Regarding question 5, results shown in the scores indicate an even more obvious discrepancy on the choice of politeness strategy between Chinese and English. Specifically, the Chinese request is rated at 4.2 points—the highest of all seven sentences—by participants, while the translations in English scored an average of 3.45. Similarly, it is likely that participants simply ‘transferred’ the sociological values that influence their decision on the choice of politeness strategy from their native language to a second language. Below are some answers from the interview regarding their translation of question 5:

Oh about that...I was thinking of using ‘please’ but it doesn’t sound right to me....Oh I was imagining it is an order in an office or something when people ask the secretary to get a glass of water...

Yeah because asking someone to get you a glass of water happens normally from a boss to a secretary? Or to a waitress in a restaurant? That’s their job right? So I can just give them the order....

(Chinese, female and male interviewees (translated by the author from Chinese))

Again, social power involved in this type of discourse situation is displayed differently regarding Chinese and English culture. Take the first answer above as an example, in Chinese culture, the relationship between an employer and employee is generally characterized by traditional Chinese values such as *Confucianism* which has a strong emphasis on hierarchy and loyalty (Froese & Xiao, 2012). In other words, as mentioned by the interviewee, the relationship between superiors and workers is rather hierarchical. For instance, while western employers view themselves as independent individuals who also value personal performance of their employees more than what Chinese bosses will treasure most—organizational value such as duty, obligation and loyalty. Therefore, in the request of asking a subordinate/secretary for a glass of water, Chinese students will view this as the ‘duty’ of the addressee while in the western culture, it is merely a personal favour between two individuals (Froese & Xiao, 2012). Thus, the majority of Chinese students translated request 6 using bald on-record strategy such as ‘Get me a glass of water, Xiaoming’. Consequently, we graded most translations as impolite.

Interestingly, examining the collected data, some (even though very rare) answers for request 5 is in fact very polite, such as ‘Could you get me a glass of water, Xiaoming?’ or ‘Can you get me a glass of water please, Xiaoming?’ This means that as students learn English as a second language, they are sufficiently—at least they are taught in classes—equipped with enough linguistic knowledge as to

make requests ‘polite’, and the problem occurring in the reframing stage is highly likely due to a lack of competence in sociopragmatic knowledge. In short, results regarding the application of politeness strategy of minimizing imposition confirm the hypothesis that pragmatic failure in terms of the application of appropriate politeness strategy in English by Chinese high school students is indeed caused by a lack of sociopragmatic strategy.

However, one interviewee gave an explanation of his translation ‘Please give me a glass of water, Xiaoming’ which probably illustrates a problem in their pragmalinguistic awareness about grammatical differences between Chinese and English:

I don't really know....I finished the questions quickly and I didn't really think of what situation those utterances may take place... For me I just wanted to finish the task and make them (grammatically) correct. As long as I can get a good mark, right?.... Hmm...about that... I don't really think there is something wrong (in terms of politeness) with my answer.

(Chinese, male interviewee; translated by the author from Chinese)

Obviously, it is indeed a problem in terms of the orientation that students take with tasks given to them in classes as well as their lack of awareness with regards to different grammatical structures between Chinese and English.

4.1.2.1.4 Be optimistic

Questions 6 and 7 are designed in accordance with the Chinese politeness strategy *Be optimistic* as defined by Zhan (1992). Again I used similar sentences in the previous chapter of this paper. Question 6 involves a request asking the hearer to put on more clothes as it is cold outside, and question 7 is an emergency call from a friend asking the addressee for some help. As already discussed in the theoretical chapter, this politeness strategy displays a huge difference between Chinese and English as translations by scholars (e.g. Zhan, 1992) may appear impolite to a native English speaker. Not surprisingly, results collected for this paper justified such difference by the illustration of the biggest difference in score for Chinese sentences and their English translations by high school participants.

To begin with, data collected for question 6 is perhaps the most interesting in that it scored as the most polite requests (1.35) by Chinese students but the most impolite (4.35) according to the English standard. Here a ‘collision’ between ideologies in both cultures is presented. On one hand, in Chinese culture, it is not a request at all. As has mentioned before, the suggestion to put on more clothes happens most frequently in very close relationships such as between family members, usually the elderly showing care and love to the youngsters, and between friends. Thus upon seeing the question sentence, it is highly likely that those high school participants take for granted that it is in itself an expression of love and care. In other words, this type of request is not an FTA at all in the Chinese

culture. Therefore, it is not surprising that they opted for the bald on-record strategy in this translation by giving answers such as ‘Put on more clothes, it is cold outside’ or ‘It’s cold outside, you’d better wear warm clothes’. In English speaking culture, on the other hand, display of affection in close relationships is perhaps illustrated by the application of politeness strategy. For example, one possible way of asking youngsters in the family to wear more clothes is suggested as ‘would you like to put some more clothes on, it might be a bit cold outside’ by an English native speaker. Hereby the sociological factors involved in the realization of the speech act are clearly troublesome for second language learners. In addition, the notion of ‘expressing love and care’ is illustrated differently in terms of linguistic forms. In Chinese, the content of the request is rather revealing of the emotional attachment while in English, as shown in the example, linguistic downgraders such as ‘would you like to...’ and ‘might’ are implemented to express desired emotions. In other words, while content is extremely important in Chinese, linguistic formation in terms of sentence structure or grammatical markers are manners of expressing feelings in the English language. In short, it is reasonable to conclude, from the above analysis, that pragmalinguistic as well as sociopragmatic incompetence caused such type of pragmatic failures by Chinese students in an English language setting. However, it is also possible due to the data size of the current paper (only a couple of native English speaker are consulted for possible standard expressions) that the answers they provided is too polite as for average English speakers.

Evaluation results for the last question, again, suggest that Chinese students may perform poorly in a situation when imposition on the hearer is rather strong. It is easy to understand that an average score of 3.3 for ‘how polite the Chinese request is’ was given by Chinese students on the evaluation procedure since the request is indeed fairly imposing as it indicates a somewhat emergent situation. So by using the particle ‘得’ *dei* (must, have to), the politeness strategy of being optimistic (towards the capability of the hearer fixing the emergency) is realized in making a request. However, judging from their answers in the translation task, for example ‘You have to help me on this!’, Chinese high school students are not clearly aware of the different way of being optimistic in English. A possible translation by English native speaker for this request is ‘Do you think you could do me a favour? I am so sorry to bother you with this but it is really an emergency. Please, you have to help me’, which clearly applied different linguistic tools in the realization of requesting politely and is in line with Economidou-Kogetsidis’ (2008) findings that English speakers tend to implement formulaic expressions, ‘sorry’ and ‘could..’ in this case, in the realization of politeness.

4.1.2.1.5 The use of ‘please’ and ‘!’

High school students were found to use marker ‘please’ as well as the exclamation mark more frequently than expected. Nearly half of the sentences (54.5%) have the politeness marker ‘please’. This tendency, interestingly, is in contrast with observations by scholars (e.g. Pan & Kadar 2011) in

terms of the usage of its semantic equivalence *qing* 请 ('please') in Chinese. As was mentioned in Chapter 2, the usage of 'please' in Chinese is considered 'old fashioned' nowadays in the Chinese language. An answer regarding this usage of the term 'please' in the translation task given by an interviewee might suggest a possible explanation for this high frequency appearance of 'please' in their second language:

Oh about that (the use of please in his answers)...hmm...It is in the textbooks!...You know...every time they (referring to speakers in the textbooks) ask someone to do something they say 'please'....Isn't that's the way you ask people to do something in English? Did I make mistakes on that? I thought it is always like this.....

(Chinese, male interviewee; translated by the author from Chinese)

Thus, it is perhaps the education method that led to this result. One problem of learning a second language without being in the correspondent culture is perhaps that learners have a limited access to sociopragmatic information associated with language use. Fortunately, this did not lead to a disastrous impact on the analysis of the current paper—in contrast, it is because those students have such an intuition that it is somewhat obligatory to use 'please' in requests in English, they were able to form more polite translations than the other way around. Taking the decrease in the usage of 'please' in Chinese, we could probably interpret the high frequency appearance of *please* in the translation task as an evidence of overusing the marker. This is in fact in line with observations made by Faerch and Kasper (1989), House (1989), and House and Kasper (1987). Their research illustrated a pattern of overusing the marker 'please' by interlanguage learners in general. According to Faerch and Kasper (1989), second language learners' preference of using the marker results from its feature as both illocutionary force indicator and transparent mitigator. Specifically, in their line of reasoning, Faerch and Kasper (1989) explained that students of a second language have a tendency of following Grice's principle of clarity by way of choosing simple and unambiguous means of expressions which, in the case of the realization of politeness theory, is achieved by the use of the marker 'please' in the formation of requests in English. The problem of 'hypercorrection' displayed in question 1, therefore, is perhaps a negative impact following such a tendency.

Secondly, the different perception of politeness by the Chinese and the English might be identified from the frequent use of exclamation marks (32.3% sentences have an exclamation mark) in the translation task. The original Chinese text does not include a single exclamation mark, whereas in their translations, interlanguage learners included it in their expression in English. The explanation for exclamation mark is as follows: 'Used to end sentences that express an exclamation, direct speech that represents something shouted or spoken very loudly, and something that amuses the writer' ('Exclamation Mark', n.d.). Therefore, it is not normal to use it in requests unless it is in extreme emergency. The relatively frequent usage of the exclamation mark in the translations when there is no such mark in the original text might result from the misconception of the level of emergency involved

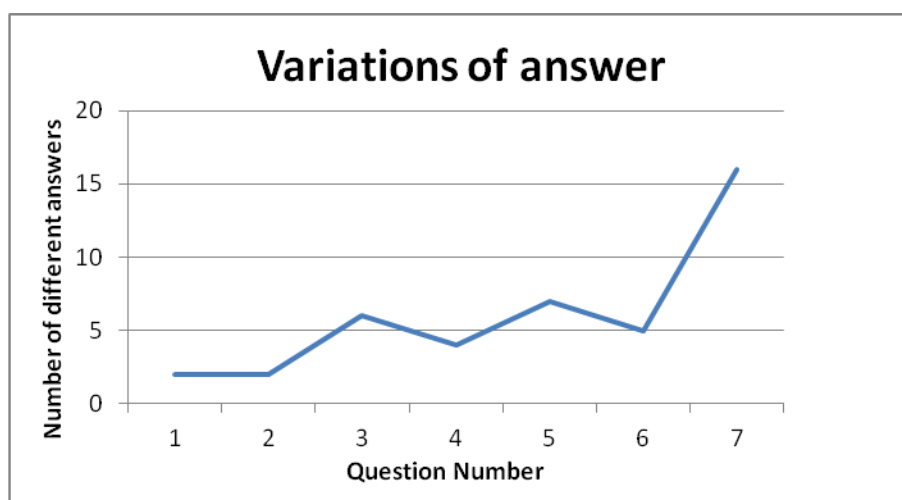
in both languages. As a matter of fact, the usage of exclamation mark in Chinese does not display emotions as strong as in English. There is only a slight difference in the expression of emotions in Chinese requests with or without exclamation mark. Thus, it might again be an example of confusion of ideological variation in the misuse of exclamation marks. However, due to the limitation of the current work such as sample size, this is a topic that will merit further investigation.

Hence, by far the above analysis reached a clear conclusion that Chinese high school students' pragmatic skills concerning the realization of appropriate politeness strategy in English as a second language is to some extent problematic. Admittedly, however, it is rather difficult for a second language learner to command such transformation taking into account the fact that the formation of the provided answer is rather complex in English already. Therefore, before preceding to possible solutions aiming at improving students' pragmatic performance in English, it is useful to have a discussion on students' overall performance in the translation task and hopefully shed some light on the level of difficulty in learning sociopragmatic strategies specifically in the above seven types of requests.

4.1.2.2 Other findings in the translation task

In addition to the above detailed analysis regarding individual politeness strategy, it is useful to include an overview of participants' performance in the task.

First of all, it is interesting to extract information upon students' level of certainty in their answers for the purpose of investigating their degree of competence for each question type. Thus, a number of different variations of answers for each question is calculated and shown in Graph 2:

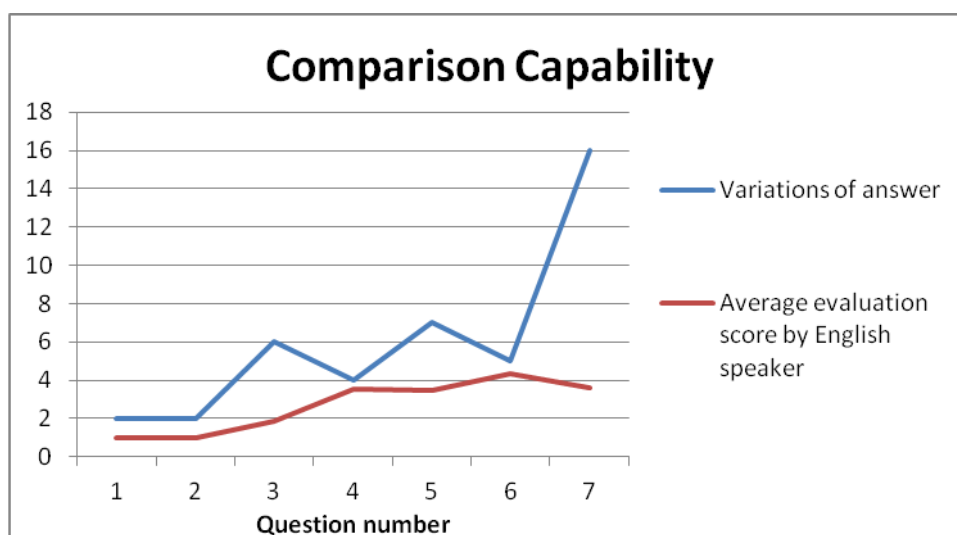


Graph 2 Variations of answer

The criteria for the differentiation among answers by students is rather loose—it is judged by 2 English native speakers and if they agreed two answers have similar/different grammatical structures

which has little impact on their level of politeness, the answers are counted as the same type. Thus, we can have an impression on students' doubts for each question type, which should be sufficient for the current paper.

As we can see from the Graph 2, there is a general upward trend of number of different answers through question 1 to 7 with question 1 and 2 have only 2 types of different answers while students gave 16 types of answer for question 7. This is highly likely an indication of students' competence level has, an overall declining trend with the least level of command for question 7 and a fairly good confidence in answering question 1 and 2. Putting this data together with their average score for the English translations, we can find that overall students performed better when they are more certain of their answers. A comparison graph is illustrated below in Graph 3 in which the blue line shows the number of different types of answer high school students gave in their translated tasks and the red line illustrates average evaluation scores for each question conducted by the author and an English native speaker:



Graph 3 Comparison Capability

As we can see from the graph, students' average scores for question 1 and 2 are indeed the lowest—which indicates their highest level of politeness for the questions—amongst all questions. However, there is not a strong correlation between differentiation on type of answer and students' capability of applying appropriate politeness strategy in the English language. This view is underlined if we take into consideration the comparison between those two sets of data for question 7, where students felt extremely uncertain as to how to translate such a request into English (there are 16 different forms of translation in students answers) but did not result in a correspondently disastrous outcome (an average of 3.6 is considered 'acceptable' according to the native speaker who scored those answers). In addition, data for question 3 (where more uncertainty is displayed while better score is achieve) and

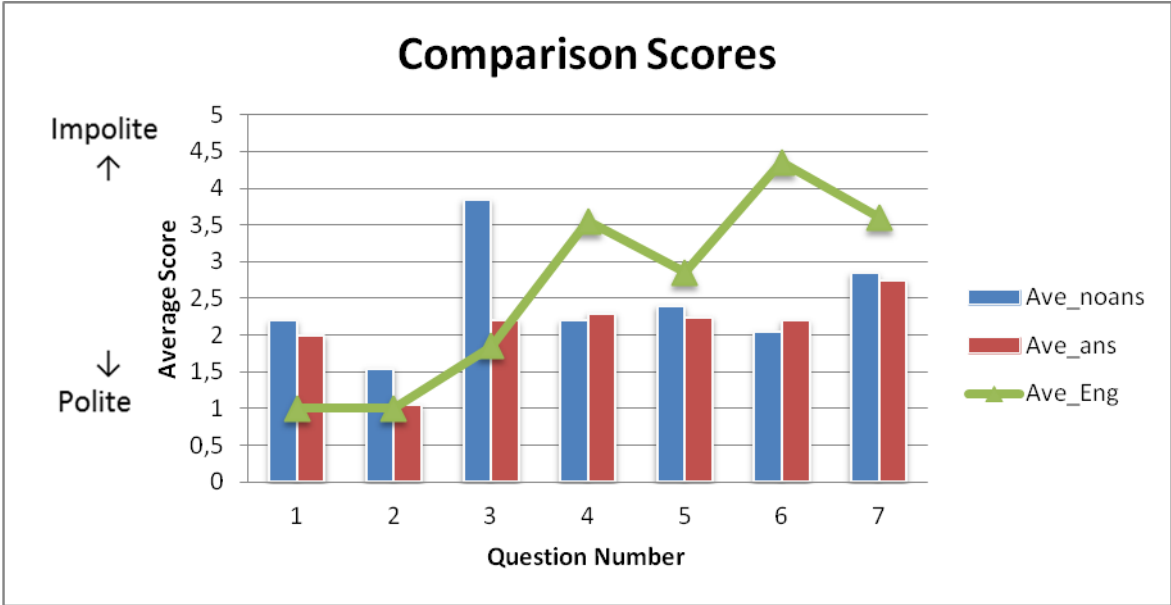
question 4 (where less uncertainty is illustrated but more impolite translations are produced) has also displayed a somehow negative correlation between those outcomes. Keeping in mind that we already levelled out grammatical impacts and only count answers to be different when they are of different degree of politeness, we might conclude that interlanguage learners' uncertainty in the choice of appropriate politeness strategies does not necessarily indicate a low level of competence. Again, as our research data is of a relative small size, it will require further investigation for a generalized conclusion.

4.1.3 Test for a possible improvement for the education procedure

As has been mentioned before, one goal for the current paper is to propose a possible way in order to improve students' capability of avoiding pragmatic failures in their usage of English as a second language. Subsequently, this section will discuss the effect of one possible method as to raise students' awareness of such problems by way of modification in the evaluation standard applied in their everyday teaching procedure.

To begin with, it has been observed by scholars (Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011; Kristofk, 2011; Qi, 2004; Hill, 2010) that the Chinese education system is primarily examination-oriented. According to Kirkpatrick & Zang (2011), getting good grades in examinations is the only achievement that is valued by Chinese students. A good performance in the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) or *gaokao* is the only and ultimate goal for Chinese high school students. The government-funded education system in China focuses on exams starting at an age as early as two, accompanying by the starting of a 'three-point life' of *home-school-home* (Kristofk, 2011). Though considerable efforts have been made in order to improve the current situation, it is still unrealistic to predict that such examination-oriented education system will be abandoned in the near future (cf. Xu, 2004). Hence, for the current paper, it is probably wise to find a solution within the system itself that suits the value of Chinese education system at large. Consequently, in this paper, we propose a solution that makes a quantitative connection between students' pragmatic performance and the marks they get for tests they take in class. Therefore, as a deviation from the traditional evaluation standard for tests in English classes which examine the sole aspect of grammatical correctness, we propose a second criterion of appropriateness in a given context. Correspondingly, a pilot test involving a change of standard has been done for the current paper which was introduced as the extra interview in section 3.5. Four teachers currently teaching in high school where the translation task took place participated in the interview, two of them were asked to evaluate, according to their own intuition/standard, a random sample of 20 answers from the translation task, and the average scores that they gave for each question were calculated; the other two teachers, on the other hand, were provided a 'standard answer' for each question by the English speaker that evaluated all the answers together with the author and similarly the average scores per question given by the other teachers were calculated. For example, one

student’s answer for question 6 is ‘Wear more clothes, it’s cold outside’. The 2 teachers who graded it without a ‘standard answer’ gave it marks of 2 and 3. The other 2 teachers, who had a reference answer, graded it with 4 and 5. After all grading, average marks for each question were calculated. The results, together with a comparison with the average scores made by the native English speaker, are illustrated in the Graph 4:



Graph 4 Comparison Scores

The green line, specifically, illustrates the same evaluation results per question as we discussed above, the average evaluation scores by the author and an English native speaker for all the students’ translation tasks. The blue bar, then, shows the average score for every question graded by the teachers with no standard answers (for instance, 2.5 if only the above example is considered); and the red bar presents the average score given by the other teachers with provided answers (4.5 for this one considering only the given example). Through the data collected and compared, it is clearly shown in the graph that teachers’ grading outcome on 5 (question 1,2,3,4 and 6) out of 7 questions were improved—closer to scores by examiners for the current paper. Specifically, the most obvious improvement appeared in question 2 and 3. For question 2, teachers gave an average score of 1.55 without being provided a standard answer whereas the other teachers, who on the contrary had the answers, gave on average 1.05 points for it, which is almost the same as the average score of 1.0 point from the examiners of this paper. Similarly, average score for question 3 dropped significantly from 3.85 (considered only slightly acceptable) to 2.2 points owing to the differentiation in the access to a standard answer. Also, the 2.2 average is again nearly the same as what came up in the current paper (1.85 points). Moreover, regardless of the small degree of improvement, the average score for question

1 declined 0.2 points closer to the 'standard' score, for question 4 it changed 0.1 point closer, and for question 6 there is a 0.15 points improvement.

Even though the above data displayed a major improvement on teachers' grading performance, a small discussion for the ones that did not illustrate any improvements is still worth conducting. First of all, it should be taken into account that there are limitations on the sample size for the test in general. It is likely that due to the small size of the random sample that the improvement is less obvious in this case. On the other hand, however, as a relatively large gap still remains between scores by teachers with provided answers and the outcome in the paper, it is wise to admit that this proposed solution could not be considered entirely perfect. Nevertheless, since one goal of the current paper is to qualitatively detect problems and offering possible improvement method, the above discussed should be sufficient and further research on the practical realization is required and appreciated.

Despite the promising result from the extra interview, it is still not realistic to conclude that current problems discovered through the translation task will be solved any time soon. Instead, the improvement is better expected in a long term. Thus, it is useful to collect some information regarding the future trend of English teaching concerning pragmatic skills. The following section includes an analysis on the DTC task that aimed at gathering relevant data from future high school English teachers in China.

4.2 Data analysis: future Chinese high school English teachers

This chapter will provide an analysis of data collected from the DCT task. This section aims at sketching an overview of development in English teaching for pragmatic skills, specifically in terms of the realization of politeness strategies, for the future generation in China. The feasibility of such predictions lie in the profile of the participants. In 2007, the Chinese Education Ministry started a program called 'Free normal education' in 6 teachers' college throughout China. According to the regulation, university students can receive free undergraduate education on the condition that they return to their home province as (mainly high school) teachers after their graduation. Furthermore, it is clearly stated in the articles of the regulation that possible measures be taken by the local government for the purpose of encouraging the graduates' 'dedication for a long time, even life-time in the education system'. Thus, there is a guarantee that students involved in such a program will be future teachers in high schools throughout China and it is highly likely that they are going to remain a teacher for a rather long period of time. These facts make them the ideal group for conducting research aiming at solving current problems in the educational system in the long run. Correspondingly, this current research includes 20 last year students who are currently studying in such a programme in the English Department in East China Normal University, Shanghai. In addition, among the 20 students, 7 of them were involved in the university's exchange programs overseas in which they spent their third year in an English speaking country (the UK for all the 7 participants). In this section, hence, a general

analysis towards the level of competence in the realization of politeness strategies for all participants is included, followed by a further discussion in terms of differences of performance by students who have experiences abroad and those who do not.

Before proceeding to the data analysis, it is necessary to briefly explain the evaluation procedure upon answers from the DCT task taken by 12 native English speakers. Specifically, each of them was provided randomly one of two sets of constructed questionnaire in which they were asked to evaluate students' answers under given discourse situations. One set of questionnaire contains answers by students who studied in the UK. The evaluation standard is differently worded in this part: instead of using the word *polite*, words including *appropriate* and *acceptable* are applied. The following table illustrates the corresponding perception provided in the questionnaire and scores used in the following analysis:

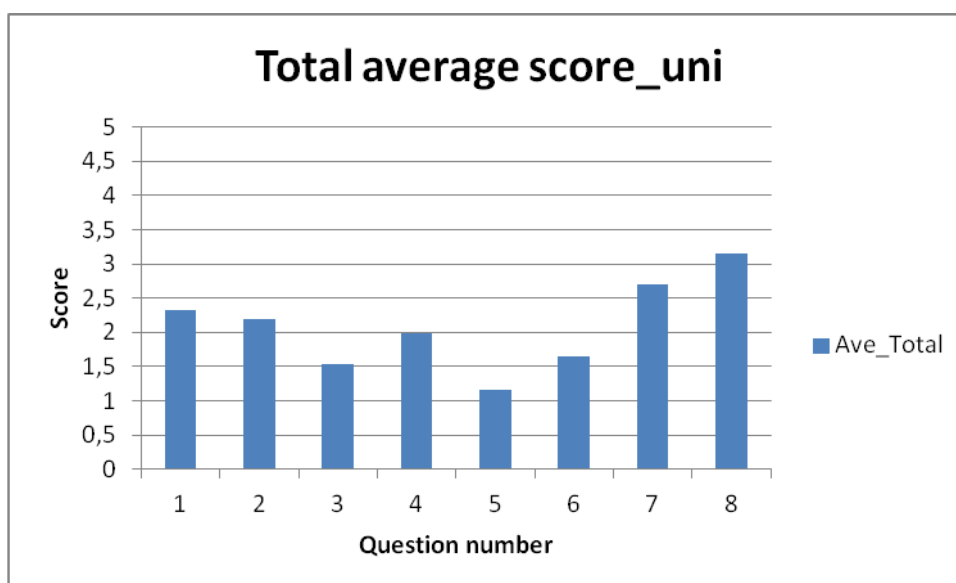
Perception	Perfectly appropriate	Appropriate	Acceptable	Slightly acceptable	Not acceptable
Score	1	2	3	4	5

Table 2 Score & evaluation

This way of handling data is for the purpose of levelling out possible error resulting from differences amongst 8 discourse situations in the task. It is possible that under certain circumstances it is more appropriate to be direct than polite. This is discussed further in the next section.

4.2.1 A general overview

The following graph illustrates an overview of the average score of all 20 participants in the DCT task.



Graph 5 Total average score_uni

As shown in Graph 5, it is clear that generally participants in this part displayed a rather strong competence in the realization of appropriate politeness strategies. First of all, the average score ranges from 1 to 3.15, suggesting that in general the participants are able to produce at least acceptable requests under each discourse situation. In other words, it is reasonable to say that as advanced learners—considering the fact that they were still students at the time when the current research took place—they are capable of avoiding pragmatic failure to a large extent, in the sense that the addressee is unlikely to feel offended. Moreover, taking into account that the average score for 5 out of 8 questions are below, or slightly above 2 point, participants are for the most time capable of behaving linguistically like a native speaker, or at least near a native speaker as those scores can be interpreted as *perfectly appropriate* or *appropriate*.

On the other hand, however, it is true that even at advanced levels of proficiency; non-native speakers' (university students of English language in this case) pragmatic performance has the potential to deviate from that of native speakers. The average score for question 8 (3.15) is clearly a case in point. The 8th discourse situation in the task is 'A university teacher asks a student to give a lecture a week earlier than scheduled', and participants are asked to construct an appropriate request on behalf of the teacher. Again, judging from students' responses and comments by native speakers who answered the online questionnaire, a discrepancy in ideological difference between Chinese and English cultures might be the reason for the relatively poor performance on this particular question comparing to the others in the DCT task. One answer by a student, for example, was evaluated at a score of 3.43 in which 3 out of 7 native speakers considered it as *slightly acceptable* and 1 even thought it was *not acceptable* at all. The answer is as such: *Due to the schedule, you have to give the lecture a week earlier. So be prepared.* On the one hand, such line of requesting from a teacher to a student is acceptable and perhaps common in China. According to Zhang and McGrath (2009), a teacher-student relationship in China is different from that in the western world in that the teacher's role in China is considered of high authority. Indeed, there is a word in Chinese for teachers that can roughly be translated as 'teacher father', and based on Hofstede and Hofstede (2005), culturally speaking, China is a male dominated society. In other words, father in the Chinese sense is a very strong, assertive and strict character similar to a father-children relationship. Therefore, in the Chinese culture, students will not be offended when addressed by their teachers directly as illustrated in the answer came upon by one participant. On the other hand, students from an English speaking cultural background will highly likely feel uncomfortable when teachers address them as directly as Chinese teachers do. This lies in the fact that in the western culture, the teacher-student relationship is much more equal than in the Chinese culture, even if not absolutely equal as indicated in numerous studies concerning teacher-student relationship in a western cultural background (Andersen, 1979; Christophel, 1990; Norton, 1977; Frymier, 1994a; Sorensen, 1989; Nussbaum & Scott, 1980; Wanzer & Frymier, 1999). In their studies, interpersonal factors such as immediacy, communicator style, affinity-seeking, solidarity,

humour, etc. are discussed and identified as having a positive correlation with the improvement of students learning outcome. In other words, different from the traditional one-end dominated father-children like relationship between Chinese teachers and students, teacher-student relationship in western societies are more similar to friendships. Thus, it is not surprising that some answers will potentially irritate English native speakers. Specifically, one comment on a response is as follows:

I don't think a teacher would/should ever say something like that to a student.

(English, Anonymous participant in the online questionnaire)

Keeping in mind problems detected in the data of high school students, it is clear that cultural differences here illustrate a strong influence on student's interlanguage pragmatic performance regardless their level of proficiency in the second language. However, a comparison between scores of students with experiences studying abroad and without might shed some light on possible improvement toward such issue, which will be discussed in the next section.

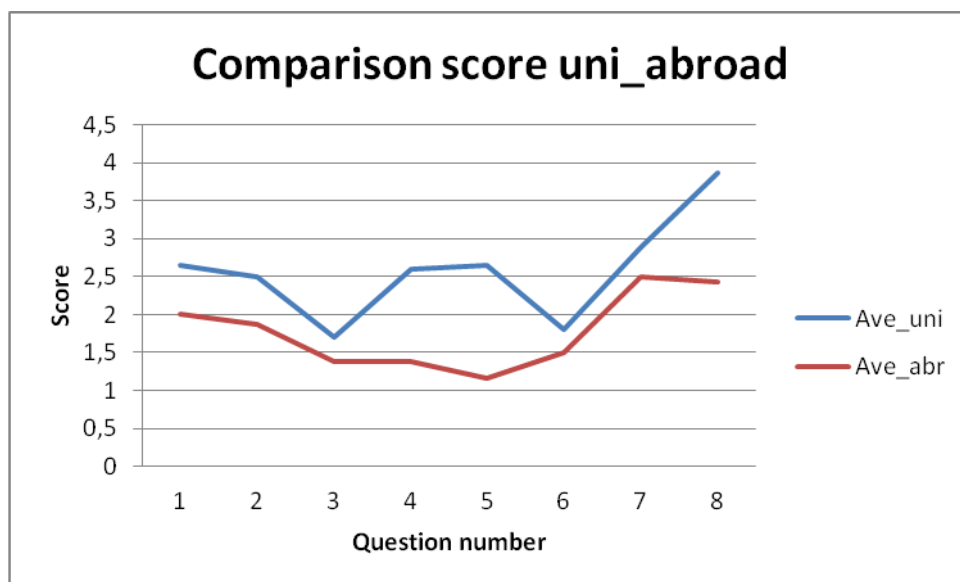
Interestingly, however, examining data for question 7 where subjects were asked to conduct a request for a student to a teacher under a situation where 'A student asks a teacher for an extension for finishing a seminar paper', we did not find participants using overly polite sentences as expected to be in line with their Chinese cultural background. On the contrary to what one might expect from known cultural expectations on Chinese teacher-student relationship, quite a few of responses displayed a simple and perhaps direct tactic for the realization of this particular request. Two examples are: 'I am sorry but can I hand in the paper later?'; 'Will you give me an extension for my paper, please?' and not surprisingly, both answers are badly reviewed by English speakers—at an average of 4.12 and 3.9 respectively. Such situations, interestingly, are in line with the theory of a tendency of associating markers such as 'sorry' and 'please' with extreme formality in modern Chinese society (Pan & Kadar, 2011), which, by contrast, proved not to be in line with high school students' usage of 'please', as has been discussed before. One possible explanation for this phenomenon is that as concluded in the previous section, the frequent use of 'please' by Chinese high school students might be the consequence of formative education; whereas advanced learners' choice for including 'sorry' and 'please' in addressing a teacher is indeed presenting the ideology of formality associated with these terms. Nevertheless, since this is not the primary goal of the current paper, this deviation displayed will merit further study and explanation; for now, this paper will proceed under this hypothesis. Therefore, a small portion of—even though not all—advanced learners, or more precisely, future English teachers still have a potential risk in facing pragmatic failure in their use of English due to the interference of their native language.

To summarize, there is a general positive and promising picture shown in the above data concerning pragmatic competence of future high school English teachers. However, native culture still formed a

strong affective factor in the possibility in making pragmatic mistakes, especially in the selection of proper politeness strategies. In the following section, through a closer analysis of data collected for two different groups of students, a possible improvement method will be demonstrated.

4.2.2 An insight towards impact of studying abroad

There has long been a consensus amongst linguists that the experience of studying abroad nurtures a rich social and linguistic environment for second language learners' language and culture acquisition (cf. DeKeyser, 1991; Ryan & Lafford, 1992; Miller & Ginsberg, 1995; Pelligrino, 1998; Wilkinson, 1998; Regan, 1990 & 1995; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004; Regan, Howard & Lemee, 2009). According to Regan, Howard & Lemee (2009), a period of one year studying abroad has already produced a rather decent improvement in second language learners' second language performance as they 'approximate L1 variation speech patterns'. In addition, their research indicates a great advancement in interlanguage learners' second language behaviour with comparison to those who do not have experiences studying abroad (Regan, Howard & Lemee, 2009). Therefore, it is necessary to have a look at the data regarding two subgroups in the DCT task—those who have one-year studying abroad experience and those who do not. Correspondently, Graph 6 is drawn to illustrate those two sets of information:



Graph 6 Comparison score uni_abroad

As Graph 6 illustrates, students who studied abroad displayed an obvious improvement in terms of their performance in the DCT task. The blue line represents the average scores per question obtained by those university students who had no experience studying abroad and the red line is for the ones who had a year-abroad experience. First of all, their average score for each question is better than

those of who have no experience studying abroad. More importantly, as shown in the graph, the average score by students who took part in exchange programs are within the range of 1-2.5, which strongly indicates that their performance in this specific task were considered near that of a native speaker as on average they can produce requests that are at least *acceptable* under all 8 discourse situations, if not *perfectly appropriate*. More specifically, according to the collected data, a significant advancement illustrated in students' performance on question 4, 5, and 8. With regard to discourse situation 4 (in which a request is made by a student who wants to get a ride home from people living in the same street) and 5 ('Applicant calls for information on a job advertised in a paper'), students with experiences studying abroad are in general capable of making requests that are somehow *perfectly appropriate* with an average score of 1.38 and 1.16 respectively; on the other hand, students with no such experience can mostly make somewhat appropriate requests judging from their average score (2.6 and 2.65 separately). Such improvement, as a matter of fact, is perhaps highly explainable by social contexts included in the discourse situation. Specifically, situation 4 involves a social event in which one student asks another for a ride home, a fairly common social practice in universities abroad but rare, if it is there at all, in China. This may validate a presumption that students who did not study abroad have simply no experiences in such social contact situation, let alone in a second language setting. As a result, their performance on this particular discourse situation is, as verified by the display of scores, unsurprisingly not as good as their counterparts who are highly likely to have been involved in such a social context while studying abroad. Similarly, with regard to task 5, there is a higher chance for students being exposed to similar social environment abroad than at home. As all participants in the DCT task were still in their last year of university, perhaps their opportunities to make a call for information regarding job advertisements are equally limited. However, it is of greater chance that students living abroad interact with people of similar social status described in the discourse situation, for instance professors or officers in or outside university, over phone in an English language setting. Hence, a lack of sociopragmatic knowledge is, again, highly likely the reason for students' underperformance in this specific task. The most interesting result, after all, is displayed in the last discourse situation. To begin with, there is a huge difference in students score for this question—3.87 (a near equivalent of *slightly acceptable*) for students who lack experience studying abroad experience and 2.43 (somewhere between *appropriate* and *acceptable*) for those who participated in exchange programs overseas. In fact, a considerable amount of answers came up by the first group of students were scored as *not acceptable* at all while the majority of answers by the second group is evaluated as *appropriate* by native speakers. As has been discussed in the previous section, there is a significant difference in terms of teacher-student interpersonal relationship between the Chinese and English culture; thus, an obvious improvement, as shown in the data, in their performance in task 8 that illustrated in students with one-year experience studying abroad is most likely a direct result from interactions with teachers during their life in an English-speaking environment. At the same time, this improvement can be regarded as an acquisition of sufficient sociopragmatic knowledge

by those students as in general they are capable of making appropriate requests in the DCT task. Thereby, to briefly conclude, data collected in the current paper is in line with scholars' conclusion about the advantages of studying abroad in students' second language performance, especially in terms of a significant improvement on their sociopragmatic competence.

Similarly, the influence of difference in culture ideology is still illustrated in our study. This can be seen from students' answers in question 7 and 8 where some answers by students who came back from the UK were still considered merely acceptable. However, considering its relatively small relevance to the purpose of the current paper, there is no need to proceed to a further detailed discussion about it. Instead, a connection of the above two sets of data, i.e. from high school students and university students, will be made in the next section together with a possible suggestion concerning the overall improvements on Chinese high school English education in terms of pragmatic competence for the future generation.

4.3 Beyond result analysis—an insight on the improvement of English teaching in China

This section provides another more practical suggestion for the future of English education in the acquisition of pragmatic skills—an increase of interaction with the English culture for interlanguage learners in China. Specifically, one convenient and economical way is perhaps the expansion of the scale of study abroad program opportunities for students of English in normal universities in China, which directly improves future teachers' sociopragmatic competence in English thus circumstantially raise pragmatic awareness for future generations of high school students across China.

To begin with, it is necessary to establish a causal correlation between the improvement of teacher's competence and student's academic performance. Not surprisingly, a general positive connection has been observed by a considerable amount of studies (e.g. Hanushek, Kain & Rivkin, 1998; Darling-Hammond, 1999; Elliot, 1998; Evertson, Lasley II, Siedentop & Yinger, 2006). It is not unreasonable, at the same time, to predict that teachers with a higher competence in pragmatic knowledge will have a more positive impact on students' corresponding academic performance in second language learning. Therefore, a practice that enables an improvement on teachers' pragmatic competence in English can also be beneficial to students' performance.

It has been shown in the above analysis that an experience of studying abroad is indeed an effective way to improve students' sociopragmatic awareness in terms of the realization of politeness strategy in requests. Consequently, with an expansion of opportunities to study abroad, it is highly likely that there will be a significant improvement in students' acquisition and production of English as a second language as a whole. If such expansion were to take place throughout English departments normal universities that are involved in the 'Free normal education' program, such positive development in

graduates' English language learning will consequently be beneficial to high school students across China in the future generations since those university graduates are obligated to teach at local schools across China and, as mentioned before, encouraged to remain teachers for as long as possible. In other words, with a relatively small input, what we can expect is probably a long-term and large-scale positive impact on English education in China at large.

Nevertheless, considering the limitation in terms of scale of data collection and focusing point (i.e. pragmatic implementations on politeness strategies only), the above suggestion is perhaps the best in terms of economy and effectiveness the current paper could result in, with the possibility of over-evaluation of the actual impact on the improvement of Chinese students' accomplishment in English learning as a whole. Therefore, the above suggestion is merely preliminary and would appreciate further research on its practical applicability.

5. Research limitations

There are several limitations to this study which will appreciate further research. First, the sample in the current study contains high school students from one high school in the Hunan province; the students have a relatively poorer command of English compared to students studying in big cities elsewhere in China and the sample size (80 in total) is relatively small. Therefore, it is not wise to take this sample as representative for the whole Chinese high school student population. However, we think that their performance in the translation task indeed illustrated more or less the current problematic English teaching in Chinese high schools. Similarly, the sample size (20 students) of the university students is small thus not representative of the whole population of advanced English learners in China. Nevertheless, as issues did occur during the tasks which shows pragmatic competence is indeed important and would possibly cause difficulty in English acquisition amongst Chinese students. In short, further research which could contain a large number and geographically widespread sample would be appreciated in order to generate a general conclusion.

Secondly, the current study does not examine the realization of politeness strategies in a detailed manner, especially in terms of distance and power relationship between interlocutors. The study of the current paper does not include a thorough questionnaire/interview under different social situations and opted for a more open approach. Hence, results may be subject to change if specific social circumstances are clearly explained. Nevertheless, we have detected some problems using this method, as what we hypothesized at the beginning. Future studies could therefore apply research methods that take into account social factors that were included in Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory in a more specific manner.

Thirdly, the differentiation of 'appropriateness' and 'politeness' is somewhat difficult to define when it comes to the evaluation procedure, since people's interpretation of such terms are very subjective; thus it is hard to accurately transform the results into a numerable data set. Similarly, due to the depth of the current paper, both the translation task and DCT are set in a rather open format, providing rather general discourse situations for participants, which might have caused very different subjective interpretation among participants as well as evaluators. Therefore the results in the paper might not be perfectly reliable. However, it still counts as a qualitative reference for the detection of existing problems. Future investigations would benefit taking this into consideration.

Last but not least, as the main purpose of the current paper is not providing solutions to the detected problem concerning Chinese student's pragmatic incompetence in English learning, proposals in this paper are merely suggestions; further research focusing mainly on possible improvements will be much appreciated.

6. Conclusion

English education is becoming increasingly important in China, commencing very early in the education system. However, one of the prevailing problems for student's competence in English is pragmatic knowledge due to linguistic and culture barriers. But this usually has been underestimated by educators. Specifically, they are more likely to make mistakes in their English where the inherent cultural differences—the relationship between teachers and students, for example— are big between Chinese and English. This study detected such a problem in both intermediate and advanced English learners in China on their choice of politeness strategy in making requests. Also, this research found out that the focus on formality in English education in China leads to students' mistakes in making requests in English: they are likely to be 'too polite' when addressing friends in English. The results indicate that weakness in both linguistic and pragmatic knowledge may be the reason for the inappropriate behaviour that students illustrated during the tasks. The process of 'reframing' in a second language seems to be more difficult when social ideology conflicts happen. Based on the data, some practical propositions were provided in the paper to help tackle such issues.

Appendix 1: Translation Task

1. 到这儿来吧，这边很漂亮。(Come here, it's so beautiful.)
2. 小心哦，很烫。(Watch out, it is hot.)
3. 妈，帮我开开门。(Mom, would you open the door for me?)
4. 小明，过来一下吧。(Xiaoming, can you come over here?)
5. 小明啊，给我倒杯水吧。(Xiaoming, can you get me a glass of water please?)
6. 外面冷，多穿点衣服。(Would you put on more clothes? It's pretty cold outside.)
7. 你可得帮帮我。(You have to help me on this please.)

备注：请使用你认为正确的句式，不需要逐字翻译。(Note: please use the appropriate sentence structure; do not translate word-by-word.)

Appendix 2: Data Completion Task

Imagine you are in the situations below, what would you say to the other person?

- 1). A student asks his roommate to clean up the kitchen which the other left a mess.

- 2). A girl tries to get rid of a boy pestering her on the street.

- 3). A student asks another student to lend her some lecture notes.

- 4). A student asks people living on the same street for a ride home.

- 5). Applicant calls for information on a job advertised in a paper.

6). A policeman asks a driver to move a car.

7). A student asks a teacher for an extension for finishing a seminar paper.

8). A university teacher asks a student to give a lecture a week earlier than scheduled.

Note: please do not consider this a written task, instead, write down what you would SAY to the other person.

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