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**Context- and formula based approaches in the
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Context- and formula based approaches in the investigation of request strategies of Chinese EFL learners

Vincent X. Wang. 2011. *Making Requests by Chinese EFL Learners*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

This book investigates how Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners make English requests, e.g., *Can you open the door*, by means of context-based and formulae-based approaches in an experiment. Two groups of Chinese EFL learners are tested in the foreign language environment. Their pragmatic behaviours like strategy use, formulaic expressions, internal modifications, external modifications and utterance length are examined. The usefulness of these approaches as well as different request models of the learners are introduced.

Aijmer's (1996) examination of spoken English finds that native speakers of English make requests that are predominantly formulaic. However, in Chinese, request imperatives are used to make bald on-record requests (Lee-Wong 1994: 509), such as in 帶一點兒糖回來 *Dai yidianr tang hui lai* 'bring a little sugar back'. Studies of cross-linguistic variation in speech acts show that when adult L2 learners have not mastered certain L2 pragmatic norms, they tend to rely on their L1 pragmatic practice. This should then show improvement in their L2 pragmatic behaviours as their L2 learning progresses, and a gradually reduced reliance on L1 pragmatic norms. This discussion on the research of interlanguage pragmatics is then expanded and explained as the author reports his present study.

The author meticulously designed an experiment to obtain samples from two groups of Chinese EFL learners (a group of language students and a group of business students) and a native speaker group. The language group consists of advanced learners, who are third-year students in a Chinese-English translation and interpretation programme at a tertiary institution in Macao. The language and business learners have studied English for an average of 16.8 and 12.6 years, respectively. The mother tongue of the learners is either Cantonese or Mandarin. The native speaker group comprises native speakers of Australian English.

The research goals of Wang's book concern four areas. First, to what extent the two groups of Chinese EFL learners achieve native-like pragmatic behaviours in the foreign language environment. Secondly, whether the language group outperforms the business group in approximating native norms. Thirdly, to find out which of the elements of request behaviours

are developed in the learner groups. Finally, Wang investigates whether the scenario-based or the formulae-based approach has any advantage for interlanguage pragmatics. Enhanced discourse completion tasks are applied for eliciting request utterances from the different groups. The discourse completion task instruments contain ten scenarios, such as in the post office, in a restaurant, in a shop, to a technician, a retired actress, a police officer, and a professor. For example, request an extra bag in the supermarket, request an account statement in the bank, request to borrow money, or a reference letter from a professor. Each of the scenarios (see Appendix 1 of the book) consists of a written prompt that describes the situational context, an image and blank lines for respondents to write down their utterances. The instructions explain to the respondents that they are supposed to produce request utterances for scenarios that would occur in an English-speaking country, just as they would in real-life situations.

The discourse completion tasks elicited 1016 valid instances of request utterances — 401 for the business group, 306 for the language group, and 309 for the native speaker group. The results are analyzed in detail based on their pragmatic features including utterance length, strategy types, formulaic expressions, syntactic downgraders (conditionals and hi-clausal structures), lexical modifiers, and external modifiers (supportive moves and information sequencing). Previous research is reviewed wherever necessary to enhance the background of the research and the reliability of the data analysis.

Concerning the request strategies, the two learner groups are quite native-like. The author reveals the distribution patterns of ten strategy types and three strategy categories (direct, conventionally indirect, non-conventionally indirect) in the learner and the native speaker group, and examines inter-group differences using Chi-square tests. Request utterances, for example, *I want to trouble you to give me the letter*, *Could I possibly borrow \$50?*, are used to illustrate the qualitative features of the respondent groups' use, as well as analyse the lexical realizations of the major strategy types. It is found that the two learner groups strategy uses are similar to those of native speakers. The two groups do, however, differ from the native speakers in their use of strategies in several individual scenarios. The group in the EFL learning environment does not show a native-like use of request strategies even though they are advanced learners who had spent an average of 17 years studying English and training in translation and interpreting. There are two likely factors that can account for this: L1 transfer and L2 instruction. The EFL learners exhibit L1 pragmatic interference on at least the strategic, lexical and sociopragmatic levels. The language learners come slightly closer to a native pattern strategy use than the business learners, both in the scenarios as a whole and in individual scenarios.

Both learner groups use request formulae in a distinctively non-native-like manner. The learner groups could not use some of the longer and more syntactically complex formulae, such as *I was wondering if*, *Would it be Adj if* and *Would you be Adj to VP*, that native speakers commonly use for elaboration and deferential requests. The learners were also unable to utilize some scenario-specific formulae. As for the internal modifications, the two learner groups also differ in several ways from native speakers in their use of downgraders, such as *possibly*, *maybe*, *just*, *at all*, *look*, and *you know*.

In addition, supportive moves and information sequencing are employed for the analysis of external modifications. Both learner groups employ supportive moves more frequently and in more elaborate configurations than the native group. Disarming strategies such as *I know this is a big ask*, and *I completely understand if you say no* are used by the native speakers only. On the other hand, for the information sequencing, the two learner groups favoured supportive moves when making requests, while the native speaker group would often choose to omit them. However, when the native speakers do use supportive moves, the positions in which they use them are similar to those of the learner groups — the post-posed position is favoured in the service scenarios, while the pre-posed and hi-positions predominate in the favour-asking scenarios.

Furthermore, the author revisits basic questions put forth by Kasper and Schmidt (1996) that pertain to interlanguage pragmatics studies. Among them, for the question “Does the L1 influence L2 learning?” the author compares the result of the present study with those of Lee-Wong (1994), Zhang (1995), and Yu (1999). In general, Yu (1999) and the present study both uncover similar results, i.e., that Chinese EFL learners noticeably increase their use of conventionally-indirect strategies and reduce their use of direct strategies in English in comparison to what Chinese speakers generally do in their L1 (cf. Lee-Wong 1994; Zhang 1995). In terms of lexical interference, Wang explains that L1 to L2 transfer can also occur in terms of lexical choices that reflect learners’ L1 origin. The same is observed in the present study, e.g., the Chinese EFL learners use requests like *I want* and *I would VP* much more frequently than the native English speakers. These two formulae mirror two common Chinese expressions: 我要 *wo yao* ‘I want’ and 我想要 *wo xiang yao* ‘I think [that I] want’ in terms of semantic meaning and situational usage. The EFL learners also use certain words that suggest L1 interference, for example, the expression 給我一個機會 *gei wo yige jihui* ‘give me a chance’ is commonly used in situations where the speaker acknowledges guilt, will stop making the mistake, and requests the hearer not to impose punishment. L1 interference in L2 also occurs at the sociopragmatic level where the learners’ knowledge influences the way they perceive social and contextual factors in L2 situations. The samples centering on

“police” and “bank” given by the learners and the native speakers differ markedly in their levels of politeness and directness. Differing from Yu’s (1999) study, however, Wang found more direct strategies and fewer conventionally-indirect strategies than Yu’s (1999) study in both EFL learners and native English speakers. Such differences depend on the scenario types used for data elicitation in the two studies.

At last, the author evaluates the two major approaches — the context-based approach and the formulae-based approach. The former provides evidence that learners do not vary their linguistic behaviour to the same extent that native speakers do, and that they do not perceive contextual factors in a native-like manner. In this sample, linguistic behaviour occurs in patterns, suggesting that learners need to adjust these patterns more towards native norms. As for the formulae-based approach, the results of the study show in different contexts that formulaic language provides an important means for learners to achieve native-like request behaviours for their responses.

It is a virtue of Wang’s book that he builds his research on the basis of a solid grasp of previous research on interlanguage pragmatics. This allows him to provide a concise review of and critical view on the research background. The clear and step-by-step analysis of the request samples provides the reader with a deep understanding of request strategies in Chinese EFL learners. At the same time, the author does not lose sight of the L1 and L2 comparison. Wang has genuine empirical evidence for the usefulness of the context-based and formulae-based approaches and contributes a study for cross-cultural pragmatics, politeness and language pedagogy.

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