

ABSTRACT

RESEARCH PAPER: How to respond to a compliment: an analysis of pragmatic transfer of Chinese learners of English

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Communication breakdowns can occur during cross-cultural communication due to different perceptions and interpretations of appropriateness and politeness. This paper reports a study on the phenomena of pragmatic transfer committed by Chinese learners of English in their daily intercultural conversations. It has two aims: (1) to investigate differences between Chinese L2 learners of English and native English speakers' production in compliment responses; (2) to explore negative pragmatic transfer relating to learners' linguistic proficiency levels.

20 Chinese and 10 American college students at Ball State University were chosen for this study. A discourse completion test (DCT) designed with 12 contextual settings and a Demographic survey were administered to both groups of subjects. Twenty Chinese students were given 15-25 minutes to complete the test and questionnaire in the presence of researcher. Similarly, responses of ten American native speakers were collected as baseline data to evaluate the quality of speech produced by Chinese speakers. The responses of Chinese students were principally compared with American native English speakers' responses in terms of the frequency of semantic patterns and the content of semantic formulas based on Herbert's (1986 & 1990) classifications of compliment response strategies. Results were found that overall all three

groups of Chinese ESL learners with different proficiency levels shared most of the CRs strategies and that negative pragmatic transfer existed in the choice and content of CRs strategies. Language proficiency was a very important factor in negative pragmatic transfer. In employing the CRs strategies, the group that most approximated the English norms were learners with high linguistic proficiency and ESL learner with lower proficiency levels were more likely to negatively transfer L1 sociocultural norms to L2 than more proficient learners.