EXPLORING CROSS-CULTURAL PRAGMATIC JUDGEMENT OF TWO GROUPS OF EFL TEACHERS ON FORMAL WRITTEN REQUESTS

This study examines the pragmatic judgments made on formal request letters written by adult L2 learners of English by two groups of EFL teachers at the City University of Hong Kong. A pragmatic Judgment Questionnaire was completed by each of the sixteen teachers (eight native Cantonese speakers and eight native English speakers), who were subsequently interviewed individually. The data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. Pragmatic judgment was examined by investigating four pragmatic variables adapted from Hudson, Detmer and Brown (1995); and Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989) – i.e., politeness, directness, formality and amount of information.

Specifically, this study aims to answer the following question: Quantitatively, will native Cantonese-speaking EFL teachers differ significantly from native English-speaking EFL teachers in their pragmatic judgment of university students’ request letters?

Main research findings suggest that there were no significant differences between the two groups of teachers in their pragmatic judgments in most aspects, except for their views on:

- what constituted “unnaturally polite” expressions,
- whether negative words would help to achieve the purpose of a message,
- what supporting moves should be avoided, and
- what writing plans they preferred.

The findings derived from this study suggest that the direction of pragmatic consciousness-raising could be re-examined. The solution to the question of how to minimize the likelihood of pragmatic failures, which Thomas (1983) regards as resulting from sociolinguistic transfer, does not seem to lie in unilaterally teaching L2 learners to use the strategies perceived as conventionally polite in English pragmatics; rather, the direction of pragmatic consciousness-raising might need to shift to raising the awareness of both NSs and NNSs of English that the meanings attached to directness/indirectness by speakers of different first languages in terms of politeness are probably different: while Western cultures may associate indirectness with politeness, some non-Western cultures do not deem direct requests impolite.
References


