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Book Reviews



Wei Li, *Pragmatic transfer and development: Evidence from EFL learners in China*.

Amsterdam, Netherlands: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2018. xv + 268 pp.,
ISBN: 9789027200631.

As educators in the field of English Linguistics many of us are used to teaching students who are still in the process of learning English as a foreign language. Our students' email etiquette might be quite different from that of native speakers of English. Their writing might include expressions that are uncommon or even appear to be rude.

In her book, Li looks at such phenomena as they occur in the realisation of request and refusal speech acts by Chinese learners of English in email conversation. In doing so, she shows how pragmatic transfer from Chinese EFL learners' L1 to their L2 leads to the distinctive character of these students' email requests and refusals and how different proficiency levels can further reduce or intensify this effect. Her book is relevant to anyone working within the fields of interlanguage pragmatics, intercultural communication and second language acquisition. In addition, its contrastive approach to the acquisition of pragmatic competence makes it an interesting read for researchers looking at contrasts in English-Chinese speech act realisations. Finally, Li's study can help inform the ESL/EFL tutor's approach to teaching Chinese students.

Wei Li is an Associate Lecturer in Chinese in the School of Humanities at the University of Tasmania, Australia. In the introduction to her book *Pragmatic transfer and development: Evidence from EFL learners in China*, the author lists her two main research questions as: 1. "Is there any evidence of pragmatic transfer in the performance of requests and refusals by Chinese EFL learners in email communication?" (p. 4) and 2. "Does pragmatic transfer increase or decrease as learners' linguistic proficiency increases" (p. 4). Both questions are analysed in terms of pragmalinguistic transfer, i.e. the influence of learners' L1 on the choice of linguistic means and forms, and sociopragmatic transfer, referring to the influence of sociopragmatic knowledge on the assessment

of social factors like relative power. In answering the first question, Li provides ample evidence for pragmatic transfer from EFL speakers' L1. Examples are the transfer of basic L1 features like Want statements which proves to be more pronounced for low proficiency learners. High proficiency learners show more sophisticated transfer on both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic levels, including the use and repetition of overly polite phrases and extended small talk. These observations show that transfer increases with increasing proficiency, thereby answering the second research question. Through very careful analysis, applying both qualitative and quantitative methods, analysing the frequency as well as the form and content of pragmatic features and checking the results of EFL groups against English and native Chinese baseline groups, Li is able to provide convincing results and a wide variety of interesting examples.

The book has 6 chapters in total. Following the introduction of the topic, research questions and the relevance of the study in chapter 1, chapter 2 provides a thorough literature review, explaining theoretical frameworks and discussing existing empirical studies on speech acts as well as pragmatic transfer. By positioning her research relative to the existing literature, Li shows where her work is filling gaps and concludes that more in-depth research is needed that examines the connection between pragmatic transfer and the proficiency levels of EFL learners. Chapter 3 covers research methods, explaining the use of Email Production Questionnaires for data collection in combination with informal interviews. For the study, 145 participants, divided into two baseline groups (native speakers of Mandarin, native speakers of Australian English) and two EFL learner target groups (high and low proficiency levels), respond to eight email situations, which require them to produce written requests and refusals. The analysis of negative pragmatic transfer is analysed quantitatively, by considering the frequency and average number of pragmatic features transferred, and qualitatively in terms of the form and content of transferred pragmatic features. The approach to the acquisition of pragmatic competence followed in this study is thus clearly grounded in a base-line description of the contrastive pragmatic norms that guide Chinese vs English native speakers in their choice of speech act realisation strategies. An in-depth description of the findings for requests and refusals respectively makes up chapters 4 and 5. In chapter 6, the author summarises her findings and links them to the cultural values which guide the speech act behaviour of the Chinese participants in contrast to their Australian counterparts. Results are discussed in relation to existing theories of L2 pragmatic development and with regard to their pedagogical implications.

Having taught EFL to Chinese students in China for almost five years myself, I found it particularly useful to read about differing cultural concepts of politeness and how they surface as pragmatic transfer in the EFL speaker's production of requests and refusals. The use of Want statements or the phrase *I hope you can* as opposed to internal modifiers, such as continuous aspect and past tense (*I was hoping you could*), next to the common use of compliments and overly polite terms of address (*professor*) are phenomena I frequently observe in my communication with Chinese students. Li's findings confirm that they are statistically meaningful. In addition, she provides a linguistic explanation as to why these patterns exist. Continuous aspect, for example, lacks equivalents in Mandarin, whereas Want statements cannot be softened in English, like they would be in Mandarin (*wǒ xiǎng* instead of *wǒ yào*). The study also provides a sociocultural explanation of these patterns, introducing the principles of the Anglo-Saxon individualistic culture in contrast to the Chinese values of community and solidarity. It is precisely these values that explain the more elaborate flattery and small talk that is applied by more proficient learners of English. All these observations and their explanation are useful to practitioners when observing and trying to address these "harmful" instances of pragmatic transfer, which may easily lead to pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication (p. 217). The author's suggestions about how the teaching of pragmatics could be integrated into EFL teaching in China are equally useful. To me this practice-oriented view on the data is the most interesting aspect of Li's book.

As limitations of the book, the author herself mentions the fact that completing Email Production Questionnaires creates an unnatural situation for the production of requests and refusals. Also, she points out that the number of suggested situations was limited, and only negative pragmatic transfer examined. Yet only so much ground can be covered in a single study, and to my mind this study is already very thorough. Thus, the literature discussion and extensive data analysis supply so much detail that, to some extent, parts of the book become somewhat repetitive and readers may get the impression that they are reading a PhD thesis. It would have been more reader-oriented, in my opinion, if the interesting discussion part, which puts the results into context, had instead occupied a greater share of the work.

Li's book shows us that acquiring pragmatic competence is a big, yet underestimated, task in second language acquisition. She provides a wide variety of examples showing how Chinese EFL learners will translate their own cultural norms into the target language, how this may lead to intercultural misunderstandings and how L2 development is influencing this process. These insights will be invaluable to researchers in interlanguage pragmatics, intercultural communication and second language acquisition. Its contrastive approach to

the acquisition of pragmatic competence also makes it appealing to anyone interested in Chinese-English contrasts in speech act realisation strategies concerning requests and refusals. In particular, EFL/ESL teachers of Chinese students in China will profit from the author's practice-oriented recommendations as they try to create more pragmatic awareness in the classroom.

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