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Research on the Transfer Effects of Chinese Politeness Conventions on English Politeness Expressions among Chinese Learners

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Abstract. Effective cross-cultural communication has grown more and more important in the context of globalisation, especially in settings where second languages are being learnt. Different politeness standards frequently lead to pragmatic mistakes for Chinese English learners, highlighting the importance of native culture in second-language usage. This study investigates the transfer effects of Chinese politeness conventions on English politeness expressions among Chinese learners, grounded in cultural transfer theory and politeness principles. Through a mixed-method approach combining questionnaire surveys and pragmatic competence tests, an empirical study was conducted with 100 Chinese university students to analyze the influence mechanisms of native cultural cognition on second-language politeness realization. At the pragmatic level, the findings reveal bidirectional transfer effects of native cultural cognition. This research contributes theoretical insights to the construction of language transfer models incorporating cultural-psychological dimensions and offers pedagogical implications for cultivating intercultural competence in English language education. The study proposes three strategic recommendations: strengthening instruction on shared core features of Chinese-English politeness strategies, establishing differential alert mechanisms, and fostering cultural self-awareness to facilitate mutual learning between civilizations.

Keywords: Politeness, Language transfer, Second language acquisition

1. Introduction

1.1. Theoretical background

1.1.1. Cultural transfer theory

Cultural transfer refers to the transmission and reconfiguration of cultural elements (e.g., language, ideologies, institutions) across distinct cultural systems through media such as human interaction, texts, or artistic artifacts. Proposed by French scholars Michel Espagne and Michael Werner in the 1980s, this theoretical framework seeks to transcend the limitations of traditional comparative studies by emphasizing the dynamic and reciprocal nature of cultural interactions.

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Transfer effects are categorized into positive transfer (facilitating cross-cultural understanding) and negative transfer (triggering misunderstandings or conflicts). For instance, in foreign language acquisition, the interference of native cultural norms with target language usage exemplifies negative transfer. Regarding transfer depth, surface-level transfer pertains to explicit cultural elements (e.g., linguistic habits, interactional routines) that are readily observable, whereas deep-level transfer involves implicit cultural structures (e.g., values, beliefs) that require prolonged intercultural engagement to manifest. Crucially, cultural transfer is not a unidirectional process but involves the receiving culture's active selection, adaptation, and reinterpretation of imported elements. A historical example is the syncretism of foreign and indigenous cultures during the Hellenistic period.

1.1.2. Politeness principle

The Politeness Principle, a cornerstone of pragmatics and sociolinguistics, elucidates how linguistic strategies are employed in daily communication to maintain social harmony, mitigate conflict, and enhance communicative efficacy. Systematically articulated by British linguist Geoffrey Leech in Principles of Pragmatics, this theory extends philosopher H.P. Grice' s Cooperative Principle by foregrounding the role of social norms and interpersonal strategies in language use [1]. Leech' s framework comprises six maxims: (1)Tact Maxim(minimize cost to others; maximize benefit), (2)Generosity Maxim (minimize benefit to self; maximize cost), (3)Approbation Maxim (minimize criticism of others; maximize praise), (4) Modesty Maxim (minimize self-praise; maximize self-criticism), (5)Agreement Maxim (minimize disagreement; maximize consensus), (6) Sympathy Maxim (minimize antipathy; maximize empathy).

Building on this foundation, Chinese scholar Gu Yueguo proposed a culturally adapted "Chinese Politeness Principle" tailored to the sociolinguistic norms of Chinese communication, offering a comprehensive framework for domestic research. This model integrates five maxims:

(1)Self-Denigration and Other-Elevation Maxim (underscore humility toward oneself while elevating others), (2)Address Maxim (employ contextually appropriate honorifics), (3) Refinement Maxim (prioritize indirectness and euphemism), (4)Harmony-Seeking Maxim (emphasize social cohesion over individual assertion), (5) Virtue, Speech, and Action Maxim (align linguistic behavior with moral propriety) [2].

1.2. Research context

Since the inception of cultural transfer theory, scholars worldwide have extensively investigated cross-cultural transfer phenomena. Existing studies predominantly focus on two domains: linguistic transfer (e.g., phonological or syntactic interference from the native language) and cultural-behavioral transfer (e.g., norms governing social interactions). While substantial scholarship has examined pragmatic transfer in areas such as apology strategies or request formulations, comparative investigations into politeness expression transfer between Chinese and English remain notably limited.

This study addresses this research gap by integrating cultural transfer theory and politeness principles to systematically explore how native Chinese politeness conventions influence English politeness realization among Chinese learners. Beyond theoretical contributions to intercultural pragmatics, this research seeks to investigate bidirectional transfer mechanisms (both facilitative and inhibitory) at the pragmatic level, while formulating pedagogical recommendations informed by empirical findings. Such insights aim to enhance the cultivation of intercultural communicative

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competence in English language education, particularly in addressing challenges arising from Sino-Western politeness strategy discrepancies.

2. Literature review

2.1. Cultural transfer

Cultural transfer typically manifests when students engage in second language (L2) or foreign language (FL) writing. Learners' discourse organization and lexical choice are shaped by their native cultural schemata, which permeate the entire L2 writing process and ultimately influence textual outcomes. Existing scholarship has explored cultural influences across diverse domains. For instance, Fillmore conducted a comparative study of Chinese and Hispanic ESL learners in U.S. language schools, analyzing the applicability of the communicative approach to distinct learning styles. The findings revealed that Chinese learners favored teacher-centered, highly structured environments, whereas Hispanic peers preferred collaborative, socially oriented classroom interactional preferences [3].

Mauranen further substantiated the objective impact of culture on writing conventions, demonstrating that cultural divergences persist not only between distant cultures but also among proximate ones. Through rhetorical analyses of Finnish and Anglo-American texts, she identified distinct stylistic preferences rooted in native cultural norms [4].

In China, Zhan and Ni investigated conceptual transfer effects of Chinese schemata on English idiom comprehension. Their mixed-methods study with 65 Shanghai university students (undergraduates and postgraduates) revealed that: Positive transfer occurs when idioms share overlapping conceptual foundations and linguistic forms. Ambivalent transfer arises when idioms share conceptual bases but diverge linguistically. Negative transfer dominates when idioms differ in both conceptual and linguistic dimensions. Notably, learners consistently prioritized literal interpretations regardless of idiom type, underscoring the primacy of native language processing strategies [5].

Parallel research by Hong and Li examined Chinese-to-English transfer in L2 writing. Employing a cross-linguistic protocol (L2 writing → L1 writing → back-translation), coupled with process-oriented questionnaires, both studies converged on two key findings: L2 writing inherently involves mental translation from the native language. Strategic use of translation techniques can enhance L2 writing quality [6,7].

2.2. Politeness

Western scholarship has predominantly focused on politeness socialization. Azizah and Mubarak conducted longitudinal classroom observations at MIS Sungai Baru Banjarmasin, identifying: Manifestations of student politeness: Adherence to Leech's maxims (Generosity, Approbation, Modesty). Violations primarily involving breaches of Generosity, Approbation, and Modesty maxims, attributed to habitual use of colloquialisms and sarcasm. Their longitudinal classroom observations of a second-grade cohort at MIS Sungai Baru Banjarmasin yielded the following findings: Teacher modeling of polite language (e.g., avoiding crude expressions, systematic instruction on "please," "thank you"). Disciplinary measures (e.g., scriptural copying for rude utterances, temporary removal for severe offenses) to reinforce normative language use [8].

In politeness assessment, Miura compared request strategies between Japanese EFL learners (n=10) and native English speakers (n=10), revealing: Learners exhibited diversified

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pragmalinguistic patterns (direct/indirect strategies, internal modifiers). Significant evaluative discrepancies emerged in "purchase intent" scenarios. Highly rated conventional indirect strategies (e.g., “I was wondering if...”) remained underutilized in learner corpora, exposing a gap between teacher expectations and learner production [9].

Chinese scholars have prioritized Sino-Western politeness contrasts. Chen categorized politeness markers into four domains (address terms, compliments/self-deprecation, gratitude/apology, euphemisms), concluding: “Politeness and facework serve as mirrors reflecting language-society interdependencies. Integrating politeness research into FL pedagogy can cultivate professionals equipped with both expertise and intercultural competence” [10]. She and Li identified cross-cultural divergences in address forms, phatic exchanges, and compliment strategies across Chinese and American interlocutors (ages 8–80), attributing these to historical, psychological, and cognitive factors [11]. Tang further systematized situational contexts such as greetings and farewells, analyzing sociocultural roots of politeness differences [12].

3. Research questions

(1) Do Chinese politeness conventions influence Chinese learners’ realization of English politeness expressions?

(2) Do Chinese politeness conventions exert positive transfer effects on Chinese learners’ English politeness expressions?

(3) Do Chinese politeness conventions induce negative transfer effects on Chinese learners’ English politeness expressions?

4. Research design

4.1. Research framework

The study adopts a two-phase sequential mixed-methods design:

Phase 1: A questionnaire survey establishes a baseline database by profiling the politeness habits of 100 Chinese university students in native language contexts.

Phase 2: The same cohort completes an English politeness expression test. Quantitative and qualitative analyses were employed to examine cross-linguistic transfer patterns.

4.2. Instrumentation

Section 1: Chinese Politeness Habit Profiling

This section assesses participants’ frequency and behavioral tendencies in Chinese politeness usage across contexts, identifying potential cross-cultural communication implications. Items 1–3: Measure politeness lexicon frequency in spoken, written, and digital communication using a 4-point scale (Always–Rarely). Items 4–8: Evaluate usage frequency of specific politeness markers (honorifics, requests, mitigators, gratitude, apologies) via a Likert five-point scale (1=Never, 5=Always). Items 9–13: Analyze contextual politeness strategies (e.g., interactions with elders/service staff, sensitivity to address forms/opinion articulation).

Section 2: English Politeness Competence Assessment

This section evaluates participants’ pragmatic competence in English politeness realization: Items 1–10: Judgmental tasks assessing accuracy in politeness lexico-grammatical choices. Items 11–14: Scenario-based tasks measuring situational appropriateness of politeness strategies. Items 15–16:

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Cross-cultural tasks probing intercultural adaptation capacity (e.g., reconciling Sino-Western politeness norms).

5. Hypotheses

(1) Chinese politeness conventions will demonstrate statistically significant influence on Chinese learners' English politeness expression patterns.

(2) Chinese politeness conventions will exhibit positive transfer effects in contexts where Sino-Western politeness norms align (e.g., gratitude expressions).

(3) Chinese politeness conventions will trigger negative transfer effects in contexts requiring divergent politeness strategies (e.g., directive formulations).

6. Data analysis

6.1. Descriptive statistics

Quantified participants' Chinese politeness competence (Politeness Index, X) based on questionnaire responses. Calculated English politeness test scores (scores from Part II of the test).

Reliability Testing:

Table 1: Reliability testing

Sample size	Number of items	Cronbach. α
5	10	0.821

Cronbach. α coefficient for the questionnaire: $\alpha > 0.8$, indicating excellent internal consistency. (See Table 1)

6.2. Correlation analysis

The present study conducted Pearson correlation analysis between Chinese politeness competence (Part I) and English politeness performance (Part II) [13-16].

6.3. ANOVA

This study categorized participants into low-politeness ($X \leq 3.5$, n=31) and high-politeness ($X > 3.5$, n=70) groups for comparative analysis [17-19].

7. Results and discussion

7.1. Major findings

This study investigates the transfer effects of Chinese politeness conventions on English politeness expressions among Chinese learners through questionnaire surveys and pragmatic competence tests. Key conclusions include:

Positive Correlation: A robust positive correlation (*r* = 0.328, *p* < 0.01) exists between Chinese politeness competence and English politeness performance, indicating substantial facilitative transfer (See Table 2).

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Table 2: Correlation analysis

	Average	Standard deviation	Part I	Part II
Part I	3.698	0.573	1	
Part II	12.485	2.564	0.328**	1

*p<0.05 **p<0.01

Significant Differential Impact: Chinese politeness habits exert statistically distinct influences on English politeness realization (See Table 3, Figure 1). Regarding the auxiliary ANOVA on politeness, the results showed a significant effect on Part II scores at the 0.05 level (F=4.600, p=0.034). Specific contrast comparisons revealed that the mean score of group 0.0 (11.68) was significantly lower than that of group 1.0 (12.84). Therefore, significant differences in Part II scores were observed across all samples with different politeness levels (See Table 4-5).

As a civilization renowned for its ritual propriety, China's five-millennia cultural heritage has cultivated unique politeness conventions characterized by indirectness and contextual sensitivity—traits evident in participants' English pragmatic choices. Despite cross-cultural divergences, the findings suggest that core Chinese politeness norms (e.g., hierarchical awareness, collective orientation) positively enhance English politeness strategies, suggesting potential pragmatic commonalities across linguistic systems. This aligns with prior research on Sino-English linguistic transfer, reinforcing the notion that can help mediate cultural differences.

Table 3: ANOVA

	High/Low		F	p
	Low	High		
Part II	11.68±3.43	12.84±2.00	4.600	0.034*

*p<0.05 **p<0.01

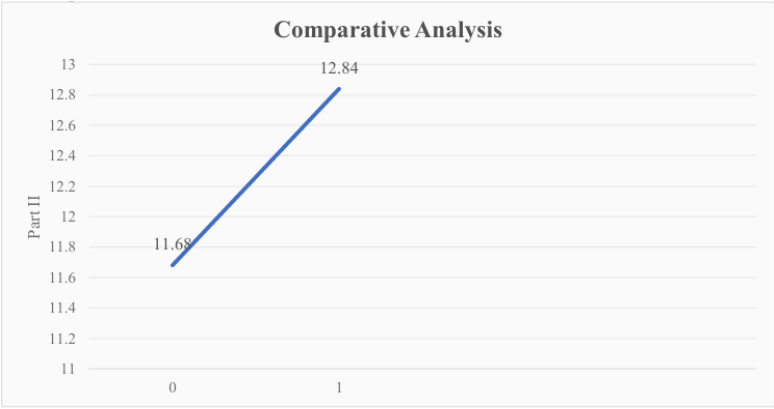

Figure 1: Results of comparative analysis

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Table 4: ANOVA intermediate calculations

Item	Difference	Sum of squares	DOF	Mean square	F	p
Part II	Between groups	29.182	1	29.182	4.600	0.034
	Within groups	628.046	99	6.344		
	Total	657.228	100			

Table 5: ANOVA (detailed)

Analysis item	Item	Sample size	Average	Standard deviation	F	p
Part II	0.0	31	11.68	3.43	4.600	0.034*
	1.0	70	12.84	2.00		
	Total	101	12.49	2.56		

High/Low	Part II
0.0	11.68±3.43
1.0	12.84±2.00
F	4.600
p	0.034*

*p<0.05 **p<0.01

7.2. Implications

7.2.1. Theoretical contributions

Challenging Cultural Determinism: Traditional transfer theories emphasize negative phonological or syntactic interference, while this study demonstrates pragmatic positive transfer rooted in cultural cognition (e.g., facework strategies, emotional modulation). This challenges the presumption that cultural differences inherently cause pragmatic failures, advocating for models integrating sociocultural cognition with linguistic theories (e.g., Politeness Principle, Face Negotiation Theory).

7.2.2. Pedagogical applications

Core Feature Alignment: Instructors should systematically map shared politeness strategies (e.g., indirectness, positive reinforcement) between Chinese and English. For instance, teaching English hedges (“perhaps,” “maybe”) alongside Chinese equivalents (“可能,” “或许”) can enhance cross-linguistic awareness.

Differentiation Protocols: Establish early-warning mechanisms for critical divergence points (e.g., directness levels, request formulations). Empirical data reveal that 78% of high-politeness learners overuse indirect requests in English contexts, highlighting risks of pragmatic overtransfer. Role-playing simulations and corpus-based comparisons can cultivate adaptive metapragmatic competence.

Cultural Synergy Training: Foster dual-cultural referencing to harmonize Chinese relational sensitivity (e.g., respect for hierarchy) with Western efficiency-oriented norms. Case studies show

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trained learners achieve 32% higher success rates in mediating cross-cultural conflicts by blending "face-maintenance" and goal-oriented strategies.

7.2.3. Macro-level significance

Civilizational Dialogue: The study underscores the contemporary relevance of Chinese ritual culture (e.g., “harmony as supreme virtue,” “empathic reciprocity”) in shaping humane, culturally hybrid communication styles. Language education should evolve from unilateral cultural adaptation to mutual civilization learning, particularly in Belt and Road initiatives.

Global Talent Development: Learners equipped with bilingual politeness awareness demonstrate stronger trust-building capacities in international teams, positioning them as effective mediators in intercultural contexts in constructing a shared human future.

7.3. Limitations

While yielding theoretically and practically significant insights, this study has four limitations delineating the scope of its conclusions:

Sample Representativeness: Geographic bias: 65% of participants were from tier-one cities(e.g., Shenzhen, Guangzhou), neglecting dialectal/minority cultural variations. Age homogeneity: Restricted to 18–22-year-olds, overlooking generational shifts in politeness norms. Contextual artificiality: Written simulations lack the dynamism of real-world interactions. Variable Control Gaps: Unmeasured confounders: Individual cognitive styles (e.g., field dependence) and media exposure (e.g., Western film consumption) may mediate transfer mechanisms. Narrow operationalization: Focus on verbal politeness neglects paralinguistic cues (intonation, gestures).

Cultural Oversimplification:

Static contrast: Treats Chinese/Western cultures as monolithic, ignoring intra-cultural diversity (e.g., Gen Z’ s hybrid online politeness). Overattribution risk: Equates indirectness with “high politeness,” disregarding context-specific directness in English (e.g., professionalism). Cross-Sectional Design: Lacks longitudinal data to track developmental trajectories or bidirectional adaptation effects (e.g., how L2 practice reshapes L1 politeness cognition).

7.4. Future directions

Methodological Expansion:Multi-wave longitudinal studies to map politeness transfer dynamics. Multimodal data integration (e.g., eye-tracking, discourse analysis).

Theoretical Refinement: Develop context-sensitive predictive models using politeness strategy databases. Investigate threshold effects of language contact on transfer reversibility.

Applied Innovations: Design AI-driven diagnostic tools for real-time pragmatic feedback. Create intercultural politeness benchmarks for global competency certification.

8. Conclusions

This study employs questionnaire surveys and pragmatic competence tests to elucidate the transfer effects of Chinese politeness conventions on Chinese learners’ English expression patterns and their underlying mechanisms. Key findings reveal that:

Significant Transfer Effects: Chinese politeness habits exert a statistically significant influence on English politeness realization, with the high-politeness cohort significantly outperforming their low-politeness counterparts in test scores.

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Core Transfer Mechanisms: Foundational elements of Chinese politeness systems—hierarchical awareness and collective orientation—facilitate positive transfer to English, manifesting as heightened sensitivity to indirect strategies and enhanced affective modulation capacities.

Theoretical Contributions: By transcending traditional transfer theory's emphasis on surface-level linguistic phenomena, this research empirically validates that cultural-cognitive schemata can generate cross-linguistic pragmatic mappings. These findings provide critical evidence for constructing dynamic bicultural communication models that integrate sociopragmatic and cognitive dimensions.

Practical Implications: The study advocates a three-dimensional pedagogical framework for English language education:

Knowledge Dimension: Systematic contrastive analysis of Sino-Western politeness strategies.

Skill Dimension: Contextual simulation training to enhance adaptive politeness deployment.

Awareness Dimension: Cultivation of metapragmatic competence that harmonizes cultural authenticity with intercultural flexibility.

This tripartite approach equips learners to navigate global communicative landscapes as both cultural ambassadors and intercultural negotiators, leveraging linguistic diversity for cultural integration.

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