

# Making Requests by Chinese EFL Learners

Vincent X. Wang

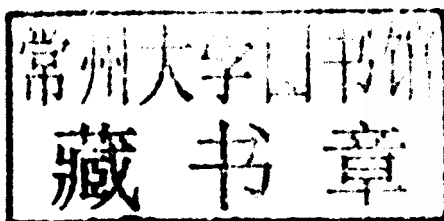


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Vincent X. Wang

University of Macau



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## Making Requests by Chinese EFL Learners

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### **Volume 207**

Making Requests by Chinese EFL Learners  
by Vincent X. Wang

## Preface

This research monograph has grown out of the author's interest in understanding how adept language learners are at performing social interactions in their L2. One question began to puzzle the author during his graduate years at UQ – if we consider that language learning should aim to develop learners' communicative competence, why has research on L2 learning and acquisition focused so much on grammatical competence, extending so little our understanding of learners' communicative competence in social contexts? This question has led me to explore the area of cross-cultural pragmatics, and to conduct an empirical study, which forms the basis of this book. The book thus aims to throw some light on interlanguage pragmatics, focusing on an important population – Chinese-speakers learning English in their home country – and an important speech act – requests – that is frequently used in day-to-day social interactions.

The book is primarily written for cross-cultural pragmatics researchers and those who are interested in Chinese pragmatics. TESOL professionals, particularly those working with Asian students, may also find the book useful, for example, in terms of the data it provides on learners' request behaviour in specific scenarios, their use of formulae, and their perceptions of social and contextual factors. Graduate students can also use this book as a reference for their studies on cross-cultural pragmatics, politeness and language pedagogy.

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## List of abbreviations

CCSARP	Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realisation Patterns
CID	conventionally indirect strategy types
D	direct strategy types
DCT	discourse completion task/test
EFL	English as a foreign language
ELF	English as a lingua franca
ESL	English as a second language
FTA	face-threatening act
ILP	interlanguage pragmatics
L1	first language
L2	second language
NCID	non-conventionally indirect strategy types
SBU	situation-bound utterance
WEs	World Englishes

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## CHAPTER 1

# Introduction

This book examines the competence of Chinese EFL learners in making English requests. It contributes to the understanding of cross-cultural pragmatics, a field of research that has been steadily growing for more than three decades. This line of study compares and contrasts how linguistic actions are performed in different languages and cultures, as well as investigating L2 learners' competence in enacting linguistic behaviours – known as interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) – which is the focus of the present investigation. Our study casts light on the ability of Chinese learners of English outside the target-speech communities to perform social interactions in comparison to native English speaker norms.

ILP research provides valuable information for L2 pedagogy in terms of language use in social contexts. This social and contextual perspective is largely missing in various schools of grammar – e.g., lexical-functional grammar and transformational-generative grammar – which are not designed to study language use (Widdowson 1984). However, L2 pedagogy concerns the ability of language learners to use the language appropriately and effectively to perform social interactions, and such an ability does not necessarily correlate with grammatical competence. Following Hymes's notion of communicative competence, researchers in the field of L2 pedagogy came to the view that L2 learning is not simply a matter of constructing grammatical sentences, but rather concerns learners' ability "to produce situationally acceptable, and more especially socially acceptable utterances, which, in his [Hymes's] view, would normally be held to be part of a native speaker's competence in a particular language" (Lyons 1996: 24). This posits a social and cultural perspective on language. Widdowson (1990) further elaborates on the social dimensions of language learning:

We learn language in order to manage our affairs in the world we find ourselves in. Language is the means of initiation into the conventions of conceptualization and communication which define particular cultures. It has a crucial socializing purpose. (Widdowson 1990: 103)

For Widdowson, language learners need to become familiar with the conventions that govern thinking and communicating in the target language and culture – a process of socialising. Since particular cultures have specific conventions for performing social interactions in particular communicative contexts, L2 learners

need to gain knowledge about the use of these conventions in the target language. It is in this regard that ILP research provides relevant information about L2 learners' linguistic behaviour and how such behaviour develops.

ILP is considered to be a hybrid of second language acquisition (SLA) and pragmatics (Kasper & Blum-Kulka 1993). SLA is a relatively well established field in applied linguistics that examines how an L2 is acquired or learnt (Ellis 1994), while pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that studies how meaning is derived in context. So how is ILP related to SLA? In most SLA circles since the 1980s, SLA has been not only about linguistic competence, but also about Hymesian communicative competence – recognising the rules of language use in social contexts (Block 2003). For example, Ellis (1985) proposed extending the scope of SLA to incorporate “all the aspects of language that the language learner needs to master” (p. 5), including socially-situated language use. However, mainstream SLA research has largely focused on the formal linguistic properties of learners' interlanguage, marginalising the position of ILP in SLA (Ellis 1994: 159; Kasper 1996). Some researchers subscribe to a cognitive orientation of SLA, insisting that language use does not belong to SLA and is, rather, a separate category (Gass 1997, 1998; Gass & Selinker 2001; Kasper 1997). Their view of SLA has been strongly challenged by researchers who believe in the social and cultural orientation of language and language acquisition, who propose there conceptualisation of SLA by broadening its scope and giving it a social element (Block 2003; Firth & Wagner 1997; Tarone 2000). In their view, the narrower interpretation of SLA leads to the unbalanced development of the field, resulting in little relevance to L2 pedagogy (Lyons 1996). For example, Freeman and Johnson (1998) noted that the narrower view of SLA is of such minimal use in L2 education that practising language teachers probably do not need an understanding of the SLA literature. While the debate on whether or not ILP has a place in SLA is beyond the scope of the present study, we should note that interlanguage pragmatics has developed into an important research area in its own right. ILP research contributes to the fields of applied linguistics and L2 pedagogy, extending our knowledge of how learners perform social interactions with their L2, and how this competence develops (Ellis 1994; Kasper 1996; Kasper & Rose 2001, 2002).

### **ILP and requesting**

ILP research has mainly studied L2 learners' performance and acquisition of speech acts (Ellis 1994; Kasper & Dahl 1991). Requesting, rather than other speech acts such as apologising, complimenting, refusing, and complaining, is probably the most frequently studied speech act in both L1 speakers and L2

learners. It is a speech act that people perform in social contexts in order to direct the hearer to provide goods and services, and attracts particular attention in politeness theory and language acquisition/pedagogy research. ILP studies have shown that L2 learners often doubt whether their requests sound appropriate to native speakers. For example, Cohen and Olshtain (1993) examined ESL learners' production of speech acts in several communicative scenarios, and asked the learners to report what they were thinking when they produced the speech acts. In one of the scenarios the learners needed to ask their professor for a ride home after class. A female respondent revealed in the post-test interview that she had wanted to say *Do you have any room in the car?* at first, but had then shifted to other utterances:

It [Do you have any room in the car?] has a lot of meanings and I wasn't sure that it was correct, so I changed my tactic, and decided she would understand better if I said, *I want to drive with you*. I thought of *lift*, but I didn't know how to use it in a sentence so I left it out. (Cohen & Olshtain 1993: 40)

The learner's first utterance, *Do you have any room in the car?*, is an indirect request that sounds tentative and non-coercive. However, she was so worried about clarity of meaning that she shifted to a direct request – *I want to drive with you*. The learner probably did not realise that *I want to drive with you* sounds much more direct and imposing than *Do you have any room in the car?* She therefore lacked the competence to control her level of politeness in the given context. In addition, she sought to use the idiomatic expression “lift”, which can be a good strategy for performing the request effectively. Unfortunately, she was unable to use an expression such as *Can you give me a lift?* because it was not part of her repertoire of formulae. This example shows that the learner attempted to construct an appropriate request and sought to observe “the rules of use” – the norms and conventions of the target speech community. However, she was not very successful because she had insufficient collocational expertise or sociopragmatic competence to formulate the request politely in this context. Other learners in Cohen and Olshtain's (1993) study also reported instances in which they felt uncertain whether their request utterances were appropriate in the particular social context. This shows that L2 learners need to develop the pragmatic competence to perform social interactions more effectively.

Previous studies have provided evidence that L2 learners tend to use different request strategies from those used by native speakers, resulting in different levels of indirectness in requesting (Blum-Kulka 1989). This can further indicate different levels of politeness from native norms and conventions, affecting the interpersonal rapport between the speaker and the hearer. Learners may produce non-native-like request behaviours because of their unfamiliarity with



native speakers' request behaviour in specific contexts, as revealed in Cohen and Olshtain's (1993) study. Learners may also use non-native-like requests because they are influenced by their L1 request patterns – a phenomenon known as L1 pragmatic transfer.

There have been many ILP research studies on the learning of major European languages and Japanese, as well as studies of speakers of these languages who learn another language. There are a small number of studies of requests in Chinese speakers in the second language environment (e.g., Yu 1999a, 1999b) and in Chinese speakers' L1 (e.g., Lee-Wong 1994; Rue & Zhang 2008). However, for a number of reasons, there is a pressing need for research on request behaviour in Chinese speakers in the foreign language environment. Above all, the population of Chinese EFL learners is extremely large – China, as a nation, is devoting considerable energy and resources to learning English. It is also intellectually intriguing to study Chinese speakers, whose cultural tradition and social practices differ vastly from western norms and conventions. Chinese speakers' experience of learning English inevitably involves cross-cultural reorientation and adaptation, which is likely to be manifested in their pragmatic behaviour. Our sample will focus on Chinese EFL learners.

### **The context-based and formulae-based approach**

A critical literature review (Chapter 2) identifies two problems with existing ILP studies: the lumping together of scenarios obscures important information, and the formulaic expressions used to formulate speech acts have seldom been explicitly examined. In light of recent research on formulae in L1 and L2 (Aijmer 1996; Kecskés 2003; Nattinger & Decarrico 1992; Schmitt 2004; Wray 2002) and on socially-situated language acquisition and use (Block 2003; Gee 2004), we believe that a context-based and formulae-based examination is essential to provide a more fine-grained analysis of distinct situation types and to formulate more specific statements on learners' pragmatic competence (cf. 2.3). For example, Marquez Reiter (2000) contrasted the request behaviours of Uruguayan Spanish and British English speakers, finding that the two groups favour different levels of directness in their request strategies. The present study will compare directness in the strategies of Chinese EFL learners and native English speakers not only for the scenarios as a whole, but also in individual scenarios. In other words, we will test whether the learners are able to vary their request behaviours across the scenarios in the way that native speakers do. A context-based approach is indispensable in achieving an in-depth examination of variational pragmatics competence when we consider Achiba's (2003) observation that her 7 year-old Japanese-speaking