

Exploring Cross-cultural Pragmatic Judgment of Two Groups of EFL Teachers on Formal Written Requests

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Abstract—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 a university in Hong Kong. A pragmatic Judgment Questionnaire was completed by each of the sixteen teachers, comprising eight native Cantonese speakers (CSTs) and eight native English speakers (ESTs). Pragmatic judgment was examined by investigating four pragmatic variables -- i.e., *politeness*, *directness*, *formality* and *amount of information*. Main research findings suggest that there were no significant differences between the two groups of teachers in their pragmatic judgments except for their views on: a) what constituted “unnaturally polite” expressions, b) whether negative words would help achieve the purpose of a message, c) what supporting moves should be avoided, and d) what writing plans they preferred. Qualitative analysis revealed examples of “unnaturally polite” expressions (e.g., “forgive”) and supportive moves (e.g. compensating class teachers) considered appropriate by CSTs only.

Index Terms—inter-cultural pragmatics, written request, politeness strategies, directness, formality

I. INTRODUCTION

Since English constitutes one of the two major languages in use (Chinese and English) in Hong Kong, it is not unusual for L2 learners of English to encounter the need to use the English language to make formal written requests in their academic life and during their future working life. Despite request messages being written in the English language, the addressees of those requests in the Hong Kong setting could be either native speakers of English or native speakers of Cantonese. As has been shown in alternative studies (e.g., Bulut, 2008; Eslamirasekh, 1993; Kim, 1995; Suh, 1999), politeness expressions and supportive moves favored by NNSs of English were found to be different from those produced by NSs of English; given this, it would be reasonable to speculate that the perceptions of the addressees who speak various first languages concerning what constitutes a politeness message and/or other aspects of pragmatic competence could also be different.

The possible differences in the pragmatic judgments of addressees speaking different first languages lead to a pedagogical question: Should L2 learners be taught the English pragmatics considered appropriate by NSs of English or the English pragmatics considered appropriate by NNSs of English who co-exist in the same community with NSs of English? Recognizing the difference in pragmatic opinions across different language groups is especially important considering that, in the Hong Kong setting, many people who hold senior positions in organizations and who are responsible for responding to the requests made by their students or by their subordinates do not speak English as their first language. To the best of my knowledge, there has not been any research investigating the differences in the pragmatic judgments made by native speakers of Cantonese who hold senior positions (e.g., having the power to approve or reject a request) and by their counterparts who are NSs of English. This study attempts to fill this gap by investigating the pragmatic judgments made by native Cantonese-speaking EFL teachers (CSTs) and native English-speaking EFL teachers (ESTs) in the English Language Centre (ELC) at the City University of Hong Kong regarding what constitutes an effective formal request written in English.

The following research questions are formulated:

Quantitatively, will CSTs differ significantly from ESTs in their pragmatic judgment, examined by investigating four dependent variables (i.e., *politeness*, *directness*, *formality* and *amount of information*) of request letters?

Qualitatively, what characteristics of a written request do CSTs and ESTs consider appropriate?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The differences in pragmatic judgments between people who speak different first languages may originate from ethnolinguistic differences of two communities of language speakers, which in turn might result in the transfer of L1 pragmatics to L2 pragmatic situations. One way to minimize the influence of pragmatic transfer on English language learners might be to raise language learners’ awareness of intercultural communication through classroom or online learning activities (e.g., Chun, 2011; Hong, 2011; Jernigan, 2012; Louw, Derwing, & Abbott, 2010; Rafieyan, Sharafi-Nejad & Eng, 2014; Shively, 2010; Tian, 2014; Waugh, 2013). For example, Waugh (2013) designed a course to

improve both learners' pragmatics and intercultural communication skills based on the Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) developed by Bennett (1993). Liddicoat (2014) advocates "intercultural mediation", which involves "awareness of one's own cultural positioning and expectations in relation to the phenomenon being mediated as well as knowledge of the target culture behavior" (p. 275). Similarly, Bouchet (2010) stresses the need for a language learner to be aware of the paradoxical nature of intercultural communication – that is, regarding a stranger as being similar and being different at the same time. Louw, Derwing and Abbott (2010) arrive at a similar conclusion that, by comparing their answers with those of the NSs, NNSs would be able to enhance their pragmatic awareness. While developing L2 learners' awareness of the intercultural pragmatic differences constitutes the focus of some studies, the present study intends to investigate the pragmatic issue of communication across cultures from another perspective – that is, investigating the pragmatic judgments of native English-speaking and native Cantonese-speaking requestees who are teachers of the target language rather than learners. This paper argues that it is not sufficient for language learners to be aware of the pragmatic judgments of NSs of English; rather, the pragmatic judgments of NSs of Cantonese who will read letters of request written in English also constitutes an important source of information for language learners.

The pragmatic judgments of native Cantonese-speaking EFL teachers are worth investigating considering: a) the controversy over the rhetorical thought patterns of Chinese discourse; and b) the relationship between politeness and directness/indirectness for different languages with respect to the speech act of request. Based on his analysis of Chinese requests, Kirkpatrick (1996) concludes that Chinese requests follow a pattern progressing from providing reasons for a request to stating the request. Kirkpatrick argues that this rhetorical structure is opposed to the English pattern, in which a request is usually stated prior to the provision of reasons for the request. Kirkpatrick (1996)'s conclusion is support of Kaplan's notion of the circularity of the Chinese discourse patterns. By circularity, Kaplan (1966) refers to the indirect way of coming to a point of argument. Similarly, Tian (2014) observed that indirectness was employed in the informant's speech acts of refusal; Hong (2011) concludes that Chinese people's preference for indirectness is realized by offering explanations and apologies. On the other hand, Zhu (1997) observes that Chinese sale letters are direct and linear. She claims that it is the communicative purpose that largely determines the rhetorical structure. Given the inconclusive findings about the rhetorical pattern of Chinese writing, it would be interesting to explore further whether the NSs of Cantonese in the present study would prefer a direct or an indirect plan for making a request in English.

In addition to the investigation into the possible preference for circularity/linearity discourse patterns, another focus of this study is to examine the types of supportive moves that Cantonese-speaking EFL teachers would prefer in making a request, especially the use of apology as a politeness strategy. Kim (1995) found that the Korean speakers in her study differed from NSs of English in that the L2 learners overused the supportive move "apology". Clankie (1993) held the view that it was in the culture of Japanese to use expressions of regret to show their gratitude (p.16). Trosborg (1995) points out that both the native-speaker and the non-native-speaker groups do not use the strategy of asking for forgiveness as frequently as other strategies for making an apology. The findings of Farashaiyan and Amirkhiz's (2011) study also suggest that the strategy of requesting forgiveness might only be applied in situations involving serious offence. However, the strategy of asking for forgiveness was found to be commonly used as a politeness strategy among Farsi speakers (Bagherinejad & Jadidoleslam, 2015; Chamani & Zareipur, 2010).

Besides supportive moves, the present study also examines the language expressions used to introduce the head act of a request using the notion of directness/indirectness in the politeness theory elaborated by Brown and Levinson (1978), who state that the speech act of requesting is a face-threatening act, thus requiring an indirect approach in which face-saving strategies such as hedging or questioning are employed (p. 75). Degree of indirectness has also been found to link to degree of politeness as a linguistic universal for the seven European languages examined in Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper's (1989) study.

Some more recent researcher, however, have begun to question the research focus on the use of indirectness to show politeness. For example, Mills (2003) questions the concept of "indirectness" in relation to different cultures. She argues that research on politeness should not focus solely on the analysis of indirectness as an instance of polite behavior; rather, she suggests fundamental questions about whether all of the participants in the conversation consider particular utterances to be indirect and whether they consider indirectness to be indicative of politeness (p.14). Watts (2003) believes that linguistic means through which politeness is expressed "differ quite radically in terms of the structural types that realize politeness across a range of different languages" (p.12).

In some non-Western cultures, directness has been found even to receive high politeness ratings. Eslamirasekh (1993) found that Farsi speakers were considerably more direct in making requests as compared to American English speakers.¹ The Farsi data showed that 70% of requests were phrased as impositives (most direct), more than 25% were phrased as conventionally indirect, and only about 4% as hints (p.91). Similarly, de Kadt (1992) found that requests in Zulu were significantly more direct in formulation than requests in South African English, and that directness received high politeness ratings. Given the positive relationship between politeness and directness in some non-European languages, it would be interesting to investigate whether some direct English expressions in the letters of request written by native Cantonese-speaking learners of English in this present study (e.g., "I want you to proofread my application letter") would still be considered to be polite by native Cantonese-speaking EFL teachers for possible reasons such as

group solidarity (Scollon & Scollon, 1983).

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

A. Independent and Dependent Variables

The independent variable of this study is the first language of the raters. Dependent variables include four pragmatic variables (i.e., politeness, directness, formality, amount of information), adapted from the analysis frameworks of the following research studies: Hudson, Detmer and Brown (1995); Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989) in the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Patterns (CCSARP) Project; Suh (1999) and Chen (1996).

- *Politeness* includes two dimensions: a) politeness expressions used to introduce head acts, and b) supportive moves used.

- *Directness* includes a) the position of the head act of the exact request designated by the writing topic, and b) the use of negative words.

- *Amount of information* refers to the quantity of information contained in a *request message*.

- *Formality* includes the language features that are compatible with the formal nature of the request.

1. Politeness

Politeness subsumes two categories: “mitigating politeness expressions introducing head acts” and “supportive moves”.

Mitigating politeness expressions introducing head acts

See Table 1 for examples:

TABLE 1:
MITIGATING POLITENESS EXPRESSIONS INTRODUCING HEAD ACTS

Categories	Examples
• Modals for polite request	<i>would, could, may</i>
• Past tense tone softeners	<i>I was wondering whether...</i>
• Politeness marker “please”	<i>Would you please proofread the job application form?</i>
• Expressions to mitigate the size of the request	<i>a bit, a little, somehow, possible, possibly</i>
• Expressions involving the addressee directly, bidding for cooperation	<i>Do you think you could...?</i>
• Miscellaneous words (nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs) showing goodwill and thankfulness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Mind</i>” as in <i>Would you mind...</i> • <i>“Appreciate”</i> as in <i>I would appreciate...</i> • <i>“Grateful”</i> as in <i>I would be grateful if you could...</i>

Supportive moves

Supportive moves examined in this study subsume the following:

- Preparing the addressee for the coming request,
- Minimizing the force of imposition of the request,
- Acknowledging the imposition of the request,
- Showing the effort made,
- Complimenting the addressee,
- Showing gratitude,
- Pointing out the importance of the request,
- Apologizing,
- Offering compensation,
- Pointing out the negative consequences of refusal to the author,
- Pointing out the benefits the author would gain if the request were approved,
- Asking for forgiveness,
- Providing the addressee with options,
- Showing sincerity,
- Showing appreciation,
- Showing regret,
- Recognizing and responding to the greater authority of the addressee,
- Making a promise,
- Making a personal appeal.

2. Directness

Directness was examined using the following two measures:

- a) The position of the head act of the designated request, and
- b) The number of negative words used.

3. Amount of information

Amount of information was indicated by the overall length in number of words of a letter or an e-mail. Researchers find that L2 learners of English talk too much by adding a variety of supportive moves to requestive utterances (e.g.,

Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1986; House and Kasper, 1987; Rintell and Mitchell, 1989). Edmondson and House (1991) call the tendency of L2 learners to be more verbose than target language speakers as “waffling” (p.280).

4. Formality

Formality subsumes two categories:

- 1) Violations of formality,
- 2) Features of formality.

Violations of formality

- The use of lower case “i” for “I”; “u” for “you”;
- All contracted forms – “can’t”, “don’t”, etc.;
- Abbreviated forms, e.g., “Yr” for “your”;
- Informal words and phrases, especially words from slang or other informal registers;
- The use of the imperative structure: all commands addressed to the reader requiring actions (e.g., “Do not fail me”);
- Omission of sentence subject “I” in expressions like “I look forward to seeing you”;
- Problems with the opening salutation, such as use of first name only with or without the prefix “dear” or the title (e.g., “Dear Mary”, “Mary”), the use of the full name with or without the prefix “dear” or the title (e.g., “Dear Mary Brown”, “Mary Brown”), the use of the prefab “Dear Sir/Madam”;
- Problems involving the closing salutation including inappropriate choice of the closing salutation, inappropriate spelling and upper/lower case of “Yours sincerely”, and the use of one’s first name.

Features of Formality

- Use of modal verbs “would”, “could” and “may” to introduce a head act;
- Complexity of sentence structure, using Mean T-unit length (MTL) as a measure to determine length.

B. Control Variables

1. Gender of the Raters

Because gender might have an effect on the pragmatic judgments of raters, this variable was controlled by having the same numbers of male and female raters for both the groups of CTSs and ESTs. This present study does not intend to investigate the possible effect of gender on the pragmatic judgments of raters, although it is certainly possible that gender differences may be significant.

2. The variety of English that ESTs speak

All the raters chosen for this current study speak the same variety of English because it was necessary to consider the possible influence the variety of English a rater speaks on his/her pragmatic judgments. Only native speakers of British English were included in the present study because they constituted the majority of teachers in the ELC.

C. Instrumentation

1. Twelve letters of request written on three writing topics by four writers

To elicit pragmatic responses from sixteen raters – i.e., eight native Cantonese-speaking EFL teachers (CSTs) and eight native English-speaking EFL teachers (ESTs) – a total of twelve letters was prepared. The twelve letters were written by participants of different language proficiency levels in response to three writing topics (Appendix A) in the hope that the language and content of the twelve letters would be sufficiently diverse to generate informative comments from the raters.

Three letters were written by an American ESL teacher having 35 years of experience teaching at the tertiary level, and three were written by a Cantonese EFL teacher who had taught at the tertiary level for about ten years. Of the remaining six scripts, three were written by two Cantonese-speaking working adults who scored Grade B and Grade C in the Hong Kong A-level Examination in the subject “Use of English”.² Each of these two working adults wrote three letters, but only three letters from this group of six were selected based on the criterion that diversity in content and politeness expressions were preferred. The last three letters were written by two E-grade students who took the English Enhancement Course “Language Skills for Research Projects” offered by the ELC.

The twelve letters (four letters each for the three topics) were rated by each of the sixteen raters, who followed the fourteen questions in the Pragmatic Judgment Questionnaire.

To avoid ordering effects, the order of the twelve letters was randomized using a random numbers table, producing sixteen sequences of the twelve letters.

2. Pragmatic Judgment Questionnaire to be completed by 16 raters

A pragmatic questionnaire (Appendix B) constituted the second research instrument. After the briefing session, the raters started rating the twelve letters. After the completion of the questionnaires, an interview was arranged with each rater.

The profile of the teacher participants is shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2:
GENDER AND LINGUISTIC ORIENTATION OF THE RATERS

Gender	Number	Language
Female Cantonese-speaking	4	
Female English-speaking	4	
Male Cantonese--speaking	4	
Male English-speaking	4	

As indicated in their Personal Background Questionnaires, the age range of the eight Cantonese teachers is between 36 and 55, and they have taught in the tertiary institutions in Hong Kong for an average of 13 years. Five of them have lived overseas for an average of nine years. The age range of the eight British teachers is between 25 and 65, and they have taught in tertiary institutions in countries where English is spoken as a second/foreign language (including Hong Kong) for an average of 9 years.

IV. RESULTS

The findings are presented in Tables 3 to 5 according to the type of responses elicited. The first type of response required raters to choose from a five-point Likert Scale (Table 3); the second type of response required raters to choose between categories (Table 4); and the third type of response required raters to indicate their own pragmatic preferences if they were to write the letters themselves (Table 5).

TABLE 3:
DIFFERENCES IN THE MEAN SCORES REPORTED BY CSTs AND ESTs FOR THE "APPROPRIATENESS OF SUPPORTIVE MOVES", "APPROPRIATENESS OF REGISTER", "APPROPRIATENESS OF THE POSITION OF THE HEAD ACTS", "AMOUNT OF INFORMATION", AND "OVERALL POLITENESS OF THE LETTER", AS SHOWN BY T TESTS

*M=Mean; ^b SD=Standard Deviation; ^c Df=Degrees of Freedom; ^d n.s.=Not significant			M ^a	SD ^b	t-value	Df ^c	two-tailed p value
Q.3 Appropriateness of supportive moves	CSTs		3.13	1.207	-0.664	190	0.508 (n.s. ^d)
	ESTs		3.24	1.185			
Q.8 Appropriateness of the register	CSTs		3.2	1.253	0.527	189.759	0.599 (n.s.)
	ESTs		3.1	1.209			
Q.9 Appropriateness of the position of the head acts	CSTs		3.20	1.130	0.061	190	0.952 (n.s.)
	ESTs		3.19	1.242			
Q.13 Amount of information	CSTs		3.13	1.207	-0.058	190	0.954 (n.s.)
	ESTs		3.14	1.278			
Q.14 Overall appropriateness of letters	CSTs		3.03	1.252	-0.697	190	0.487 (n.s.)
	ESTs		3.16	1.234			

Table 3 shows that there were no significant differences between CSTs and ESTs in their judgments on the twelve letters in the following aspects:

- Appropriateness of supportive moves (Question 3);
- Appropriateness of the register (Question 8);
- Appropriateness of the position of the head acts (Question 9);
- Amount of information (Question 13);
- Overall appropriateness of letters (Question 14).

TABLE 4:
DIFFERENCES IN THE SUB-CATEGORIES CHOSEN BY CSTs AND ESTs CONCERNING "OVERALL POLITENESS OF LETTERS", "CLASSIFICATION OF REGISTER", AND "THE USEFULNESS OF 'NEGATIVE' EXPRESSIONS", AS SHOWN BY PROPORTIONAL T TESTS AT 95% CONFIDENCE LEVEL (RESULTS ARE SHOWN AS A PERCENTAGE OF PARTICIPANTS)

		CSTs	ESTs	z-value
Q.4 Overall politeness of the letters	Unnaturally polite	6.3%	17.7%;	2.43 ($p < 0.05$)
	Very polite	21.9%	15.6%	1.12 (n.s.)
	Polite	35.4%	30.2%	0.77 (n.s.)
	Neither polite or impolite	19.8%	15.6%	0.76 (n.s.)
	Impolite	13.5%	17.7%	0.63 (n.s.)
	Very impolite	3.1%	3.1%	0.00 (n.s.)
Q.7 Classification of register	Formal	58.3%	53.1%	0.57 (n.s.)
	Informal	17.7%	18.8%	0.16 (n.s.)
Q.11 "usefulness of 'negative' expressions	Hard to categorize	24%	28.1%;	0.51 (n.s.)
	Counter-productive words	35.2%	47.6%	2.31 ($p < 0.05$)
	Useful	35.2	26.2%	1.79
	Neutral	29.8	26.2	0.73

Table 4 shows that there were no significant differences between CSTs and ESTs in their judgments on the twelve letters concerning Classification of Register (Question 7).

However, for Question 4 ("overall politeness of the letters"), the number of letters classified as "unnaturally polite" by ESTs was significantly greater than that by CSTs. It is worth noting that there were no significant differences in the

numbers of letters considered as “very impolite”, “impolite”, “neither polite nor impolite”, “polite” and “very polite” by CSTs and by ESTs, implying that some direct language expressions, which were generally considered not polite enough (e.g., “I want you to proofread my application letter”), were assigned similar unfavorable ratings of politeness by both CSTs and ESTs.

For Question 11 (“usefulness of ‘negative’ expressions”), the number of “negative” expressions classified as “counter-productive” by ESTs was significantly greater than that by CSTs.

TABLE 5:
DIFFERENCES IN THE SUB-CATEGORIES CHOSEN BY CSTs AND ESTs CONCERNING “SUPPORTIVE MOVE THAT DEFINITELY WOULD NOT BE USED”, AND “WRITING PLANS”, AS SHOWN BY PROPORTIONAL T TESTS AT 95% CONFIDENCE LEVEL

		CSTs	ESTs	z-value
Q.6 Supportive move that definitely would not be used	SM 12 ^a	25%	100%	(z=3.10) (p<0.01)
	SM 9 ^b	75%	25%	2.00 (p<0.05)
Q.10 Writing plans	Plan2 ^c Topic 2	37.5%	100%	2.7 (p<0.01)
	Topic 3	37.5%	87.5%	2.07 (p<0.05)

^a Forgiveness (for Topic 1);

^b Compensation (for Topic 3);

^c Plan 2: *Preparing the requestee for the coming request (e.g. I would like to seek your help in a matter) → the exact request → background information about yourself*

(Results are shown as a percentage of participants; only the questions that showed significant differences across the two groups of raters were reported in the table).

As can be seen from Table 5, the SMs chosen by CSTs and ESTs as the SMs themselves would not use if they were to write on the three topics were not significantly different except for “forgiveness” for Topic 1 and “compensation” for Topic 3. For Topic 1, significantly more ESTs (100%) chose SM12 (“forgiveness”) as the SM they would definitely not use than did CSTs (25%), at the 99% confidence level ($z=3.10$). For Topic 3, SM 9 (“compensation”) was chosen by significantly more CSTs (75%) than was chosen by ESTs (25%), at 95% confidence level ($z=2.00$).

Table 4 also shows that, for Topics 2 and 3, significantly more ESTs chose Plan 2 than did CSTs (Topic 2: ESTs, 100%; CSTs, 37.5%, $p<0.01$; Topic 3: ESTs, 87.5%; CSTs, 37.5%, $p<0.05$).

Question 10

For each of the three topics, Plan 2 was chosen by the majority of ESTs (**Topic 1: 75%; Topic 2: 100%; Topic 3: 87.5%**). However, for each of the three writing topics, no pre-dominant pattern was found among the CSTs:³

- **Topic 1:** 12.5% for Plan 1, 37.5% for Plan 2, 12.5% for Plan 3, 37.5% for Plan 4;
- **Topic 2:** 25% for Plan 1, 37.5% for Plan 2, 12.5% for Plan 3, 25% for Plan 4;
- **Topic 3:** 37.5% for Plan 1, 37.5% for Plan 2, 0% for Plan 3, 25% for Plan 4.

V. DISCUSSION

The finding that there were no significant differences between CSTs and ESTs on eight of the twelve questions is in agreement with some previous findings to the effect that it is possible for L2 learners who are proficient in the target language and who have long-term exposure to the target culture to acquire native-like pragmatic competence to some extent (e.g., Clankie, 1993; Lee, 2010; Nakajima, 1997; Tanaka, 1988). Lee’s (2010) study reveals that the ability of Taiwanese EFL students to recognize pragmatic errors correlates significantly with their strategies for grammatical, discourse, and strategic competence. The subjects in this current study were EFL teachers, whose education qualifications (88% of them had a second degree in language teaching) and whose exposure to the L2 culture (for an average of ten years) in a working environment where English is used as the medium of communication among colleagues should have played an important role in their acquisition of English pragmatics in terms of judging the pragmatic performance in the twelve letters of requests. Among the various factors investigated in studies concerning the acquisition of L2 pragmatics by students or migrants living in a target-language environment (e.g., Schauer, 2006; Taguchi, 2011), Bardovi-Harlig and Bastos (2011) conclude that language proficiency and the actual experiences in a target-language environment like intensity of interaction are two of the relevant factors that determine the success of the acquisition of L2 pragmatics. Bardovi-Harlig (2013) believes that learners who have higher levels of language proficiency may be more able to take advantage of a target-language environment as far as the development of L2 pragmatic abilities is concerned.

That CSTs in this study differed from ESTs in four pragmatic aspects agrees with the finding of some previous studies to the effect that L2 learners often differed from NSs of English in their pragmatic choices (e.g., Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Welz, 1990; De Kadt, 1992; Harada, 1996; Liddicoat, 2014; Takahashi and Beebe, 1987).

The finding that CSTs preferred Writing Plan 2 is not in agreement with Kirkpatrick’s (1996) conclusion to some extent. Kirkpatrick concludes that Chinese requests follow a pattern progressing from providing reasons for a request towards stating a request. However, for the CSTs in this study, Plan 2 (a plan in which a writer first states a request and

then proceeds to provide supporting reasons) accounted for the highest percentage (37.5%) for all the three topics. This means that among the four writing plans, Plan 2 was the one preferred by most raters. Although it would be unconvincing to argue that a percentage as low as 37.5% constitutes a pre-dominant pattern among the CSTS, the finding nonetheless provides some clues to what most CSTS preferred as far as writing plans are concerned.

The findings that more ESTs regarded some politeness expressions as “unnaturally polite” concurs with one of the findings obtained by Harada (1996) that the advanced Japanese ESL learners in her study assigned a higher rating (9 points out of 10) to the expression “I’d appreciate it if you could get me the salt” than did the native speakers of English who were Americans (7 points out of 10). Some of the NSs in her study regarded that expression as being too polite for requesting salt and thus being somehow sarcastic.

It is possible to speculate about the reasons why ESTs and CSTs differed in their views of what constitutes “unnaturally polite” and “counter-productive” expressions:

1) The perceptions of the use of the speech act “forgiveness” could be different between CSTs and ESTs. Three ESTs who had commented on the usefulness of this expression associated the use of the term “forgive” with “sin” and “confession to a priest”, whereas the two CSTs who had commented on this word said that the use of the term “forgive” reflected that the student knew it was wrong to miss the lessons, thus making the use of the term “forgive” acceptable because the writer was interrupting the addressee. It is worth noting that the ESTs might relate forgiveness with Christianity, and the CSTs’ perception might be deeply embedded in Chinese culture, especially Confucian precepts; for example, in the domain of classrooms, in Chinese belief teachers are always perceived as seniors with great authority. The strategy of asking for forgiveness in messages of request has also been found in other studies. For example, Persian-speaking students used the expression “forgive me tremendously” frequently in making requests (Eslamirasekh, 1993); Farsi speakers ask for forgiveness extensively when making request (Chamani & Zareipur, 2010). Bagherinejad and Jadidoleslam (2015) conclude that request for forgiveness is one of criteria for being polite for both male and female Iranians, e.g., using “Excuse me” or what Iranian utter as “bebaxsid” (p.1273). In their study, the request for forgiveness accounted for 16% of all the “Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices”, while the expression of regret was the most frequent one (32%) (p.1272). Samarah (2015) points out that in Arabic apology is commonly used in asking for permission and making requests; for examples, the expressions [Jafwan mumkin tismah li...] “pardon me would you excuse...” and “please” may be used to begin a request (p.2012).

2) The perceptions of the effect of using words like “kindly” and “valuable” might be different between CSTs and ESTs. For example, five ESTs considered the expression “if you could kindly” as old-fashioned and too humble, but none of the CSTs regarded the use of this word as “unnaturally polite”.

The differences in the perceptions of the aforementioned “unnaturally polite” expressions lead to pedagogical questions. First, CSTs might prefer to maintain their own opinions despite their awareness of the views of ESTs. If this is the case, L2 learners of English should be made aware of the differences between CSTs and ESTs regarding politeness expressions to be used when writing to people who speak different first languages. Second, CSTs might not be aware of the views held by ESTs regarding “unnaturally polite” expressions. Learning a second language means acquiring a new culture rather than merely learning vocabulary and grammatical rules. Despite the validity of likely areas of greater difference between cultures, L2 teachers seem not to have considered the need to uncover teaching/learning devices to deal with cultural differences.

NSs of Cantonese seem to be repulsed by the idea of being paid by a student for doing an interview. CSTs might have perceived the acceptance of financial compensation from a student as a face-threatening act. According to Nash (1983), “the notion of face is prevalent and deeply rooted in Chinese culture; people take great offense in any loss of face, and efforts are regularly made to avoid face-risking situations” (Chen, 1996, p. 9).

The CSTs in this present study did not differ significantly from ESTs in their judgments of the degree of politeness of expressions introducing the head act of a request except for the category of “unnaturally polite expressions” (Table 4). This seems to indicate a paradoxical phenomenon concerning the pragmatic judgments of CSTs. On the one hand, they appeared to have been guided by their linguistic knowledge of the English language when judging the appropriateness of some less-than-polite expressions like “I want you to proofread my application letter”; the end result was that CSTs’ pragmatic judgments were found to be not significantly different from those of ESTs. On the other hand, the CSTs seemed to have been influenced, perhaps without their awareness, by their Chinese cultural backgrounds when judging some very polite expressions like “Please forgive me”; interestingly, the end result was that CSTs’s pragmatic judgment turned out to be significantly different from those of ESTs in the aspect of “unnaturally polite” expressions.

VI. LIMITATIONS

Supportive moves that appeared in Pragmatic Judgment Questionnaire were not randomized for the copies given to the sixteen teachers. However, the significant differences between CSTs and ESTs in the supportive moves teachers themselves would definitely not use (“forgiveness” and “compensation”) seemed to suggest that the ordering effect might not have been serious. If the ordering effect had been strong enough, there would not have been significant differences in these supportive moves between CSTs and ESTs.

Second, only sixteen teachers participated in this study. The lack of a pre-dominant pattern of CSTs’ preference for the writing plan might have been a result of the small sample size.

VII. CONCLUSION

All findings arrived at are based entirely on the data in this study, and therefore apply exclusively to them. It should also be borne in mind that these conclusions do not extend beyond these data except very tentatively.

Despite the uncertainty of “whose pragmatic system is to be taught” (Rose, 1994, p. 52) and the uncertainty of whether the writers would benefit from writing in accordance with the pragmatic preference of the addressee (i.e., having a greater chance of getting the request approved), L2 learners could at least be made aware that:

1) differences in the pragmatic preferences between NSs and NNSs of English exist; and 2) the possibility that L2 learners might need to use different request strategies to suit the pragmatic preference of the addressee, which might reflect “how culture impacts on pragmatic phenomenon in the varieties of English relevant to the particular... context” (McConachy, 2013, p. 102).

Future research might study the effectiveness of using a bi-directional approach, which aims at making NSs and NNSs of English aware of how the other group perceives social and situational/contextual variables in relation to the speech act of requesting and what linguistic strategies the other group uses to show politeness.

Notes:

¹ Although the pragmatic judgments of only NSs of British English were examined in the present study, alternative studies involving NSs of other varieties of English (e.g., American English) were also reviewed for providing referential information.

² The results of the HKALE are expressed in terms of six grades A – F, of which grade A is the highest and F the lowest. Results below grade F are designated as unclassified (UNCL).

³ A category in a group is considered to show a pre-dominant pattern if the first and the second highest percentages of teachers who chose that category show a significant difference at the 95% confidence level, as shown by Proportional t test.

APPENDIX A. THREE TOPICS USED IN THE WRITING TASK

Request 1

You have failed the attendance requirement of the English course (Spoken Language) you are taking. The minimum attendance requirement is 80%, which means that you can be absent for at most 7 hours only. You have been absent for 10 hours. You plan to write a letter to the department head (named Betty Black) to request that special consideration be given to let you pass the course.

Request 2

You need to find someone to proofread your job application letter. You are very interested in the job to be applied for, but you are very concerned about possible grammatical mistakes in the letter. You would like to ask the language adviser of the Self-access Centre of your department to do the proofreading for you. You plan to write a letter to her for your request.

Request 3

You are taking an English course, which requires you to interview a native speaker of English for a project. You have got a name list of all the tutors in the English Language Centre, and you plan to write a letter to one of them. The tutor you have chosen from the list is a female (named Mary Brown).

Background information for your reference

- You have not had any contact with your requestee before.
- She is about 40 years old, and she speaks English as her first language.
- The language advisor (named Susan Smith) does not have the responsibility to proofread your job application letters, so you are actually asking her to do you a favor.
- The success of such a request will obviously depend upon its being phrased as politely as possible

APPENDIX B. THE PRAGMATIC JUDGMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

The present researcher is interested in your opinion about the request letters written by the participants in this study in terms of the following four aspects of pragmatic competence: 1) politeness, 2) formality/informality, 3) directness/indirectness, and 4) amount of information.

There are altogether twelve letters and twelve rating sheets. Read the corresponding letter for each rating sheet and complete the rating sheet by following the instructions given. Please be aware that, for some of the questions, you need to write your ratings on the scripts, not on the rating sheets.

Letter No. _____	Questions/Tasks
<p>Politeness</p>	<p>1. Referring to the script, how polite do you think the expressions underlined in the letter are? ON THE SCRIPT, please write “1”, “2”, “3” or “4”, “5+”, or “5-” under EACH of the underlined expressions. “1” means “Very impolite” “2” means “Impolite” “3” means “Neither polite nor impolite” “4” means “Polite” “5+” means “Very polite” (“+” showing “approval”) “5-” means “Unnaturally polite” (“-” showing “disapproval”)</p> <p>2. Referring to the script, did you find any supportive moves* you did not approve of? ON THE SCRIPT, use a red pen to underline ALL the supportive moves you feel inappropriately used.</p> <p><i>* When rating the “supportive moves”, please note that your rating should be based on content only; the linguistic form of the expressions used should NOT be a factor for consideration when answering this question. Please also note that different people may have different views about how appropriate the supportive moves listed in Handout B are.</i></p> <p>Checklist: Please tick as appropriate.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I have underlined the inappropriate supportive moves on the script. <input type="checkbox"/> I did not find any inappropriate supportive moves in the letter.</p> <p>3. Referring to the script, overall, how appropriate do you think the supportive moves used by the writer are in terms of <u>quality</u>? Please refer to the notes in Question 2 about supportive moves, if needed.</p> <p>Very inappropriate 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 Completely appropriate</p> <p>Reason(s) for your rating: _____</p> <p>4. Referring to the letter, overall, how polite do you think the letter is when considering <u>the phrases introducing the head acts</u> (those underlined in the text for you) and <u>the supportive moves used</u> by the writer? Circle your answer below.</p> <p>Very inappropriate 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 Completely appropriate</p> <p>“1” means “Very impolite” “2” means “Impolite” “3” means “Neither polite nor impolite” “4” means “Polite” “5+” means “Very polite” (“+” showing “approval”) “5-” means “Unnaturally polite” (“-” showing “disapproval”)</p> <p>If your answer is 5, please tick as appropriate: <input type="checkbox"/> 5+ <input type="checkbox"/> 5-</p> <p>Reason(s) for your rating: _____</p> <p>5. If you were to write this letter, which of the following supportive moves do you think would be the most important? From the list below, choose the SIX most important moves and rank them in ascending order, where “1” indicates “the most important and “6” indicates “the least important”. Write your ratings in the boxes.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 1) Preparing the requestee for the coming request (E.G., I would like to seek your help.)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 2) Acknowledging imposition. (E.G., I understand this is an imposition.)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 3) Minimizing the imposition (E.G., it will take you only a few minutes to finish reading the letter.)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 4) Making the request reasonable by showing the effort put in by the letter writer (E.G., I have worked very hard and have mastered most of the substantive requirements.)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 5) Complimenting the requestee (E.G., my classmates say that you are very helpful.)</p>

	<p><input type="checkbox"/> 6) <i>Showing the benefits if the request is complied</i> (E.G., <i>your help will surely increase the chance of getting the job.</i>)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 7) <i>Pointing out the importance of the request</i> (E.G., <i>I would like to seek your assistance in a matter that is of utmost importance to me.</i>)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 8) <i>Showing negative consequences</i> (E.G., <i>I may lose the good job.</i>)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 9) <i>Promise of compensation or mention of the intended compensation</i> (E.G., <i>I fear that I lack the resources to offer you compensation.</i>)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 10) <i>Showing thankfulness</i> (E.G., <i>thank you for ...</i>)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 11) <i>Apologizing</i> (E.G., <i>I am terribly sorry that ...</i>)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 12) <i>Asking for forgiveness</i> (E.G., <i>please forgive me.</i>)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> <i>Other strategies you would prefer to use:</i> _____</p> <p>6. If you were to write this letter, are there any supportive moves listed above that you would definitely NOT use? Write the numbers indicating the categories on the lines below: _____</p>
Formality/informality	<p>7. Is the register of this request letter formal or informal?</p> <p><i>Please tick your answer.</i></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> <i>Formal</i></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> <i>Informal</i></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> <i>Difficult to categorize this letter as either "formal" or "informal"</i></p> <p><i>Reason(s):</i> _____</p> <p>8. How appropriate do you think the register adopted by the writer is?</p> <p><i>Very inappropriate 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 Completely appropriate</i></p> <p><i>Reason(s) for your rating:</i> _____</p>
Directness/indirectness	<p>9. Do you think the writer has put the head act* of the request asked in the writing topic in an appropriate position of the letter?</p> <p><i>Very inappropriate 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 Completely appropriate</i></p> <p><i>Reason(s) for your rating:</i> _____</p> <p>*The head act has been capitalized in the letter for your easy reference. Please refer to Handout B for the explanation of "Head act".</p> <p>10. If you were to write this request, which of the following writing plans would you use? Please tick the box.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> <i>Preparing the requestee for the coming request (e.g. I would like to seek your help in a matter) → background information about yourself → the exact request</i></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> <i>Preparing the requestee for the coming request (e.g. I would like to seek your help in a matter) → the exact request → background information about yourself</i></p>

	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Background information about yourself→ the exact request</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The exact request → background information about yourself</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify): _____</p>
	<p>11. For a letter with some “negative elements” highlighted in bold print:</p> <p><i>Referring to the script, how useful do you think the “negative elements” are in increasing the chance of getting the request complied with? On the script and under EACH of the words in bold print, write “U”, “CP”, or “N”:</i></p> <p>“U” means “useful” “CP” means “counter-productive” “N” means “neither useful nor counter-productive”</p> <p><i>(If needed, you might refer to Handout C for what counts as “negative elements”).</i></p> <p>Checklist - Please tick the box:</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I have written “U”, “CP” and/or “N” under the words in bold print.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> There is no word in bold print in this letter.</p> <p>12. If you were to write this letter, which of the following would be your decision regarding the use of “negative elements”?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I would try to use as many positive words as possible in the hope that a positive tone of the letter can help achieve the purpose of the letter because of the overall pleasant effect created</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I do not think it is necessary to use positive words to express ideas that can be said directly by using negative words.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify): _____</p>
<p>Amount of information</p>	<p>13. Referring to the letter, how appropriate do you think the amount of information given is in terms of achieving the purpose of the letter? Circle your answer.</p> <p>Very inappropriate 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 Completely appropriate</p> <p>Reason(s) for your rating: _____</p>
<p>Overall appropriateness of the letter</p>	<p>14. Referring to the letter, overall, how appropriate do you think the letter is in terms of achieving the purpose of the letter? Circle your answer.</p> <p>Very inappropriate 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 Completely appropriate</p> <p>Please tick the box(es) that show the MAIN factor(s) influencing your ratings.</p> <p>If you have ticked more than one box, please rank your choices in ascending order, where “1” indicates “the most important” and “4” indicates “the least important”. Put your ratings beside the</p>

	<p>boxes.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Level of politeness</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;"><input type="checkbox"/> Expressions introducing a request</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;"><input type="checkbox"/> Supportive moves</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Level of formality/informality</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Level of directness/indirectness</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;"><input type="checkbox"/> Position of the head act of the request</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;"><input type="checkbox"/> Use of negative elements</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Amount of information</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify): _____</p>
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Please go to the next script

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