

**Pragmatic Transfer in Foreign Language  
Learners:  
A Multi-competence Perspective**

蘇怡如

國立清華大學 外國語文學系

# Gass & Selinker (1992: 234)

- “For most researchers, language transfer is the use of native language (or other language) knowledge—in some as yet unclear why—in the acquisition of a second (or additional) language “

# Multi-competence (Cook, 1992, 2003)

- Refers to the knowledge of two or more languages in one mind.
- Cross-linguistic influence (or language transfer) can simultaneously work both ways, from L1 to L2, and from L2 to L1.
- Second language users' competences of L1 and L2 may be distinguishable from those of monolinguals, and thus **they are unique in their own right**.
- “If L2 users are different kinds of people, the interest of second language acquisition research lies in discovering their characteristics, not their deficiencies compared with native speakers.” (Cook, 2003)

- Segmental phonology (Zampini & Green, 2001)
- Intonation patterns (Mennen, 2004)
- Morpho-syntactic structures (Pavlenko & Jarvis, 2002)
- Sentence processing (Su, 2001)

➤ ***Most of the multi-competence research focus on the L2 users' grammatical competence.***

# Communicative Competence

- Refers to the ability to speak appropriately in a given language community (i.e., pragmatic competence)
  - Socio-cultural rules for appropriate speaking vary from one speech community to another (Hymes, 1964).
  - In order to communicate successfully with native speakers of the target language, L2 users need to be equipped not only with linguistic knowledge but also with knowledge of socio-cultural rules for appropriate use.
- ***Are socio-cultural rules for appropriate speaking also susceptible to bi-directional influence?***

# Goals of the present study

- To see if communicative competence (i.e., pragmatic competence) is also susceptible to bi-directional influence.
- To see if bi-directional transfer in pragmatic competence occurs in foreign language learners, who have relatively limited exposure to the target language and culture.
- To provide insights regarding the characteristics of multi-competence of the foreign language learner/user, especially with respect to his/her pragmatic competences.

# The speech act of *request*

# The study

- Subjects:
  - L1 controls: Chinese (n=30), English (n=30)
  - L2 learners: Inter EFL (n=30), Adv EFL (n=30)
- Instrument:
  - Written discourse completion test, which contains 9 request situations and 6 offense situations
  - Two social variables: status and distance
  - Social status: *high, equal, low*
  - Social distance: *close, acquaintance, stranger*



# Request situations

- (1) **Loud Music:** The person asks his/her younger sister (or brother) to turn down music.
- (2) **Work Overtime:** The manager asks his secretary to work on Saturday.
- (3) **Illegal Parking:** The police officer asks the driver to move his/her car.
- (4) **Computer Crash:** The person asks his/her roommate to fix his/her computer.
- (5) **Free Ride:** The person asks his/her neighbor to give him/her a ride home.
- (6) **Book Searching:** The person asks a tall person nearby to help get a book on a higher bookshelf.
- (7) **Money Loan:** The person asks his/her father to lend him/her money to buy a computer.
- (8) **Late Homework:** The student asks the professor to extend the deadline of a term paper.
- (9) **Job Searching:** The person calls to ask about a part-time job.

# Examples of request situations

*(Computer Crash)*

You are writing a paper on the computer, but suddenly the computer crashes. You don't know how to fix the computer. Luckily, your roommate is around and s/he is very good at the computer stuff. If you asked him/her for help, what would you say?

You say, “ \_\_\_\_\_ ”

你在用電腦寫報告，突然電腦當機了，你不會修，剛好你的室友在旁邊，他/她對電腦很在行，你需要他/她的幫助，此時你會怎麼跟他/她說？

你說：「 \_\_\_\_\_ 」

# The speech act of *request*

- **Request strategies:** refer to the linguistic elements used to convey the head act of the request.
  - direct (*Clean up the kitchen!*),
  - conventionally indirect (*Could you clean up the kitchen?*),
  - non-conventionally indirect (*What a mess here!*)
- **Internal modification:**
  - **Lexical/phrasal downgraders:** optional additions to soften the impositive force of the request by modifying the head act internally through specific lexical and phrasal choices.
  - **Syntactic downgraders:** internal modification that uses syntactic devices to mitigate the impact of requests on the hearer such as interrogatives (*Could you...*), and conditionals (*I was wondering if...*)
- **External modification:** *Supportive moves* are external to the head act, occurring either before or after it. They are optional and function as a mitigating or aggravating device for the request,

# Lexical/phrasal downgraders

- 1) **Polite marker:** *please* 請; 麻煩; 拜託
- 2) **Subjectiviser:** *I'm afraid; I suggest; I think* 我希望; 我想
- 3) **Consultative device:** *I was wondering if; do you mind if; do you think you will* 不知道你可不可以
- 4) **Downtoner:** *possibly; perhaps* 可能; 大概; 吧
- 5) **Understater:** *a little; a bit* 一點
- 6) **Appealer:** *ok? ; please?* 行嗎?; 可以嗎?

# Supportive moves

- 1) **Preparatory:** *Work Overtime:* Are you free on Saturday?
- 2) **Pre-commitment:** *Work Overtime:* I'd like to ask you for a favor.
- 3) **Grounder:** *Work Overtime:* We have been very busy lately.
- 4) **Apology:** *Loud Music:* I'm sorry.
- 5) **Thanking:** *Work Overtime:* I'd appreciate it.
- 6) **Promise:** *Late Homework:* I promise I'll do my best and finish it as soon as possible.
- 7) **Promise of reward:** *Work Overtime:* I'll be willing to pay you overtime if you are up to it.
- 8) **Cost minimizer:** *Money Loan:* I'll pay you back right away.
- 9) **Direct appeal:** *Free ride:* I really need your help in this bad weather!
- 10) **Sweetner:** *Work Overtime:* Ms. Li, you are the most capable staff in our company.
- 11) **Disarmer:** *Work Overtime:* Ms. Li, I know Saturday is normally your day off.

# Examples of request realizations

- You are studying in your room for a coming exam, but you can't concentrate because your younger brother (or sister) is listening to loud music in the next room. If you asked him (or her) to use his (or her) headphone, what would you say?

**“Judy, could you please turn down the music or use your headphone? I'm preparing for the exam right now, so I'd be grateful if you could use the headphone.”**

- 你因為身體不舒服，無法在規定的時間內完成作業，你向你的老師說明，希望他/她讓你晚幾天交，你會怎麼老師說？

**「老師對不起，我知道沒有早點做作業是我的不對，但我今天真的非常不舒服，可不可以讓我晚幾天再交作業？」**

# Operational definition of transfer

- **Forward transfer** (i.e., transfer from L1 to L2) obtains when there are statistically significant differences in the frequencies of a pragmatic feature between L2 learners' first and second languages, and between learners' L2 performance and that of L2 native controls.
- Likewise, **backward transfer** (i.e., transfer from L2 to L1) holds when statistically significant differences in the frequencies of a pragmatic feature are found between L2 learners' first and second languages, and between learners' L1 performance and that of L1 native controls.

**Table 1**  
**Requests by English and Chinese native speakers**

	ENS		CNS		<i>t</i> -test	
	M	SD	M	SD	<i>t</i>	p
Con. indirect strategies	<b>7.23</b>	0.89	<b>4.73</b>	1.23	8.99	<b>.000</b>
Lexical/phrasal downgraders	3.73	2.21	3.43	1.69	0.59	n.s.
Supportive moves	5.97	1.52	5.67	1.67	0.73	n.s.



## Table 2

Requests in English by English native speakers and EFL learners

	ENS		Inter EFL		Adv EFL		ANOVA	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F	p
Con. indirect strategies	<b>7.23<sup>a</sup></b>	0.89	<b>6.43<sup>b</sup></b>	1.52	<b>6.33<sup>b</sup></b>	1.21	4.76	<b>.01</b>
Lex/phr. downgraders	<b>3.73<sup>a</sup></b>	2.21	3.67 <sup>a</sup>	1.47	<b>2.67<sup>b</sup></b>	1.89	3.01	<b>.05</b>
Supportive moves	<b>5.97<sup>a</sup></b>	1.55	5.23 <sup>a</sup>	2.08	<b>6.53<sup>b</sup></b>	1.66	4.08	<b>.02</b>

Table 3

Distribution of different types of lex/phrasal downgraders (%)  
in English requests by ENS and EFL learners

	ENS	Inter EFL	Adv EFL
none	59	68	70
polite marker	13	29	19
subjectiviser	10	1	8
consultative device	16	0	0.7
downtoner	1	0	0.3
understater	0	0	0.3
appealer	0	1	0.7

Table 4

Distribution of different categories of supportive moves (%) in English requests by ENS and EFL learners

	ENS	Inter EFL	Adv EFL
none	34	42	27
a single grounder	49	36	40
other single supportive	8	12	11
combination	9	10	22

# ENS and advanced learners' use of supportive moves in English requests

## *(English native speaker):*

- “Ms. Li, can you possibly come in on Saturday? *We really need your help. You’ll be paid overtime of course.*”

## *(Advanced EFL learner):*

- “Ms. Li, *you are always the most capable secretary in our company. Now I need your help on Saturday. You may not want to work overtime, but without your help, I don’t think I can get things done.*”
- “Ms. Li, *you are an excellent worker and deserve a nice break, so I feel really sorry to ask you to continue on Saturday, but it’s getting a bit busy here so I really need your help. Can you do me this favor?*”

# Forward transfer (L1→ L2)

- Both intermediate and advanced EFL learners adopted significantly less conventionally indirect strategies than did ENS when making requests in English.

Table 5  
Requests in Chinese by Chinese native speakers and EFL  
learners

	CNS		Inter EFL		Adv EFL		ANOVA	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F	p
Con..indirect strategies	<b>4.73<sup>a</sup></b>	1.23	<b>5.70<sup>b</sup></b>	1.42	<b>5.60<sup>b</sup></b>	1.28	4.94	<b>.009</b>
Lex/phr. downgraders	3.43	1.69	3.77	1.99	3.33	1.60	0.49	n.s.
Supportive moves	5.67	1.67	5.80	1.65	5.93	1.36	0.22	n.s.

Table 6

Distribution of different types of lexical/phrasal downgrader in Chinese requests (%)

	CNS	Inter EFL	Adv EFL
none	61	57	63
polite marker	27	28	28
subjectiviser	3	0.5	1
consultative device	1	1.5	4
downtoner	4	7	4
understater	0	0	0
appealer	4	5	0

# The advanced EFL learners' use of consultative devices (不知道你可不可以) in Chinese requests

- “李小姐，這禮拜公司業務較多，我週末工作的時候可能需要你的幫忙，不知道你有沒有時間在週六來公司加班？當然公司會支付加班費。
- “你好，我是你的鄰居，因為我忘了帶傘，不知道你方不方便順道載我一程呢？”



# Backward transfer (from L2 to L1)

- Both intermediate and advanced EFL learners adopted significantly more conventionally indirect strategies than did CNS when making requests in Chinese.
- Advanced EFL learners tended to use more consultative devices than CNS (4% vs. 1%).

# Within-group comparisons in English vs. Chinese

- Do EFL learners merge or distinguish the two language systems in their use of the two languages?

Table 7

Requests in English and Chinese by Intermediate EFL learners

	English test		Chinese test		<i>t</i> -test	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	<i>t</i>	p
Con. indirect strategies	<b>6.43</b>	1.52	<b>5.70</b>	1.42	3.00	<b>.005</b>
Lex/phr. downgraders	3.67	1.47	3.77	1.99	-0.26	n.s.
Supportive moves	5.23	2.08	5.80	1.65	-1.47	n.s.

Table 8

Requests in English and Chinese by Advanced EFL learners

	English test		Chinese test		<i>t</i> -test	
	M	SD	M	SD	<i>t</i>	p
Con. indirect strategies	<b>6.33</b>	1.21	<b>5.60</b>	1.28	3.34	<b>.002</b>
Lex/phr. downgraders	2.67	1.89	3.33	1.60	-1.76	n.s.
Supportive moves	<b>6.53</b>	1.66	<b>5.93</b>	1.36	1.87	<b>.07#</b>

## *(Work Overtime)*

- “Ms. Li, you are an excellent worker and deserve a nice break, so I feel really sorry to ask you to continue on Saturday. But it’s getting a bit busy here so I really need your help. Can you do me this favor?”
- “李小姐，這個禮拜業務比較多，所以還要麻煩你星期六來公司，辛苦你了。”

## *(Late Homework)*

- “I’m not feeling well lately, and I’m afraid that due to the condition of my body, I can’t finish my term paper by the due date. I’ll try my best to finish it. *But can I have some extra days just in case?* I really appreciate your understanding!”
- “老師對不起，我沒辦法準時交作業，這幾天身體不舒服，我可以晚一點補交嗎？”

# Summary of findings on EFL learners' requesting behavior

- Bi-directional transfer is evident in the Chinese EFL learners' requesting behaviors.
- Both groups of EFL learners, especially the advanced learners, exhibited a differentiated pattern of requesting behaviors in their two languages.
- Compared to immigrants in the previous studies which evidenced merged pragmatic systems, the EFL learners of the study have rather limited exposure to English. These findings together suggest that the language learning/use environment may play a role in how L2 users' two language systems are integrated.

The speech act of *apology*



# Apology situations

- (1) Exam papers:** The teacher promised to give back student's exam papers today but had not finished grading them.
- (2) Job interview:** The manager scheduled a job interview with an applicant but was 20 minutes late because s/he received a phone call before the interview.
- (3) Watch movie:** The person was late for the movie.
- (4) Car incident:** The person accidentally backed into someone's car.
- (5) Return book:** The student promised to return the book s/he borrowed from a professor, but s/he forgot to bring it.
- (6) Coffee spill:** The waiter/waitress spilled some coffee on a customer's jacket.

# Examples of apology situations

*(Job interview)*

- You are the manager of a company. Today you have scheduled a job interview with an applicant. But before the interview, you received a phone call and thus are 30 minutes late for the interview. When you see the applicant, what would you say to him/her?

You say, “ \_\_\_\_\_ ”

- 你是公司的經理，今天有人按時間來接受面談，但你臨時接了一通電話，所以晚了半個小時才進到辦公室。當你看到應徵者時，你會怎麼跟他說？

你說：「 \_\_\_\_\_ 」

# Five major apology strategies

- Direct apology
- Acknowledging responsibility
- Providing explanation
- Offer of repair
- Verbal redress

# Examples of apology realizations

- You are the manager of a company. Today you have scheduled a job interview with an applicant. But before the interview, you received a phone call and thus are 30 minutes later for the interview. When you see the applicant, what would you say to him/her?

**“I’m sorry. I got a phone call and lost track of time. Shall we start now?”**

- 你是公司的經理，今天有人按時間來接受面談，但你臨時接了一通電話，所以晚了半個小時才進到辦公室。當你看到應徵者時，你會怎麼跟他說？

**「抱歉，臨時有人打電話來，耽誤一點時間。」**

# Control groups: Average number of apology strategies used in each response

- ENS (1.89)
- CNS (2.16)

Table 9

Distribution of apology strategies by English and Chinese native speakers (%)

	ENS	CNS	<i>t</i> -test	p
Direct apology	44	37	1.94	.05
Ack. responsibility	27	29	-1.49	n.s.
Offer of repair	13	15	-1.16	n.s.
Explanation	10	9	0.37	n.s.
Verbal redress	4	6	-1.71	n.s.
Others	2	4	--	--

Table 10

Average number of strategies in relation to social variables in the control groups

	ENS		CNS		<i>t</i> -test	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	<i>t</i>	p
Social Status						
High	3.70	1.37	3.20	1.30	1.45	n.s.
Equal	3.97	1.19	4.03	1.35	-0.20	n.s.
Low	3.60	0.97	4.67	1.06	-4.07	.000
<i>ANOVA</i>	<i>F</i> = 0.77 n.s.		<i>F</i> = 10.51 <i>p</i> = .000			
Social Distance						
Acquaintance	5.77	1.61	6.07	1.55	-0.73	n.s.
Stranger	5.47	1.76	5.80	1.58	-0.77	n.s.
<i>t</i> -test	<i>t</i> = 0.83 n.s.		<i>t</i> = 0.79 n.s.			

# Use of individual strategy in relation to social variables in the control groups

- While ENS adopted explicit apology formulas to a similar extent regardless of the offended party's status, CNS used significantly less direct apologies when apologizing to the addressees of lower status than to the addressees of equal or higher status.
- CNS acknowledged responsibility and expressed verbal redress significantly more often than ENS did when the offended party was of higher status.
- With respect to the factor of social distance, CNS were more likely to acknowledge responsibility to strangers than ENS and to offer significantly more repairs and verbal redress to acquaintances than ENS.



# English DCT: Average number of apology strategies used in each response

- ENS (1.89)
- Inter EFL (1.77)
- Adv EFL (2.07)

## Table 11

Distribution of apology strategies in the English DCT (%)

	ENS	Inter EFL	Adv EFL	F	p
Direct apology	44	45	38	0.92	n.s.
Ack. responsibility	27	27	30	2.88	n.s.
Offer of repair	13	16	17	1.80	n.s.
Explanation	<b>10<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>4<sup>b</sup></b>	10 <sup>a</sup>	14.04	<b>.000</b>
Verbal redress	4	4	6	0.93	n.s.
Others	2	4	1	--	--

Table 12

Average number of strategies in relation to social variables in the English DCT

	ENS		Inter EFL		Adv EFL		ANVOA	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F	p
<b>Social Status</b>								
High	3.70	1.37	3.10	1.56	3.73	1.17	2.01	n.s.
Equal	3.97	1.19	3.70	0.95	4.03	1.27	0.71	n.s.
Low	3.60	0.97	3.83	1.05	4.17	0.87	2.59	n.s.
<i>ANOVA</i>	<i>F= 0.77 n.s.</i>		<i>F= 3.08 p=.05</i>		<i>F= 1.18 n.s.</i>			
<b>Social Distance</b>								
Acquaintance	5.77	1.61	5.60	1.63	6.23	1.45	1.32	n.s.
Stranger	5.47 <sup>a</sup>	1.76	5.00 <sup>b</sup>	1.93	6.17 <sup>a</sup>	1.05	3.92	.02
<i>t-test</i> 2015/6/5	<i>t= 0.84 n.s.</i>		<i>t= 1.89 n.s.</i>		<i>t= 0.25 n.s.</i>			

# Forward transfer (L1→ L2)

- Like CNSs, the intermediate learners were status-sensitive in their use of apology strategies when apologizing in L2.
- Like CNSs, both EFL learner groups' use of direct apologies varied according to the status conditions.
- Like CNS, the advanced learners acknowledged responsibility more often than did ENS when the offended party was a stranger and offered more repairs to an acquaintance than ENS did.
- In addition to L1 influence, learners' proficiency also plays a role in the differences observed between nonnative and native apology performance.

# Chinese DCT: Average number of apology strategies used in each response

- CNS (2.16)
- Inter EFL (2.02)
- Adv EFL (2.06)

## Table 12

Distribution of apology strategies in the Chinese test (%)

	CNS	Inter EFL	Adv EFL	F	p
Direct apology	37	40	39	1.07	n.s.
Ack. responsibility	29	26	25	0.95	n.s.
Offer of repair	15	16	15	0.14	n.s.
Explanation	9 <sup>ab</sup>	8 <sup>a</sup>	12 <sup>b</sup>	3.21	.05
Verbal redress	6	7	7	0.07	n.s.
Others	4	4	3	--	--

# Table 17

## Average number of strategies in relation to variables in the Chinese test

	CNS		Inter EFL		Adv EFL		ANOVA	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F	p
Social Status								
High	3.20	1.30	3.50	1.70	3.87	1.04	1.78	n.s.
Equal	4.03	1.35	4.20	1.21	4.23	1.28	0.21	n.s.
Low	4.67	1.06	4.37	1.03	4.23	1.17	1.25	n.s.
ANOVA	$F= 10.5$ $p=.000$		$F= 3.51$ $p=.03$		$F= 0.99$ $n.s.$			
Social Distance								
Acquaintance	6.07	1.55	5.97	1.54	6.00	1.74	0.03	n.s.
Stranger	5.80	1.58	6.17	1.80	6.37	1.69	0.86	n.s.
Paired t-test	$t= 0.79$ $n.s.$		$t= -0.69$ $n.s.$		$t= -1.00$ $n.s.$			

# Backward transfer (L2 → L1)

- L2 influence in L1 apology was not as noticeable as the other way around.
- L2 influence in L1 apology was mainly observed in the advanced EFL learners. Like ENS, the advanced learners were not status-sensitive in the choices of apology strategies as Chinese native controls were.



# Within-group comparisons in English vs. Chinese

- Do EFL learners merge or distinguish the two language systems in their use of the two languages?

# Apology in English and Chinese by Intermediate EFL learners

- The intermediate learners used significantly more strategies when apologizing in Chinese (2.02) than in English (1.77).
  - They also provided significantly more *explanations* in Chinese apology than in English apology.
  - In addition, the intermediate learners adopted significantly more apology strategies in Chinese than in English in most social conditions.
- ***Do the results suggest that the intermediate learners have had two separate apologizing repertoires?***

# Apology in English and Chinese by Advanced EFL learners

- Advanced EFL learners adopted the similar amount of apology strategies averagely when apologizing in Chinese (2.06) and English (2.07).
  - There was no difference in the frequency with which they used each main strategy in their L1 and L2.
  - There was little variation between their two languages in the selection of apology strategies in relation to the social factors.
- **These results suggest that the advanced EFL learners apologized in essentially the same way in their two languages.**

# Summary of findings on EFL learners' apologizing behavior

- Bi-directional transfer was also observed in Chinese EFL learners' apology performance.
- However, L2 influence in L1 apology was not as noticeable as the other way around.
- The advanced learners seemed to have merged their two apologizing repertoires.

# Request vs. Apology

- The advanced Chinese EFL learners differentiated their two pragmatic systems in terms of requesting repertoires but they merged the apology ones.
- One possible reason is that Chinese and English share more similarities in apology realizations than in request realizations.
- Moreover, English conventional indirectives such as *Could you...? Can you...?* are likely to be treated as formulas and explicitly taught in the foreign language classroom, and this may be the reason for the significant difference in the frequency usage of this strategy in the EFL learner's request realizations in their two languages.

# Conclusion

- The patterns of bi-directional interaction between foreign language learners' pragmatic systems may vary across speech acts; the integration or separation of the two pragmatic repertoires may depend on the degree of similitude in the realizations of a given speech act shared by the learner's two languages and the way in which a given speech act is learned.

Thank you for listening!