

## An Exploration on Instructiveness of Contextual Clues in Chinese EFL Learners' Pragmatic Comprehension of Indirect Refusal Speech

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Received 29 April 2015; accepted 2 July 2015

Published online 26 August 2015

### Abstract

Pragmatic comprehension in audio-visual training has always been a big difficulty to most Chinese EFL learners. By employing a test, a questionnaire and several interviews, this essay explores the instructiveness of three contextual factors to learners of different linguistic levels from grade one to grade four, including linguistic context, linguistic knowledge and speakers' kinesics, in order to improve Chinese EFL learners' listening ability effectively.

**Key words:** Instructiveness; Contextual clues, Chinese EFL learners; Pragmatic comprehension; Indirect refusal speech

Chen, X. (2015). An Exploration on Instructiveness of Contextual Clues in Chinese EFL Learners' Pragmatic Comprehension of Indirect Refusal Speech. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 11(2), 64-67. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/7450> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/7450>

### INTRODUCTION

Pragmatic comprehension in English listening has always been a big difficulty to most Chinese EFL learners. According to Levinson (1983), refusals are dispreferred second part in an adjacency pair, so interlocutors often violate cooperative principles in order to save face and maintain the harmony of the conversation. In other words, they usually express the intention of refusals indirectly. Zhu (2007) also proposes that the association of different contextual clues may be helpful to interpret the true

intention of a speaker's utterance, because most contextual clues have explanatory functions. They often provide hints in forms of phonetics, syntactics, semantics and rhetorical devices to explain a linguistic phenomenon according to Chen and Wen (1997). However, can every EFL learners identify those hints provided by certain context clues so as to catch the correct meaning of a speaker's utterance? Is there any relationship between EFL learners' linguistic proficiency and the ability to identify instructive hints in a context?

By applying both quantitative and qualitative designs, this paper aims to explore Chinese EFL learners' preference for their application among three kinds of instructive contextual clues, including linguistic context, linguistic knowledge, and speakers' kinesics, so as to bring insights into the developing features of different contextual clues applied by EFL learners of different linguistic proficiency in their understanding of indirect refusal speech.

### 1. THE DEFINITIONS OF PRAGMATIC COMPREHENSION

Thomas (1995) proposes three levels of meaning: a) abstract meaning, namely semantic meaning or linguistic meaning, which is concerned with what a word, phrase or sentence, etc. could mean; b) utterance meaning, namely, what the speaker actually means by saying the words on a certain occasion; c) force, namely, the speaker's communicative intention. In Thomas' view, pragmatic comprehension is the process of moving from the abstract meaning to utterance meaning by assigning sense and/ or reference to a word, phrase or sentence and then reach the speaker's intention known as the force of an utterance.

Van Dijk (1977) proposes that the pragmatic comprehension of Indirect Speech Act (ISA) can be achieved through contextual analysis and utterance analysis. In contextual analysis, language users can

analyze the meaning of an utterance through the context in which an utterance occurs, concerning a) linguistic context, namely, the referential information before or after certain words, phrases and sentences; b) situational context, namely, the actual situation in which the utterance takes place, like the time or location relating to the utterance; c) social context, namely the social, cultural or political knowledge relevant to the utterance. Although contextual analysis plays a key role in the pragmatic comprehension of ISA, Van Dijk (1977) still claims that the final comprehension of an utterance as a specific speech must be based on the analysis of the utterance itself. In other words, linguistic features in terms of semantics, syntax, morphology, phonology, etc. play an indispensable part in the full interpretation of an utterance. Besides contextual factors and linguistic factors, Van Dijk (1977) also puts forward that nonlinguistic factors such as the speaker's facial expression or the types of communicative acts occurring in the context should also be concerned to achieve full pragmatic comprehension of ISA. More specifically, nonlinguistic factors includes: a) speakers' facial expressions, such as smiling in greeting; b) body movements, such as slamming the door to show one's discontent; c) body interaction like tapping somebody on the shoulder.

Based on the theoretical framework of Van Dijk, pragmatic comprehension in the present study refers to the comprehension of indirect refusal through three contextual clues including linguistic context, linguistic knowledge, and speakers' kinesics. Linguistic knowledge refers to words in the focused sentence (syntactical or semantic feature of the focused sentence) and the speaker's intonation (different features of intonation like rising or fall tones etc.); while speakers' kinesics refer to speakers' facial expressions (facial expressions that directly or indirectly express disagreement or refusal like smiling, frowning etc.) as well as speakers' behaviors (body movement or body interaction).

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Both quantitative and qualitative designs have been employed in this study.

### 2.1 Quantitative Design

The subjects involved in this study were 149 English majors of Nantong University. In order to make a cross-sectional research into the developmental patterns, all the

**Table 1**  
**Information of Subjects**

Grade	Number of subjects	Major
Freshmen	33	English language
Sophomores	41	Foreign trade
Juniors	42	Translation
Seniors	33	Foreign trade

subjects were selected from the English majors ranging from the first year to fourth year. And they were volunteers, which would guarantee the smooth going of the test. Their detailed information was described in Table 1.

The quantitative instrument of the study was an audio-visual test revised from Chang (2007). The materials were clips from *Seinfeld* (the 4th season), a famous American sitcom, covering 8 scenes of conversations about Americans' different strategies of refusals in their daily life.

The form of the test were made up of two parts: multiple choice questions and a survey on the justification for the choice. In the first part, the subjects would be required to tick out a item which has the same meaning as the focused sentence. In the second part, each item in the survey contained five options consisting a) linguistic context, b) words in the focused sentence, c) the speaker's intonation, d) the speaker's facial expression, e) the speaker's behavior. The subjects were required to tick out one or more than one options as their justification for their choice in the first part.

The results of the survey would be processed by SPSS. The data analysis consisted of three steps: a) Employing simple random sampling to make sure of the same number of subjects in each grade (33 students for each grade); b) Calculating the mean frequencies of the three contextual clues employed by subjects of each grade in their comprehension of indirect refusal speech; c) Comparing the mean frequencies of the 4 grades by employing one-way ANOVA.

### 2.2 Qualitative Design

In order to get a deeper understanding of why students of different proficiency levels varied in their choice of different justification, 12 students (3 from each grade) who took part in the test in the quantitative design of the present study were selected for an interview. And they were chosen under the principles that their answers and justifications typically reflected the developmental patterns for the purpose of supporting the results of the study objectively.

The qualitative instrument of the study was a structured interview consisted of 2 parts:

Part one: Survey on English Majors' focus of the three contextual clues including five options in understanding the original movies.

a) Do you refer to the subtitles when watching original movies? How do subtitles affect your comprehension of the movie?

b) Which factor(s) in the following will facilitate your comprehension of the movie: linguistic context, words in a certain sentence, intonation, the speaker's facial expression or the speaker's behavior?

c) How can you sequence the above factors from the most focused on the least?

Part two: Survey on English majors' justifications their choice of cues in answering questions.

Each student interviewed was required to justify their choice of options with the following question:

Why do you choose the (options of cues) in answering the question?

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 The Instructiveness of Linguistic Context in EFL Learners' Pragmatic Comprehension of Indirect Refusals

According to Table 2, the mean frequency of linguistic context has a significantly rising tendency from Grade 1 to Grade 4 ( $P = .001 < .05$ ). The biggest difference lies in EFL learners from Grade 2 and Grade 3. According to the interview, the understanding and application of linguistic

context have been affected by the position of clues and the type of indirect requests.

##### 3.1.1 Positions of Linguistic Contextual Clues

There are three positions of linguistic contextual clues: a) before the focused sentence; b) after the focused sentence; c) both before and after the focused sentence. Interviews with freshmen and sophomores show that they often miss the referential information before the focused sentence but can identify the ones after it for the mode of catching the focused sentence first in listening comprehension training. Meanwhile, they worried that more attention paid to the clues before the focused sentence may result in a miss of the sentence. However, compared with freshmen and sophomores, juniors are quite competent in identifying referential information in a context no matter what the

**Table 2**  
**The Mean Frequencies of Different Contextual Clues Employed by EFL Learners From Grade 1 to Grade 4**

Grade	Linguistic context	Linguistic knowledge		Speakers' kinesics	
		Words in the focused	Intonation	Facial	Behaviors
Freshmen	2.58	1.18	3.09	3.21	1.88
Sophomores	2.67	1.58	2.42	2.52	1.70
Juniors	3.48	1.58	2.82	3.21	2.09
Seniors	3.50	1.70	2.18	2.24	1.88

position is. As for the worry, they suggest that taking notes in listening comprehension may be helpful to identify both linguistic contextual clues as well as focused sentences.

##### 3.1.2 Types of Indirect Request

An indirect request and its reply are called an adjacency pair. For the sake of politeness, nearly all requests in our daily life are indirect requests, a kind of indirect speech act, which can be divided into conventional ones and unconventional ones according to Searle (1979). Correct identification of indirect requests in listening comprehension can prompt EFL learners to pay attention to their replies and to judge the intention of the speaker (acceptance or refusal). For freshmen and sophomores, markers like "would you" and "can you" in the first part of the adjacency pair often remind them the concept of requests, so they could presuppose the second part as either an acceptance or a refusal. Nevertheless, as to the unconventional indirect requests without the markers like "would you" and "can you", the juniors and seniors are more proficient than both the freshmen and sophomores in identification and application.

#### 3.2 The Instructiveness of Linguistic Knowledge of the Focused Sentence in EFL Learners' Pragmatic Comprehension of Indirect Refusals

As shown in Table 2, the mean frequency of words in the focused sentence is the least one among all other clues. Although it has been in a rising tendency from grade 1 to grade 4, there is no significant difference ( $P = .072 > .05$ ). However, the mean frequency of intonation has been decreased in the four grades generally except a subtle rise in grade 3, with a significant difference ( $P = .028 < .05$ ).

##### 3.2.1 The Instructiveness of Words in the Focused Sentence

Words in the focused sentence in the test were presented in forms of idioms, which have a weaker instructiveness than other clues among four grades. According to the interview, EFL learners in lower grades were quite deficient in the accumulation of idioms, like "It's the coming attraction", in which they know every word, but can not understand the meaning. However, learners of higher grades manifested that they were not dependent on the single vocabulary in the pragmatic understanding, and the association of other clues can make them more confident in the judgement.

##### 3.2.2 The Instructiveness of Intonation of the Focused Sentence

As proposed by Chen (1983), speaker's emotion and attitude can be shown in the intonation of his utterance. For the deficiency in vocabulary, lower grades are more likely to depend on the speaker's intonation than the higher grades in listening comprehension. According to the interview, the freshmen focus much on the attitudinal function of intonation, from which they could easily infer the speaker's attitude toward a certain issue, like acceptance or refusal. However, with the gradual rise of the linguistic level, EFL learners become less dependent on intonational clues to guess the meaning but more dependent on their gradual proficient language to confirm the correct pragmatic meaning. As for the subtle rise in grades 3, juniors explained that they often applied intonation as a way to testify their answer, which was ignored by sophomores for their anxiousness in listening.

### 3.3 The Instructiveness of Speakers' Kinesics

As displayed in Table 2, the mean frequency of speakers' facial expressions changes much of a significant difference ( $P = .006 < .05$ ), while the tendency of the frequency of speakers' behaviors appears much like facial expressions but with a less significant difference ( $P = .485 > .05$ ).

#### 3.3.1 The Instructiveness of Speakers' Facial Expressions

According to the interview, the instructiveness of speakers' facial expressions to EFL learners is much like intonation. Namely, except grade 1, EFL learners in other three grades regard speakers' facial expression as auxiliary ways to testify the answer. However, the instructiveness of facial expressions appears a little stronger than intonation for the mean frequency of all grades presents a bit higher than intonation. For freshmen, speakers' facial expressions as well as intonation are regarded as an effective way to compliment their deficiency in linguistic levels, but facial expressions seem much more familiar and easier to catch in audio-visual comprehension. As auxiliary ways, speakers' facial expressions are more instructive to juniors than the sophomores and seniors. They explained that the association of other contextual clues could make facial expression more instructive. For example, in the understanding the focused sentence "you ought to write one of those", they caught the linguistic context beforehand that the two sides were talking about changing the setting, and the hesitating smile obviously appears as a refusal for setting change.

#### 3.3.2 The Instructiveness of Speakers' Behaviors

The mean frequency of speakers' behavior has been lower than other clues, and there is no significant change among four grades. Most interviews explained that they were used to pay more attention to the speaker's face than his body in listening. However, some manifested that speakers' behaviors could be instructive when they understand the context. For example, the speaker was fiddling with his buttons before he said "you ought to write one of those." Fiddling buttons hint that he was not interested in the topic of setting changing.

## 4. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

### 4.1 Cultivating a Contextual Consciousness in EFL Learners From Low Grades

Instead of catching the focused sentence at first, taking down keywords should be encouraged in listening comprehension training, so as to cultivate EFL learners' consciousness to understand the listening material as a whole. Besides, the introduction of adjacency pairs is necessary for they have been widely used in daily communication.

### 4.2 Encouraging the Attention and Accumulation of Idioms of Lower Grades While Guiding the Focus on Intonation of Higher Grades

Learners of lower grades can be guided to accumulate idioms from extracurricular ways like listening to English songs, watching English movies, performing in short plays etc.. Frequent and casual access to English language can not only be effective in accumulating idioms but also helpful in relaxing the anxiousness in listening. What's more, the instructiveness of intonation should not be ignored in higher grades. Arranging advanced audio-visual training class in higher grades can be constructive to the recovery of their sensitiveness to intonation.

### 4.3 Transforming Listening Class From Listening-Centered to an Audio-Visual Combination

Daily communication is usually a complex combination of watching and listening. Speakers' kinesics plays an indispensable role in successful communication. Audio-visual material in listening class can help EFL learners to become familiar with English speakers' facial expressions as well as behaviors. With the association of other contextual clues, speakers kinesics can become more instructive in daily communication.

## CONCLUSION

The instructiveness of contextual clues appears differently to Chinese EFL learners from different linguistic proficiency level. Therefore, features and tendencies for different grades should be studied in order to guide learners to apply and associate different contextual clues in their pragmatic comprehension.

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