



# A Study on Impoliteness Encountered by Chinese EFL Students Studying in English-Speaking Countries

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## Abstract

*With the acceleration of globalization process, an increasing number of Chinese students begin to learn English as their second language and further their education in English-speaking countries. Unavoidably, Chinese students may face with some occasions where foreigners say something impolite to them. The study mainly discusses the verbal impoliteness that Chinese students may encounter in all sorts of occasions during the period of studying in English-speaking countries.*

*The paper adopts a qualitative questionnaire-based study. According to the results of the survey, it is true that impolite discourses commonly happen. Then this paper sorts out statistical results and combine methods concerning Spencer Oatey's rapport management framework to further analyze these impoliteness phenomena.*

**Keywords:** *Interlanguage Pragmatics; Second Language Acquisition; Impoliteness; Rapport Management Framework.*

## Introduction

Nowadays, an increasing number of Chinese students begin to learn L2 English to better adapt to the trend of globalization. Some L2 English learners from China further their education in English-speaking countries, however, they might inevitably meet with foreigners who say something impolite to them because of linguistic competency deficiency or cultural shock and many other factors.

There are several reasons to conduct this research, one of which is to explore whether verbal impoliteness phenomena are prevalent in the L2 context for Chinese students. Furthermore, to reduce cultural misunderstanding and misapprehension of words and develop a harmonious relationship.

Studying verbal impoliteness in an English L2 context has realistic significance which correlates to the most popular issue of studying abroad and is a brand-new orientation in the crossing field of Second Language Acquisition and Pragmatics.

## 1. Literature Review

In the late 20th century, the study of impoliteness abroad began to boom, mainly focusing on the theoretical knowledge of impoliteness such as definition, types and models. Two famous principles of politeness were put forward including Leech's (1983) Politeness Principle and Brown & Levinson's (1978) Face Theory. Some famous impoliteness strategies such as Culpeper's (1996) five impoliteness superstrategies were put forward and some years later, Bousfield (2008) simplified two types of impoliteness.

During the last 20 years, the study scope of impoliteness from abroad gradually increased. Case study and collecting questionnaires are commonly used methods to analyze impoliteness. These researches illustrate that people's perception towards impoliteness is based on individual difference, in other words, interlocutors' divergency. This kind of research can reflect people's judgement towards impoliteness. Nevertheless, the cases that are allowed for participants to choose are limited, which do not provide sufficient samples for linguists to study.

Some scholars adopt method of collecting data from specific context, which contains various situations. Mugford & Gerrard (2018) conducted interviews of bilingual workers in Mexican call center and identified intercultural impoliteness to help them overcome difficulties like discrimination and a sense of powerlessness. Kryk-Kastovsky (2006) investigated impoliteness in English courtroom discourses and Sara Mills (2009) analyzed about impoliteness at a cultural context.

Another way of collecting data is Cesar & Sean's (2016) study through a prompt that asks participants to write a narration of an impolite situation that occurred while students were studying abroad and uses impoliteness model to analyze. The result of the research demonstrates that American students face many impoliteness phenomena in Spanish L2 context. The advantage is that it allows examinees to write their previous experiences in detail which varies from person to person and the matters they once encountered have happened in our real life that are more realistic and worthier of exploring.



From the literatures that are recently published these years, impoliteness phenomena that English L2 students meet in English-speaking countries were rarely discussed. Therefore, this paper explores whether impolite utterances pose a threat to L2 students.

## 2. Research Methodology

### 2.1 Participants and Procedure

A total of 30 students who have studied or are studying in English speaking countries were involved in this research and 4 of them provided invalid answers. Chart 1 shows the constitution of countries where students receive education.

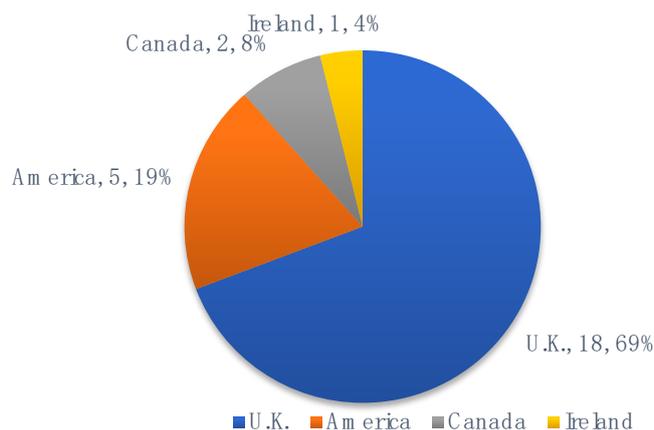


Chart 1 Distribution of study destinations

The paper adopts a qualitative questionnaire-based study method, allowing some Chinese students, who have studied or are now studying in English-speaking countries, to fill in a questionnaire which “contains their age, gender, what kind of course they study and then a detailed description of the impoliteness phenomena they encountered (Cesar & Sean, 2016: 102).

### 2.2 Spencer Oatey’s Rapport Management Framework

The data collected from questionnaires were analyzed according to Spencer Oatey’s (2002: 540) rapport management framework (see Table 1). Column 1 illustrates what type of offense involved in impoliteness events; column 2 put forward some questions that can help researchers to know whether impolite events violate components of face and social rights; column 3 presents a typical example from the questionnaires for each kind of offense.

| Violated subcomponent of face or sociality rights | Example from this study’s L2 English corpus   | Analysis of the example   |
|---|---|---|
| <b>Quality Face</b>                               | When I just came to the U.K., my English was not good and I sat in someone else’s car. When it arrived at my place, the driver opened the boot for me. I didn’t have things in the boot; then I would like to ask him to close it. However, I didn’t know how to express my ideas, so I just whispered ‘no’ and they laughed at me. | The student felt offended because her linguistic competence was not adequate to communicate with others and the driver laughed at her loudly without considering her feelings. Thus, she felt her quality face was violated through ridicule from foreigners. |
| <b>Relational Face</b>                            | It was when the new semester began that I knew I was assigned to class of Algebra 2 Accelerated Honors. I felt quite unhappy because the course was so easy for me. Then  | The hearer thought that she was a talented learned in math because she was much ahead of American students in the   |



|                             |   |  |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
|                             | I decided to ask the director of math department for the reason. He told me that "I know you've learned a lot. The reason we want you to take this course is that you can have a good rest in the first three or four months, without thinking about math, and spend more time on other subjects." I felt quite angry towards the answer.   | progress of studying mathematics in China. However, her relational value as an excellent math learner had been threatened by the director.   |
| <b>Social Identity Face</b> | I was discussing with the landlord about whether the central heating system should be opened all the day round. I said that there is no need to turn on the heating because it could waste a lot of electricity fees. While the landlord preferred to turn up the air conditioning to the utmost for all day and night and said to me "You Chinese only know save money. Saving money means you all are under freezing." I felt very embarrassed. I thought helping others to save money is a traditional virtue in China, however, she couldn't understand it because there exists cultural difference between us. | The Chinese student aims to show her kindness to the landlord because she wants to save electricity fees for the landlord. However, because of cultural shock and the stereotype of Chinese nation, the landlord cannot agree with her, thus making impolite speech to the listener and hurting her social identity face.                              |
| <b>Equity Rights</b>        | My university treated different students according to their countries and student registration cards. Some teachers had a bias for me because I was not a native British student, so I was not allowed to enjoy the equal treatment with others in experimental equipment and time. Without these, it was very difficult for me to make achievements in scientific research, which made me feel bad.  | As a foreign student, the hearer isn't treated as fairly as native students by his teachers, thus violating his equity rights.   |
| <b>Association Rights</b>   | In geography class, the teacher would like me to get more involved in the class. Then she asked the students about their impressions of China. A girl took off her 'Cross' from her feet directly, and lifted it saying "They make shoes for us." The rest of the students began to laugh and somebody added "They made clothes for us." and others said toys. I was reluctant to show weakness and then counterattack" Yeah, you cannot get dressed without us." However, before they could reply, the teacher continued her lecture.  | In this conversation, the girl and other classmates attack the Chinese student's positive face on purpose without other reasons mentioned. The teacher wants the Chinese student to be involved more in geography class, however, her classmates satirized her, which made the listener feel uncomfortable, thus she chose a method of attacking back. |

Table 1 Operationalization of the rapport management framework

### 3. Discussion

#### 3.1 Primary Offense Types of Impoliteness Events

The figure below presents the primary offense type (see figure 1), which is the one characterizes the major offense in the impoliteness events, of these examples collected from students. The violation of quality face plays the most dominant part in composing the total types with 12 people involved (46%), then followed closely by social identity face with 7 (27%), equity rights (4 of 26, 15%), association rights (2 of 26, 8%) and relational face (1 of 26, 4%).



### Primary Offense Type

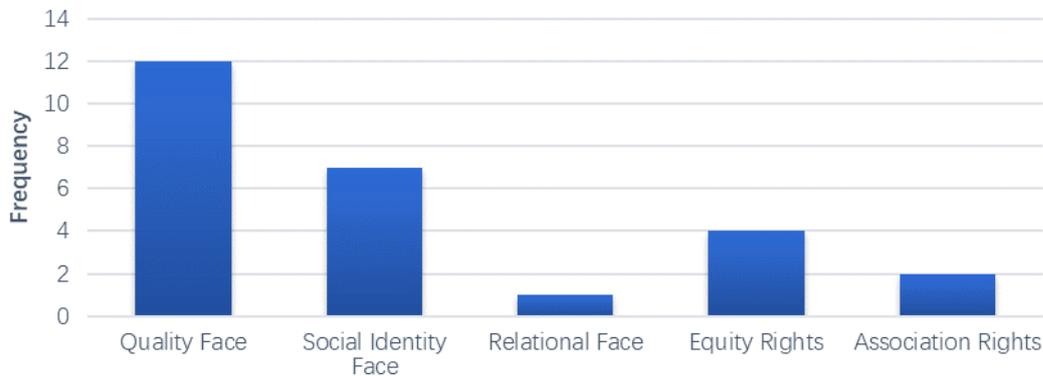


Figure 1 Primary offense of the 26 impoliteness events reported by L2 English learners

### 3.2 Frequency of Encountering Impoliteness

The frequency of encountering impoliteness phenomenon in English-speaking countries for Chinese students is quite high according to the survey. From the chart 2 below it can be seen that 15% of students often run into impoliteness events and a half of students occasionally come across impoliteness when studying abroad. Nearly one third of people say they rarely face others' impolite words and only a small percentage of 4 reckon they never meet with these impoliteness phenomena before.

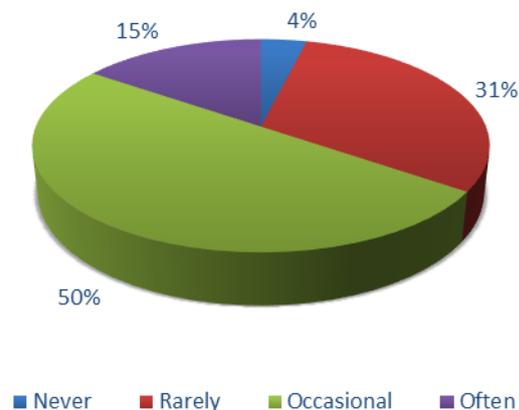


Chart 2 The frequency of students encountering impoliteness

### 3.3 Different Linguistic Competence

As for their linguistic competence (see chart 3), about 77 percent of students selected the “medieval level” which can “most of the time communicate with foreigners in English; however, sometimes don't understand what the speaker is saying”, while 19% students of “lower level” held that “My English ability is OK and can speak some simple sentences”. The remaining one person thought he belongs to “the beginner of English and can only say some easy words”. However, no one chooses “my English is excellent and can communicate without hinderance”. It is also noted that there still has a lot of space for Chinese students to improve their English ability in order to fully understand the speaker's intention and be respected by them.

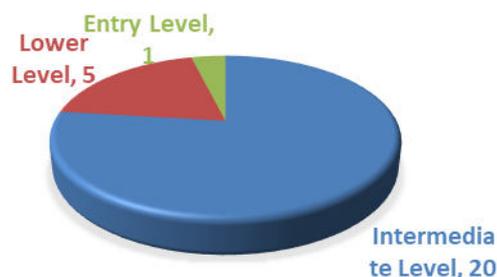


Chart 3 The number of students in different English levels

#### 4. Conclusion and Limitations

According to the survey conducted among L2 English students from China, impolite words pose a threat to their experience in studying in another foreign country. The violation of quality face is the dominant type of offense to Chinese students.

Nevertheless, the shortcoming of my research is that it just contains the verbal impoliteness of the conversation, which may not so complete. Besides, for the sake of lacking in the material condition, the number of participants that can be asked to take part in this study is not so adequate, which may cause this research not so representative.

In conclusion, to study the impoliteness that L2 learners may be faced with in L2 studying context is of great values and has innovative significance that can not only improve the pragmatic awareness of students, but also compare people who come from different cultural backgrounds towards the perception of impoliteness as well as teaching recommendations on how to deal with impoliteness. This field is relatively new and much effort should be made to develop it.

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