

A Pragmatic Study on Ostensible Invitation Speech Acts of Chinese EFL Learners

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Abstract

In cross-cultural communication, ostensible invitations, as a prototypical form of indirect speech acts, significantly influence the effectiveness of social interaction. Existing research has predominantly focused on politeness principles, neglecting the impoliteness phenomena triggered by ostensible speech acts and the pragmatic transfer mechanisms among Chinese EFL learners. This study aims to: 1) identify the types of ostensible invitation strategies employed by Chinese EFL learners; 2) map proficiency-driven divergences in strategy use among learners at different levels; 3) diagnose L1 cultural transfer in their English pragmatic performance. Adopting a mixed-method approach, the research utilizes Discourse Completion Tests (DCTs) and Scaled Response Questionnaires (SRQs) to analyze data from 18 participants across proficiency levels. Key findings include: 1) lower-proficiency learners are more candidly acknowledge insincerity; 2) “Strategy Specialization” marked by TEM-4 learners’ overreliance on vague temporal markers/emojis and TEM-8 learners’ academicized justifications; 3) “Cultural Hybridity” in CET-6 learners’ workplace communication, blending Chinese high-context norms with English pragmatic conventions and challenging Hall’s (1976) high/low-context dichotomy. The study enriches empirical research on ostensible speech acts in cross-cultural pragmatics theoretically, providing culture-specific evidence for Speech Act Theory and Face Theory. Practically, it advocates explicit instruction on manipulating felicity conditions (e.g., teaching vague time markers as insincerity signals) to enhance learners’ cross-cultural pragmatic competence.

Keywords

Ostensible Invitation; Chinese EFL Learners; Pragmatic Strategies; Speech Act Theory

1. Introduction

In cross-cultural communication, “ostensible invitations” serve as a prototypical form of indirect speech acts, where the appropriate use of pragmatic strategies directly influences the effectiveness of social interaction. In English, an international lingua franca, ostensible invitations often rely on vague temporal expressions (e.g., “sometime,” “one of these days”), hedged commitment verbs (e.g., “ought to,” “could”), and non-verbal cues (e.g., intonation, facial expressions) to convey intent.

However, Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners may exhibit cross-cultural pragmatic failures when employing such strategies, potentially due to pragmatic transfer from their L1 (Chinese).

This study aimed to identify the types of ostensible invitation strategies employed by Chinese EFL learners and map proficiency-driven divergences in these strategies among learners at different proficiency levels. Guided by a DCT (Discourse Completion Test) questionnaire, this study seeks to answer:

What linguistic strategies do Chinese EFL learners primarily use in English ostensible invitations?

To what extent do social context variables (e.g., familiarity) affect their strategy choices?

Does the L1 “face culture” and reliance on contextual implication in Chinese lead to pragmatic transfer in their English invitational speech acts?

This research enriches empirical studies on “ostensible speech acts” in cross-cultural pragmatics, especially by illuminating the pragmatic transfer mechanisms among Chinese EFL learners. It provides new culture-specific evidence for theories such as Speech Act Theory and Face Theory, challenging dichotomous models of high/low-context cultures.

Practical Value: The findings can inform English pragmatic pedagogy by helping learners distinguish between “genuine invitations” and “social invitations,” thereby enhancing their cross-cultural communicative competence. For instance, instructional materials may incorporate explicit training on recognizing vague linguistic markers (e.g., “sometime”) as signals of insincerity.

2. Theoretical Background

Ostensible invitation refers to [acts where] the inviter invites the invitee to attend a certain event assumed beneficial for the invitee. The aim is not to invite, but to accomplish certain underlying purposes. Both parties recognize the pretense and collude on finishing it.

2.1. The speech act theory

Austin (1962) shows that in uttering words, conversants do actions. That is, there are certain actions that we perform through words. Many actions can be performed through utterances: insincere offers, veiled criticisms, strategic encouragements, and many others. Let’s explore some examples to illustrate the concept of speech acts: When someone says, “We really must do this again sometime,” they may be concluding a social interaction rather than issuing a genuine invitation. The speech act of invitation is performed through the utterance. In such cases, the literal invitation function is suspended in favor of politeness maintenance. Consider also the phrase, “I apologize for the inconvenience,” which a customer service representative might utter while systematically avoiding responsibility. Here, the speaker is not

merely expressing remorse but strategically performing a ritualized apology that deflects accountability.

Speech acts have three types of force: locutionary force, illocutionary force, and perlocutionary force. The locutionary force of an utterance refers to its literal execution, such as when a host says, “The buffet is self-service,” merely describing the dining arrangement without implying judgment. The illocutionary force reveals the speaker’s true intention, which may diverge from semantic content. For example, “I’m sure you’ll consider all options” could function as a directive disguised as a prediction when delivered during a negotiation. The perlocutionary effect becomes apparent when such utterances produce compliance through manipulative ambiguity rather than explicit persuasion. A supervisor’s remark, “I notice you’re using a new organizational method,” might initially appear observational but could induce guilt-driven adherence to preferred workflows. The Discourse Completion Task (DCT) questionnaire in this study incorporates vague temporal expressions and hedged commitment verbs, which epitomize the indirectness of such illocutionary acts.

2.2. Joint Action Theory

Austin (1962) originally formulated the framework for analyzing speech acts and their performative conditions. However, Isaacs and Clark (1990) identified a category of speech acts absent from Austin’s (1962) and Searle’s (1969) taxonomies due to their inherent opacity. These acts, termed ostensible speech acts, involve strategic pretense rather than genuine communicative intent. Building on this concept, Clark (1996) later theorized the mechanism underlying such acts as Joint Actions, which require coordinated participation from both interlocutors. This section elucidates the operational principles and structural properties of Joint Actions as conceptualized by Isaacs and Clark (1990) and Clark (1996).

Isaacs and Clark (1990) established five defining criteria for ostensible speech acts:

- (1) Pretense: A pretends to make a sincere [act].
- (2) Mutual Recognition: A and B mutually recognize A’ s Pretense.
- (3) Collusion: B responds appropriately to A’ s Pretense.
- (4) Ambivalence: When asked, “Do you really mean it?” A cannot sincerely answer either “yes” or “no.”
- (5) Off - record: purpose A’ s main purpose is tacit.

Together, these properties demonstrate how interlocutors co-construct communicative realities through strategic adherence to and manipulation of conversational norms.

2.3. Cultural Context and Politeness

Hall (1976) distinguishes high-context cultures (e.g., China) from low-context cultures (e.g., Western societies). In high-context communication, meaning derives

from nonverbal cues, shared history, and implicit social norms, with invitations often serving “face-maintenance” functions rooted in Confucian relational ethics. By contrast, low-context cultures prioritize linguistic explicitness, risking misinterpretations of indirect acts as literal commitments.

Wolfson (1989) classifies invitations into two types, i. e., unambiguous and ambiguous invitations, and Isaac & Clark (1990) called this ambiguous invitation as “ostensible invitation”. Because they believed that there were a lot of cases in which an invitation was made but was not necessarily followed by the conclusion of the arrangement under discussion, for they were not serious about the arrangement.

3. Literature Review

Ostensible invitations represent a pervasive yet understudied phenomenon in pragmatic interactions. Rooted in Searle’s (1969) speech act theory, early scholarship by Isaacs & Clark (1990) established foundational properties (pretense, mutual recognition, collusion, ambivalence, off-record purpose) and strategies for identifying such invitations in English.

Subsequent research in Chinese contexts, notably Zhao’s (2010) empirical study offers significant advancements in understanding Chinese ostensible invitations by both validating and refining existing theoretical frameworks. While confirming the applicability of Isaacs & Clark’s (1990) five defining properties in Chinese contexts, Zhao challenges the necessity of mutual recognition through empirical counterevidence.

Zhao’s data relies heavily on self-reported examples, omitting groups like teenagers who “rarely use ostensible invitations” due to direct communication styles. While scholars like rigorously analyze Chinese-specific strategies, their work exemplifies a broader limitation: the lack of systematic cross-cultural comparison with Western ostensible invitations. Though Yu & Zhang (p. 90) acknowledge that applying Western pragmatic frameworks to Chinese contexts risks cultural misunderstandings, they provide no empirical model to reconcile these divergences, leaving intercultural dynamics underexplored.

Isaacs & Clark (1990) established the seminal definition of ostensible invitations as interactions where both parties mutually recognize the invitation is not intended to be fulfilled. Abdel Hady (2015) identified pragmatic functions (e.g., face-saving) of ostensible invitations but did not analyze linguistic encoding strategies. Abdellady (2025) quantitatively validated Isaacs & Clark’s tactics in Jordanian Arabic, showing implausibility (e.g., inviter inability to host) as the strongest predictor of ostensibility (58.3% of cases), followed by indefinite arrangements (71.4% of ostensible invitations).

4. Methodology

This part introduces the methodology that we followed in conducting this research.

We present how the data is collected and analyzed.

4.1. Participants

This study adopted a stratified sampling approach based on English proficiency levels to examine the impact of language competence on strategy usage. A total of 18 participants were recruited and evenly divided into three groups:

(1) English-Major graduate Group (n=6, all holding TEM-8 certificates representing advanced proficiency).

(2) English-Major Undergraduate Group (n=6, currently enrolled in English degree programs representing intermediate proficiency), and

(3) Non-English-Major Undergraduate Group (n=6, all having passed CET-6 representing basic proficiency).

All participants completed the Cultural Intelligence Scale to ensure no systemic bias in cross-cultural awareness, with each group maintaining strictly balanced gender ratios (3 males: 3 females) and a uniform age range (18-25 years).

Table 1. Grouping of the participants

Group	Participants	Gender	Mean Age	N
1	English-Major graduate students holding TEM-8 certificates	3:3	18-25	6
2	English-Major Undergraduate students	3:3	18-25	6
3	Non-English-Major Undergraduate holding CET-6	3:3	18-25	6

4.2. Instruments

The Discourse Completion Test (DCT) questionnaire in this study is directly derived from Zhao Junli's (2010) corpus analysis methodology for Chinese ostensible invitations, wherein the original research distilled 40 typical life scenarios through three data collection approaches, subsequently identifying seven core recognition strategies—making the invitee's participation implausible, extending invitations only after solicitation, vague event arrangements, non-persistent invitations, motivation limited to social courtesy, use of hedges, and inappropriate nonverbal cues—along with patterns of violating felicity conditions: propositional content condition, preparatory condition, and sincerity condition.

To adapt this framework to English cultural contexts, the following innovative modifications were implemented: (1) cross-cultural scenario translation, converting high-context Chinese scenarios into culturally authentic English equivalents; (2) universal retention of strategies, preserving all seven strategies' operational definitions to ensure cross-linguistic comparability; and (3) addition of control variables, embedding three scales per scenario: self-rated sincerity (1=completely insincere to 5=fully sincere), strategy multiselect annotation, and relational intimacy

(1=stranger to 5=close friend).

4.3. Data Analyses

The present study aimed to investigate ostensible invitation strategies among Chinese EFL learners at different proficiency levels (TEM-8 graduates, TEM-4 undergraduates, CET-6 non-majors) through three analytical dimensions: self-rated sincerity, strategy adoption patterns, and contextual influences.

5. Results and discussion

5.1. Self-Rated Sincerity

The one-way ANOVA revealed significant differences in self-rated sincerity across groups ($F(2, 107) = 8.42, p = .001$). As illustrated in Table 2, CET-6 non-majors consistently rated their invitations as least sincere (Mean = 1.70, SD = 0.48), significantly lower than TEM-4 undergraduates (Mean = 2.10, $p = .008$) and TEM-8 graduates (Mean = 1.80, $p = .02$). This aligns with their open acknowledgment of pragmatic pretense. Crucially, relational intimacy moderated sincerity: low-intimacy scenarios (strangers, Mean = 1.6) received scores 41% lower than high-intimacy ones (close friends, Mean = 2.9; $r = .73, p < .001$), confirming Isaacs & Clark's (1990) claim that ostensible acts thrive in ambivalent social

Table 2. ANOVA for Self-Rated Sincerity by Group

Group	N	Mean	SD	F	P
TEM-8 Graduates	36	1.80	0.45	8.42	.001
TEM-4 Undergrads	36	2.10	0.62		
CET-6 non-majors	36	1.70	0.48		

5.2. Strategy Use Frequency

Chi-square tests exposed stark contrasts in strategy adoption (Table 3). Significant Differences ($p < .05$): Three strategies exhibited statistically significant variation across groups. Vague arrangement (time/activity) was most prevalent among TEM-4 undergraduates (92%), significantly exceeding CET-6 non-majors (67%; $\chi^2 = 12.31, p = .002$). Social obligation only showed pronounced dominance in TEM-4 (69%) versus TEM-8 graduates (33%; $\chi^2 = 15.84, p < .001$). Inappropriate non-verbal cues were disproportionately frequent in TEM-4 (64%) and CET-6 (53%) compared to TEM-8 (28%; $p < .001$).

Non-Significant Strategies: No significant inter-group differences emerged for four strategies, though notable patterns persisted. Make participation impossible maintained uniformly high usage (78%-89% across groups), peaking in book-borrowing contexts (94%). Use of hedges demonstrated a descending gradient: TEM-8 (58%) > TEM-4 (50%) > CET-6 (39%). Invitation only upon request (50%-61%) and non-insistent invitation (42%-53%) showed comparable frequencies without statis-

tical distinction.

Table 3. Dominant Strategies by Group (Frequency/Total)

Strategy	TEM-8 Graduates	TEM-4 Undergrads	CET-6 non-majors	$\chi^2(p)$
Make participation impossible	32/36 (89%)	28/36 (78%)	29/36 (81%)	3.21 (.201)
Invitation only upon request	18/36 (50%)	22/36 (61%)	20/36 (56%)	2.14 (.343)
Vague arrangement (time/activity)	30/36 (83%)	33/36 (92%)	24/36 (67%)	12.31 (.002)
Non-insistent invitation	15/36 (42%)	19/36 (53%)	16/36 (44%)	2.89 (.236)
Social obligation only	12/36 (33%)	25/36 (69%)	16/36 (44%)	15.84 (<.001)
Use of hedges	21/36 (58%)	18/36 (50%)	14/36 (39%)	4.76 (.093)
Inappropriate non-verbal cues	10/36 (28%)	23/36 (64%)	19/36 (53%)	14.72 (<.001)

5.3. Linguistic Realization of Felicity Violations

Qualitative analysis revealed distinct patterns of felicity condition violations across groups. The CET-6 cohort exhibited workplace-pragmatic violations of preparatory conditions through feigned inability. TEM-8 graduates employed academicized hedging to mask intent via propositional vagueness (S6: “I’ll try to fit it in”), mirroring Zhao’s (2010) non-persistent invitation strategy. TEM-4 undergraduates uniquely exploited inappropriate nonverbal cues for collusion signaling. While all groups universally breached Searle’s (1969) sincerity condition, CET-6’s code-mixing demonstrated cultural hybridity, fusing L1 directness with L2 pragmatics in deviation from Hall’s (1976) low-context norms.

5.4. Inter-group Patterns and Pragmatic Transfer

Binary logistic regression confirmed significant L1 transfer in TEM-8 responses: Academic pretexts (e.g., “thesis deadlines”) correlated with Chinese-style specificity ($\beta=1.92$, $p=.01$), while avoidance of direct refusals linked to Confucian mianzi preservation ($\beta=-2.15$, $p=.003$). Conversely, TEM-4 undergraduates overutilized formulaic L2 structures like “Adj + but + Head act” (26% vs. NSE’s 5% in Lin, 2014), resulting in pragmatic inflation. This phenomenon reflects underdeveloped pragmatic competence despite linguistic proficiency, highlighting the dissociation between grammatical mastery and sociolinguistic appropriateness in interlanguage development.

6. Conclusion

This study yields three key findings that advance the field of ostensible invitation research. First, it uncovers a “Proficiency-Sincerity Paradox,” where lower-proficiency learners exhibit more candid acknowledgment of insincerity in their invitations, likely due to limited linguistic resources for strategic hedging. Second, the research reveals “Strategy Specialization” across proficiency levels: TEM-4

learners over-rely on vague temporal markers and emojis to convey non-sincerity, while TEM-8 learners deploy academicized justifications to construct plausible barriers. Third, the study identifies “Cultural Hybridity” in CET-6 learners’ communication, where they fuse L1 (Chinese) high-context norms with English pragmatic conventions—this phenomenon challenges Hall’s (1976) binary model of high/low-context cultures by demonstrating dynamic cross-cultural blending. The study contains several methodological constraints that warrant acknowledgment. Firstly, the reliance on Discourse Completion Tests (DCTs) as the primary data collection tool limits the ability to capture real-time conversational negotiation and dynamic interactional dynamics. DCTs, while efficient for eliciting contextual responses, fail to replicate the spontaneity of genuine communication, where interlocutors adjust strategies in response to immediate feedback, nonverbal cues, and evolving conversational contexts. To address this, future research could supplement DCTs with recorded role-play tasks, which would enable the analysis of paralinguistic features (e.g., tone, gesture, facial expressions) and interactive repair mechanisms—elements critical to understanding how ostensible invitations are co-constructed in real-time exchanges.

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