

Strategic Deception in Interlanguage Pragmatics: A Comparative Study on Chinese EFL Learners and Native Speakers of American English

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Abstract

The speech act of strategic deception permeates every aspect of life. It not only involves false statements at the verbal level but may also be accompanied by deceptive nonverbal acts, such as facial expressions and body movements. This study employs a questionnaire survey, particularly the Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs), to collect and analyze samples from Chinese EFL learners and native speakers of American English in America (NSEs). Among them, the samples from NSEs served as a control group. The aim is to uncover Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic characteristics and strategies in the speech act of strategic deception. The research questions focus on (1) Compared to NSEs, which strategies of the speech act of strategic deception do Chinese EFL learners tend to use more frequently? (2) Compared to NSEs, what speech act expression characteristics do Chinese EFL learners prefer to use? (3) What are the similarities and differences between Chinese EFL learners and NSEs in terms of pragmatic expressions? The findings indicate that Chinese EFL learners tend to adopt a relatively passive and defensive attitude in the speech act of strategic deception to maintain their face and control the communicative situation. They are also adept at using modals, interrogative sentences, and other expressions to mitigate the directness and offensiveness of speech acts, thereby maintaining the harmony of interpersonal relationships. In addition, compared to NSEs, Chinese EFL learners have some native language expressions that are rarely or never used and need to be further improved. This study provides valuable empirical evidence for the practical performance of Chinese EFL learners, contributing significantly to the in-depth development of cross-cultural communication research.

Keywords

Chinese EFL Learners; Native Speakers of American English in America(NSEs); The Speech Act of Strategic Deception; Interlanguage Pragmatics.

1. Introduction

Verbal communication is a fundamental component of social interaction, which involves not only the transmission of information but also the exchange of emotions, intentions, and strategies. Generally speaking, verbal communication encompasses salutation, apology, request, euphemism, persuasion, and so on. These speech acts are often influenced by various factors, including culture and value orientations, social norms and habits, contexts, and situations, as well as linguistic structures and rules. The art of verbal communication in China is deeply influenced by the legacy of Confucian political philosophy and the tradition of feudal hierarchy and order, tending to maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships through indirect communication methods[1], like euphemism[2][3]; hedges[4][5] and self-denigration and other-elevation[6]. These indirect speech acts not only reflect that Chinese culture is mainly collectivism-oriented, but also embody the virtue of modesty in Chinese. They are also important means to respect others and maintain harmonious relationships. In contrast,

Americans are good at being result-oriented in communication to achieve independence and self-realization in communication. Therefore, the values of individualism and direct communication are dominant, and they prefer to use direct statements[7]; reduce the commitment to the proposition in conversation[8]; and value the acknowledgment of contrasting viewpoints[9] to achieve personal goals or social strategies.

Owing to the disparities in cultural backgrounds, Chinese EFL learners encounter challenges in acquiring pragmatic knowledge, stemming from a paucity of profound comprehension of the target language's cultural nuances and the accrual of authentic communicative experience. Consequently, during the acquisition of a second language, these learners frequently grapple with the difficulty of entirely disentangling themselves from the linguistic conventions and cultural schemas of their native tongue. This predicament often precipitates the inadvertent transference of their mother tongue's linguistic norms and communicative protocols onto their English discourse, with repercussions for the fluidity and appropriateness of their communicative interactions. To foster learners capable of effective L2 communication, training in the appropriate linguistic rules is indispensable in addition to structural language instruction[10]. Therefore, "sociocultural competence" constitutes a vital component of communicative competence. Al-Zumor A.W.Q.Z[11] underscored the importance of cross-cultural speech act research for a deeper understanding of the interdependence between linguistic forms and sociocultural backgrounds. Among Chinese EFL learners, those lacking sufficient pragmatic knowledge often transfer their native speech norms to the second language. This pragmatic transfer manifests in speech acts such as refusal[12][13], apology[14], compliment[15], compliment response[16][17], complaint[18], and criticism[19]. Rejection and compliment responses attract particular attention due to their face-threatening nature. When learning a second language, Krashen[20] observed that learners, confronted with discrepancies between target language expressions and native rules, often resort to their confident L2 expressions to ensure smooth communication. This avoidance strategy resembles a 'speech act of strategic deception'. Despite extensive research on avoidance strategies in Chinese EFL learners' interlanguage pragmatic study, relatively little attention has been paid to studying the speech act of strategic deception.

To be more specific, the research questions in this study are as follows. First, compared to NSEs, which strategies of the speech act of strategic deception do Chinese EFL learners tend to use more frequently? Second, compared to NSEs, what speech act expression characteristics do Chinese EFL learners prefer to use? Third, what are the similarities and differences between Chinese EFL learners and NSEs in terms of pragmatic expressions?

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Speech Act Theory

The speech act theory aims to answer how language is used for "doing" rather than for "referring", embodying the linguistic view that "speaking" is "acting". The founder of speech act theory is the British philosopher, J. Austin. He believed that "many statements are merely 'pseudo-statements'; many utterances people make resemble statements, but they are not intended to narrate or convey information about facts frankly, or they are only partially constative and performative"[21]. Therefore, Austin first distinguished between constative and performative. Subsequently, he classified the acts involved in producing an utterance into three types: locutionary act (i.e., the act of saying), illocutionary act (i.e., the act in saying), and perlocutionary act (i.e., act by saying). If Austin viewed speech act theory as a study of the meaning of isolated utterances, then Searle elevated this theory to an explanation of human language communication. Searle[22] argued that using language, like many other social activities of humans, is a rule-governed and intentional behavior. Therefore, he further divided

Austin's locutionary act into utterance act and propositional act; and classified illocutionary act into representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. At the same time, he also proposed indirect speech acts, believing that indirect language phenomena involve "indirectly performing one type of speech act by performing another"[23]. The introduction of the indirect speech act reveals how language users achieve the intention of another speech act indirectly through one speech act, which greatly enhances the explanatory power of speech act theory for the complexity of daily language. Hussein[24] believed that the formula for any speech act is determined by social distance, the formality of the situation, age, educational level, and the status of the participants. This perspective emphasizes the social constructiveness of speech acts, that is, the meaning and effect of speech acts do not exist in isolation but are deeply rooted in specific socio-cultural environments.

2.2. The Speech Act of Deception

2.2.1. The Definition of The Speech Act of Deception

When an individual plays a part, he implicitly requests his observers to take the impression fostered before them seriously. They are asked to believe that the character they see possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that the task he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be[25]. However, authenticity seems to be just one of many other strategies to achieve and ensure the expected results in real life[26]. Part of speech skillfully weaves lies and half-truths, aiming to guide, mislead, or manipulate others' cognition and acts. Individuals may use carefully designed words to cover up their true intentions, exaggerate achievements, downplay failures, or even create fictional situations to enhance persuasiveness. Deception is an instrumental strategy; a means to an end, which is related to the communicator's goals in a specific situation[27]. Traditionally, the speech act of deception refers to the conscious distortion of information by deceivers, strategically choosing between two main forms of lying: concealing or omitting true information; and falsifying or presenting false information as if it were true[28]. A deception is a deliberate act performed by the addresser to make the addressee believe the opposite of what the addresser considers to be true, thereby putting the addressee at a disadvantage. It can alter pre-existing beliefs[29]. Deception inherently involves communication when individuals are intentionally guided to accept a particular narrative of truths, occurring through the employment of untruthful statements aimed at influencing or manipulating the perceptions of listeners, wherein the essence of deception lies in the presence of falsity[30]. Buller D.B. & Burgoon J.K.[31] defined deception as a communicative behavior aimed at creating a false belief in the target person that the source considers to be erroneous, either by forming a mistaken belief or altering a preexisting belief into an erroneous state. The Cooperative Principle articulated by Herbert Paul Grice is used to regulate how people interact and comprehend utterances. Once communicative cooperation is established, the implications of non-cooperation can also be factually determined, which can accordingly constitute the first step in attempting to describe verbal deception[32]. Samoilenko S.A.[33] defined "strategic deception" as a deliberate communicative attempt with the intention of "concealing, fabricating, and/or manipulating factual and/or emotional information through verbal and/or non-verbal means". It is not difficult to find that these behaviors are grounded in intricate and multifaceted motivations. Specifically, individuals engage in the speech act of strategic deception primarily for purposes of self-preservation, relationship nurturing, attainment of personal or societal objectives, and navigation through intricate situations. These motivations incentivize the selective concealment of truth or dissemination of misleading information, ultimately serving to fulfill specific communicative intentions and objectives. In this study, the speech act of strategic deception is defined as a strategic communicative tool consciously employed by Chinese EFL learners and NSEs in specific communicative contexts, for purposes such as

avoiding embarrassment, protecting privacy, or gaining benefits. These acts involve the deliberate distortion, concealment, omission, or fabrication of information, intending to create, sustain, or alter the misconceptions or judgments of the receiver (i.e., the listener or reader).

2.2.2. The Application of The Speech Act of Deception

The speech act of deception as it occurs within everyday conversations, is both universal and casual[34]. Research on deception detection has explored a wide range of applications, including identifying spam in emails, detecting fraudulent opinions in review websites, and identifying deception in extreme and mediated communications, including blog forums and online dating websites[35]. The speech act of deception has garnered significant attention from researchers, who have delved into this phenomenon from diverse perspectives. At the heart of these investigations into the speech act of deception lie linguistic features and contextual factors. Acoustic features such as the change of fundamental frequency are key to detecting deception[36]. Deceivers strategically manage their deceptive performance by employing greater use of group references, more modifiers, and engaging in more uncertain acts and indirectness, while simultaneously utilizing fewer present tense verbs and self-references[37]. Negative statements, speech directness, and narrative discrepancies are the strongest indicators of deception[38]. Establishing a coding scheme reveals how the deceiver uses the vagueness and universality of language to manipulate information[39]. The establishment of the Contextual Organization of Language and Deception (COLD) framework underscores the moderating role of context in deceptive acts, illuminating the selection of deception strategies and their varying effects across different contextual settings[40]. Furthermore, there are deceptive strategies that involve the socio-political context. For example, discursive deception strategies in the work of think tanks further exemplify the intricate machinations of deception in the context of political power struggles[41]. Communicators in political genres often employ strategies that violate Grice's maxims and certain cognitive strategies to achieve their objectives[42]. These studies have not only deepened our understanding of deceptive behaviors but also provided scientific grounds and practical tools for deception detection. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that linguistic features and vocal changes are not absolute indicators of deception, as deceivers may engage in training to disguise such cues.

Faced with the challenge of the speech act of deception, scholars have proposed a variety of moral frameworks and strategies to reduce its negative effects. Through the development of the Deceptive Miscommunication Theory (DeMiT), it is seen that deceptive communication, with its capacity to hide, omit, conceal, and blur information, can potentially serve useful information[34]. A set of universal individual values and an ethical strategic framework have been proposed to minimize the harmful effects of corporate deception while fostering value-driven business practices[43]. Theoretical issues of delineation of speech acts of sincere error and unfair informing were discussed and a method was proposed to identify unfair communication by examining diagnostic markers such as substantive contradictions and linguistic usage characteristics[44]. Concurrently, in the investigation of psychological mechanisms and behavioral patterns of the speech act of deception, deception under various relational conditions was explored by analyzing liars' delivery strategies and changes in vocal leakage cues[45]. Multiple moderating factors that alter the relationship between deception and language were further analyzed and explained[46]. The role of communication style in deception was revealed by utilizing the fractional logit model[47].

The convergence of empirical findings from these studies underscores the intricate interplay between the intricate mechanics and multifaceted manifestations of deception. By harnessing the synergies of psychology, neuroscience, and related disciplines, we can unravel the intricate tapestry of individual predispositions and collective dynamics that underpin deceptive conduct. This holistic approach promises a deep grasp of the very essence and regularities of deception,

empowering us with a formidable arsenal of strategies and methodologies tailored to counter the pernicious effects of deceitful practices.

2.3. Interlanguage Pragmatics

Interlanguage Pragmatics, a subfield that intersects with both pragmatics and interlanguage studies, utilizes theories and principles from pragmatics to elucidate how language learners encode and decode meaning in their second language[48][49]. Numerous interlanguage pragmatic investigations concentrate on delineating the pragmatic competence of L2 speakers, providing a wealth of insights into the comparative features - both similarities and differences - in how native and non-native speakers employ language[50]. The primary focus of interlanguage pragmatics is on speech acts, conversational routines, and implicature[51]. The development of pragmatic ability is a dynamic and evolving process of system construction, influenced by multiple macro and micro factors. The enhancement of learners' pragmatic ability is a process of intersection and interaction across multiple resources, levels, and dimensions. Therefore, learners' language knowledge, interaction strategies, socio-cultural knowledge, and language learning environment are the key factors in the development of their pragmatic ability, and these factors do not exist in isolation but are interconnected and interactive[52]. In the process of using interlanguage pragmatics, pragmatic failures may occur. Pragmatic failure, the communication breakdown caused by a lack of pragmatic competence, can interfere with social, academic, and professional opportunities for L2 speakers[53]. The research on the pragmatic failure of interlanguage mainly focuses on cross-culture[54][55], and second-language learning[56][57].

Interlanguage Pragmatics examines the encoding and decoding of meaning by second language learners in their target language as an intersection of pragmatics and interlanguage studies. It reveals both the similarities and differences in pragmatic competence between native and non-native speakers. Research in this field has significantly enhanced the understanding of the development process of L2 learners' pragmatic abilities and illuminated the impact of socio-cultural factors, language learning environments, and learners' strategies on the construction of pragmatic competence. By addressing pragmatic failures caused by a lack of pragmatic competence, Interlanguage Pragmatics plays a crucial role in enhancing L2 learners' communication skills and reducing cross-cultural communication barriers. Consequently, it offers theoretical and practical guidance for language teaching and assessment.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The study comprised two participant groups: 15 Chinese EFL learners from China and 15 native speakers of American English in America (NSEs). The Chinese EFL learners were graduate students majoring in English from a university in China, all of whom had passed the Test for English Majors-Band 8 (TEM-8). The NSEs were native speakers of English residing in the United States. The ratios of male to female in the participant groups were 3:12 for the Chinese EFL group and 6:9 for the NSE group, respectively.

3.2. Instruments

The instrument used in the present study was a questionnaire with one major part: Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs). DCTs are a type of production questionnaire in which speech acts are elicited in written form by some kind of situational description[58]. Besides, DCTs are the only available data collection instrument that generates sufficiently large corpora of comparable, systematically varied speech act data. Given their capacity to be translated into any language and disseminated to extensive groups of participants within a short period, they are deemed the optimal instrument for conducting contrastive analyses of speech acts[59]. The

design of DCTs was based on the contextual factors of daily life in society. A detailed distribution of the contextual factors and a brief description of each situation are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Description OF The DCT Situations

situation	Brief description
1	The project that required teamwork was not completed on time.
2	Not returning borrowed books.
3	Replacing a new fan.
4	Avoiding disclosing scores to the family.
5	Delaying wages.
6	Concealing-marriage clan.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. The Utilization of Overall Strategies

Table 2. Overall Strategies

	Strategies	Explanation
1	Equivocation	Avoid the use of clear, specific, or verifiable information, instead employ vague and general statements, thereby increasing the likelihood of false representations.
2	Fact-fiction	Fabricate non-existent facts or scenarios directly to mislead listeners.
3	Overgeneralization	By exaggerating certain facts or characteristics, one attempts to shape a one-sided impression in the listener's mind.
4	Circular Arguments	In argumentation, repeatedly employ the same false premises and unverified assertions to create a plausible and self-consistent atmosphere that may mislead.
5	Emotional Manipulation	By eliciting a certain emotional response in the listener, one aims to influence their judgment.
6	Overpromise	To gain trust or achieve a certain purpose, unrealistic guarantees or promises are made, which are often difficult to fulfill.
7	Changing Concepts	During the process of argumentation, the definition of an important concept is silently altered, thereby evading logical criticism or accountability.
8	Obfuscation	Deliberately intertwines multiple distinct topics or viewpoints, making it difficult for the information receiver to distinguish between authentic information and misleading content.
9	Pretend To Be the Victim	Pretend to be a victim of a certain false viewpoint or act in order to garner sympathy and trust from others, thereby promoting a harmful agenda.
10	Leave Out the Main Point	Only mention information that is favorable to oneself while deliberately omitting other important information that may reveal the truth.

According to Anolli L., et al.[34], deception belongs to the “family” of communication breakdown phenomena and processes, primarily encompassing self-deception and pathological frequent deception. Within this family, four deceptive “subfamilies” are identified: omission (where the speaker omits information from the listener that he/she believes or knows is relevant to the listener’s goals); concealment (where the speaker conceals and hides some information by providing the listener with other true but irrelevant or distracting information to perpetuate his/her false assumptions); falsification (where the speaker intentionally communicates some information to the listener that he/she knows is false); and masking (where the speaker conceals some information by providing the receiver with other false information). This study conducted a more detailed categorization of the four deceptive subfamilies based on the responses provided by Chinese EFL learners and NSEs. In the study, we observed that Chinese EFL learners and NSEs collectively employed 10 primary response strategies, but these strategies were mixed and overlapped in practical application, resulting in the formation of 14 distinct strategy types. The overall strategies and their specific explanations have been detailed in Table 2, while the frequencies of use by Chinese EFL learners and NSEs are presented in Table 3. For cases where the percentage calculations could not be evenly divided, we adopted the rounding method to retain the result to one decimal place.

Table 3. The Frequencies of Use By Chinese EFL Learners and NSEs

Strategies	Chinese EFL Learners		NSEs	
Equivocation	9	10%	13	14.4%
Fact-fiction	12	13.3%	16	17.7%
Overgeneralization	3	3.3%	2	2.2%
Circular Arguments	2	2.2%	3	3.3%
Emotional Manipulation	4	4.4%	4	4.4%
Overpromise	3	3.3%	2	2.2%
Changing Concepts	7	7.7%	6	6.6%
Obfuscation	13	14.4%	14	15.6%
Pretend To Be the Victim	19	21.1%	12	13.3%
Leave Out the Main Point	7	7.7%	8	8.9%
Fact-fiction + Emotional Manipulation	2	2.2%	/	/
Fact-fiction + Overpromise	7	7.7%	/	/
Emotional Manipulation + Overpromise	2	2.2%	6	6.7%
Emotional Manipulation + Pretend To Be the Victim	/	/	4	4.4%

As shown in Table 3, among the top 10 individual strategies, more than 10% of both Chinese EFL learners and NSEs tend to use equivocation, fact-fiction, obfuscation, and pretend to be a victim. Among these four commonly used strategies, Chinese EFL learners exhibit a higher frequency of pretending to be a victim, whereas NSEs more frequently adopt fact-fiction. Additionally, there is no significant difference in the overall use of strategies such as

overgeneralization, circular arguments, emotional manipulation, overpromise, and changing Concepts. This aligns with Triandis H. C.'s[60] perspective that in individualistic cultures, individuals prioritize personal goals over group goals; conversely, in collectivist cultures, individuals either do not distinguish between personal and group goals or elevate the intentions of the group above their own. When deeply analyzing the tendency in the use of mixed strategic deceptive patterns, Chinese EFL learners demonstrate a specific preference for adopting a combination of fact-fiction and overpromise. This preference stems from the influence of multiple factors, including cultural background, language acquisition environment, and personal communication habits, which lead learners to tend to enhance persuasiveness through fabricating facts during communication and reinforcing the credibility of their arguments with overpromising. In contrast, NSEs tend to more frequently utilize a combination of emotional manipulation and overpromise in their application of mixed strategic deceptive patterns. This observation underscores the propensity of NSEs to leverage emotional resonance to direct conversational flow and to motivate or persuade audiences through exaggerated commitments. This strategic divergence not only presents distinct preferences in communication strategies among various linguistic communities but also highlights the profound influence of cultural backgrounds and social norms on individuals' communicative behavioral patterns.

4.2. Three Speech Act Expression Characteristics Within the Overall Strategies Framework

The essence of the use of overall strategies lies in maintaining the speaker's face and self-esteem. Goffman[61] thought that face is not as a private or an image "located in the flow of event", supported by other people's judgments, and endorsed by "impersonal agencies in the situation". It is upheld by the judgments of others and validated by the impersonal dynamics inherent in any situation. Notably, a preponderance of negative face strategies emerged in two groups of participants. These strategies reflect an individual's aversion to interference, imposition, or compulsion from others, as well as a reluctance to relinquish their personal interests or autonomy – in essence, they embody a quest for the power to be one's true self[62]. Within the scenes of this study, participants based on the above 14 strategies primarily resorted to 3 expressive characteristics of the speech act: attribution (the facts or information on which the attributional reasoner supposedly relies are not 'naturally' given but are as much a part of the social process as the inferences themselves)[63], vague expressions (the speaker deliberately chooses to add fuzziness to an otherwise syntactically and ideationally complete utterance)[64] and pragmatic contradiction (the content or meaning of what the individual says is contradicted by the act of speaking it)[65] as tactics to preserve their negative face. The frequency of speech act expression characteristics of Chinese EFL learners and NSEs is shown in Table 4. For cases where the percentage calculations could not be evenly divided, we adopted the rounding method to retain the result to one decimal place.

Table 4: The Frequency of Speech Act Expression Characteristics of Chinese EFL Learners and NSEs

Characteristics	Chinese EFL Learners		NSE	
Attribution	69	76.7%	53	58.9%
Vague Expressions	10	9%	14	15.6%
Pragmatic Contradictions	11	12.2%	23	25.6%

Both groups of participants utilize a significant amount of attribution in the speech act of strategic deception, but Chinese EFL learners employ attribution more frequently, accounting

for 76.7% of their usage (e.g., The previous employees delayed the process in situation 1; I'm currently preparing for a crucial exam, and I haven't had a chance to read the magazine yet in situation 2; and the old fan makes loud noises every time it's used in situation 3); while NSEs account for 58.9% (e.g., there were some discrepancies in the work that will need to be reviewed first before we can finalize any payments in situation 5; Only to my job! It keeps me very busy in situation 6). This reflects that Chinese EFL learners tend to attribute responsibility or causes to external factors or third parties when constructing deceptive statements, in order to reduce their own responsibilities or increase the credibility of their utterances. Therefore, Chinese EFL learners can attempt to reduce their overreliance on external attribution and use more diversified approaches to construct deceptive statements. This can be achieved by incorporating descriptions of internal psychological states, situational constraints, or personal choices, thereby enhancing the naturalness and credibility of their utterances. Although both participant groups demonstrate a tendency to use pragmatic contradictions, NSEs exhibit a stronger propensity to this feature (e.g., I think I did a good job in this exam, but when I think about it, I feel that there are still a lot of shortcomings in situation 4; I am not currently interested in dating in situation 6). This suggests that Chinese EFL learners need to further enhance their understanding and ability to employ pragmatic contradictions, in order to express complex emotional attitudes or intentions more subtly and flexibly within the deceptive speech. Additionally, both Chinese EFL learners and NSEs, albeit sparingly, utilize vague expressions, (e.g., This exam was a bit challenging. How did my sister do this time in situation 4 in the questionnaire of Chinese EFL learners; That's a good question! Speaking of relationships, what do you think about the latest trends in dating in situation 6 in the questionnaire of NSEs). Chinese EFL learners, thus, can learn to identify and utilize different types of vague expressions to avoid direct answers to sensitive questions, express uncertainty, or convey intentions implicitly.

4.3. Utilization Patterns of Syntactics

Both Chinese EFL learners and NSEs utilize modals, like *can't*, *would*, and *won't* as well as interrogative sentences incorporating modals, like *shall I...*, *could it be that...*, *could you please...* to varying degrees. The purpose of this usage is to replace potentially offensive or unpleasant expressions with pleasant or harmless ones. The employment of modals and interrogative sentences incorporating modals is, to some extent, related to the concept of "being embarrassed or humiliated, or 'losing face'" as outlined by Brown and Levinson[62]. This leads them to use corresponding modal verbs when speaking, to garner sympathy from their interlocutors, causing them to let down their emotional guard, and ultimately achieving the goal of the speech act of strategic deception. Chinese EFL learners tend to overuse interrogative sentences incorporating modals, (e.g., *Would you like* me to buy you a new magazine in situation 2; *Could you* replace it for me in situation 3; and *Can we* get a quieter one, please in situation 3), whereas NSEs employs a wider range of modals in making deceptive statements (e.g., *Maybe we should* take some extra time to look into the project in situation 1; *Once everything's out, I'll* definitely let you know in situation 4; *I think I did better* in some subjects than others, but *I'd rather* focus on what I can improve next time in situation 4; *I guess you could say* I'm keeping things flexible in situation 6). At the same time, Chinese EFL learners are more inclined to use if-conditional sentences to construct hypothetical scenarios, thereby indirectly expressing their intentions or needs, rather than stating them directly (e.g., *If everyone's assigned tasks have been completed, but the project is still delayed, could it be that there were some hidden tasks not allocated during project initiation, leading to the delay?* in situation 1; *If you're not in a rush, I'll* bring it to you next time. in situation 2; *If it accidentally falls and injures someone, you'll end up spending more on medical expenses.* in situation 3). It is noteworthy that Chinese EFL learners never utilize general questions, which are commonly employed by NSEs (e.g., *How about you all? What have you been up to lately* in situation 4 in the questionnaire of NSEs). Therefore,

Chinese EFL learners need to improve their daily communication skills in English, particularly their questioning skills, in order to more naturally integrate into English-speaking contexts, enrich their communication content, and more strategically employ a second language when necessary.

4.4. Adjuncts

Chinese EFL learners and NSEs take into account the social relationships among individuals in the context when choosing conversational styles. The individual shapes the social process, which in turn shapes the individual. Social and psychological processes affect self-awareness in conversation, knowledge dissemination, discussion, and other forms of human relations[66]. The process of identification between the person and the context is described in Bosma H A., et al.

Identity processes are central to the interaction between person and context. They determine the outcome of each interaction, while the result of each interaction in turn forms the starting point for the next interaction. In this interaction, interindividual differences in personal (e.g. information processing style) and contextual characteristics (e.g. discrimination as an ethnic minority youth) will determine the outcome[67].

In daily communication, both Chinese EFL learners and NSEs will pay more attention to considering the social relationships among individuals in the context and employ various auxiliary expressions to soften the impact or reduce the offensiveness of speech acts hence. Adjuncts serve as supportive expressions[68] or positive comments[69] aimed at softening the impact or perceived offense of the main speech acts. The use of adjuncts reflects Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners' and NSEs' cognition of social norms and expectations, as well as their ability to adapt to different situations and audiences. In this study, adjuncts include interjections, adverbs, verbs expressed in attitudes, and imperative sentences. When comparing the differences in the use of interjections between NSEs and Chinese EFL learners, a noteworthy phenomenon emerges. Despite the limited variety of interjections used by NSEs, which are confined to *well*, *oh*, and *hey*, their frequency of utilization reaches as high as 11 times, indicating that NSEs are adept at employing these simple interjections in communication to enhance the expressiveness and interactivity of language. In contrast, Chinese EFL learners only used interjections five times in the questionnaire, with *oh* accounting for three of those instances, reflecting a more conservative and less diverse use of interjections among them. This finding suggests that Chinese EFL learners need to increase their sensitivity to linguistic elements such as interjections in English and understand their functions and roles in different contexts.

Additionally, in the use of adverbs, Chinese EFL learners employ a total of 17 adverbs, including *quite*, *initially*, *immediately*, *currently*, *genuinely*, *suddenly*, *recently*, *accidentally*, *barely*, *comprehensively*, *generally*, *luckily*, *deeply*, *acutely*, *actually*, with only one adverb (*accidentally*) being repeated three times. In contrast, NSEs use 24 adverbs, including *fully*, *completely*, *really*, *actually*, *honestly*, *definitely*, *currently*, and *totally*, with one adverb (*really*) being repeated 12 times, another (*currently*) being repeated five times, and a third (*completely*) being repeated twice. From the perspective of adverb repetition, Chinese EFL learners tend to use as many complex and uncommon adverbs as possible, in order to enrich their language expression and demonstrate their vocabulary range and proficiency in the language. However, this may also reflect a tendency towards deliberate pursuit or a lack of natural fluency in language use among them. NSEs, on the other hand, more effortlessly emphasize their viewpoints or emotions through the frequent use of simple adverbs, which underscores the differences in language habits and proficiency between the two groups.

Chinese EFL learners seem to have no problems in the use of verbs expressed in attitudes and imperative sentences, as they have similar expressions to NSEs in the statements (e.g. I'm so

sorry about that in situation 2 in the questionnaire of Chinese EFL learners; I'm planning to keep it for a few more days, but I *promise* to give it back to you next week in situation 3 in the questionnaire of Chinese EFL learners; *Let's* wait longer in situation 4 in the questionnaire of Chinese EFL learners; I *want to emphasize* that I was fully committed to my tasks and completed them on schedule in situation 1 in the questionnaire of NSEs; I *am hoping* you could arrange for a replacement in situation 3 in the questionnaire of NSEs; *Let* me look into that and get back to you tomorrow in situation 5 in the questionnaire of NSEs).

Interestingly, NSEs skillfully employ exclamation marks when expressing strong emotions or emphasizing tone (e.g. Oh, I've been meaning to return it! in situation 2; I completely forgot I had that magazine! in situation 2; Only to my job! It keeps me very busy! in situation 6). This usage not only enhances the emotional color of the statement but also makes the expression more vivid and powerful. However, such use of exclamation marks is absent in the questionnaires completed by Chinese EFL learners, indicating that Chinese EFL learners may be relatively reserved in expressing emotions and attitudes in written language and lack the habit of using punctuation to heighten the effect of language. This finding suggests that Chinese EFL learners, in addition to learning vocabulary and grammar, should also pay attention to non-verbal elements in language, such as punctuation and intonation. By reading original books, watching English films and TV shows, and other means, the expression patterns of native English speakers can be understood and imitated.

5. Conclusion

Through a questionnaire survey, this study reveals distinctive characteristics and tendencies in the speech act of strategic deception of Chinese EFL learners. The findings indicate that Chinese EFL learners exhibit a propensity for employing the strategy of pretending to be a victim, in contrast to NSEs who favor the strategy of fact-fiction. Additionally, Chinese EFL learners prefer to combine fact-fiction with overpromise within mixed strategies, while NSEs tend to integrate emotional manipulation with overpromise. These observations underscore the profound influence of cultural background, language acquisition environment, and individual communication habits on the speech act of strategic deception.

In terms of speech act expression characteristics, both Chinese EFL learners and NSEs extensively utilize attribution, vague expressions, and pragmatic contradiction to maintain negative faces. Chinese EFL learners show a higher frequency in the use of attribution, whereas NSEs demonstrate greater proficiency in employing pragmatic contradiction. This suggests that Chinese EFL learners are more inclined to attribute responsibility to external factors when constructing deceptive statements, whereas NSEs are more adept at conveying complex emotional attitudes or intentions through pragmatic contradiction.

Regarding syntactic usage, both Chinese EFL learners and NSEs extensively use modal verbs and interrogative sentences that include modal verbs to mitigate the directness and offensiveness of speech. Chinese EFL learners prefer the use of if-conditional sentences to construct hypothetical scenarios, while NSEs more frequently utilize general questions. This reflects a deficiency in English communication skills among Chinese EFL learners, particularly in the area of questioning skills.

In the utilization of adjuncts, both Chinese EFL learners and NSEs demonstrate an awareness of social relationships and expectations. NSEs exhibit greater diversity and frequency in the use of interjections, while Chinese EFL learners are comparatively more conservative. In terms of adverb usage, Chinese EFL learners tend to employ complex and less common adverbs to enrich their language expression, whereas NSEs prefer simpler adverbs to emphasize points or emotions. Furthermore, NSEs skillfully employ punctuation marks to express strong emotions

or to emphasize tone, a practice not observed in Chinese EFL learners' written expressions, suggesting a more reserved approach to conveying emotional attitudes in English.

In summary, this study provides an in-depth analysis of the speech act of strategic deception on Chinese EFL learners. The findings not only reveal cross-cultural differences in this speech act but also offer valuable empirical data for English as a second language education. The study highlights areas for improvement for Chinese EFL learners in English communication skills, particularly in questioning skills and the use of punctuation marks. Enhancing understanding and application of these non-verbal elements can facilitate a more natural integration of Chinese EFL learners into English-speaking contexts, enriching their communicative content, and enabling more strategic use of language when necessary. Theoretically, it enriches the research content of interlanguage pragmatics and speech act theory, fostering the in-depth development of cross-cultural communication studies.

6. Limitations

Despite the notable findings of this study in revealing the strategic deception in interlanguage pragmatics of Chinese EFL learners by comparing them with NSEs, there are still some limitations and directions for future research. Firstly, the limitation of sample size. The study only involved 15 Chinese EFL learners and 15 NSEs, which is relatively small and may not fully represent the overall situation of Chinese EFL learners and NSEs. Future research should expand the sample size to enhance the representativeness and generalizability of the findings. Secondly, the issue of contextual singularity. Although the DCTs were designed based on daily life situations, they may not fully encompass all the complexities encountered by learners in actual communication. Devise more scenarios to gain a more comprehensive understanding of learners' speech acts of strategic deception can be designed. Thirdly, the absence of longitudinal studies. This study is cross-sectional, not examining changes in learners' speech act of strategic deception over time. It is necessary to adopt a longitudinal design to track learners' pragmatic competence development over an extended period, revealing the dynamic processes. Fourthly, the depth of cultural background influence. While the study mentioned the impact of cultural background on the speech act of strategic deception, it did not delve into its specific mechanisms. The similarities and differences across different cultural backgrounds, as well as the profound influence of cultural factors on pragmatic competence development, should be further analyzed. Lastly, the expansion of theoretical frameworks. This study primarily relied on speech act theory and interlanguage pragmatics theory for analysis. It is important to explore the integration of other relevant theories, such as social psychology and intercultural communication theory, to provide a more comprehensive explanation and prediction.

Appendix

Questionnaire

This questionnaire aims to study the perception and performance of the speech act of strategic deception. Please write down the answers according to your understanding. Thank you very much for your cooperation.

***The Definition of the Speech Act of Strategic Deception**

It refers to the conscious misrepresentation of information by the deceiver strategically choosing between two major forms of lying: concealment or leaving out true information; and falsification, or presenting false information as if it were true (Ekman P., 1981).

1. Brief Introduction of Personal Information
- 1) **What is your native language?**

A. Chinese B. English

2) **Your gender is ____.**

A. Male B. Female

2. Directions: In the following, there are six scenarios. Please follow the prompts in the scene to answer the questions.

Scenario 1:

Background:

The project that required teamwork was not completed on time, and team members needed to meet to discuss the reasons.

Scenario Description:

At the beginning of the meeting, the project manager asks about the reason for the delay. The members state that they have completed their tasks.

Question:

If you were part of a team but didn't want to take responsibility, how would you respond by using the speech act of strategic deception?

Scenario 2:

Background:

Not returning borrowed books

Scenario Description:

Sam's friend bought a magazine. There are stars in the magazine that he likes very much. Sam intended to borrow it and keep it for himself. After lending the book to Sam, the friend found that he hadn't returned it for a long time and came to ask him about the return date.

Question:

If you were Sam, how would you respond by using the speech act of strategic deception to extend the time for returning this magazine?

Scenario 3:

Background:

Replacing a fan (Fan: a piece of electrical or mechanical equipment with blades that go round and round. It keeps a room or machine cool or gets rid of unpleasant smells.)

Scenario description:

Sam's rented house has a very broken fan, so he wants to call and ask the landlord for a new one.

Question:

If you were Sam, how would you use the speech act of strategic deception to strengthen your request for a new fan from the landlord?

Scenario 4:

Background:

Family Gathering

Scenario Description:

Sam has received poor scores in his final exams and wants to avoid disclosing his scores to his family. However, his family asked him about his final exam scores during a family gathering.

Question:

If you were Sam, how would you respond to conceal your final exam scores?

Scenario 5:

Background:

You are in charge of the construction of a project.

Scenario description:

You hire workers to do the work, but you don't want to pay them.

Question:

If you were the person in charge of the project and workers came to ask for money, how would you respond?

Scenario 6:

Background:

Dinner Party

Scenario Description:

Sam is married. When he attends a dinner party, he is inquired about his marital status by those around him. Sam prefers not to reveal that he is married.

Question:

If you were Sam, how would you use the speech act of strategic deception to conceal the fact that you were married?

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