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The Application Strategy of the Politeness Principle in Cross-Border E-Commerce Communication-From the Perspective of Foreign Trade Staff

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ABSTRACT
Against the backdrop of frequent communication barriers caused by cultural differences in global cross-border e-commerce, this study is guided by Leech's politeness principle and employs interview and case analysis methods to systematically investigate the English communication strategies of foreign trade personnel. Research has found that there are three core issues in current cross-border communication: lack of cross-cultural adaptability, insufficient information transparency, and failure to maintain trust. Three pragmatic strategies have been proposed to address these issues: adjusting politeness principles according to different contexts to adapt to cultural differences, using information transparency compensation strategies to simplify terminology and supplement nonverbal symbols to enhance understanding, and establishing trust maintenance framework strategies to ensure that foreign traders comply with platform rules while fulfilling their commitments to customers. This study integrates the principle of politeness with cross-border e-commerce communication, expanding the boundaries of politeness in traditional applications and providing reference for reducing cross-cultural transaction costs and enhancing international customer trust.

Keywords Politeness Principle, cross-border e-commerce, English communication, foreign trade staff

I. INTRODUCTION

In this section, the research background of the thesis, literature review and the significance of the study will be represented.

1.1 Research Background

In the context of accelerating globalization and unprecedented advancements in digital technology, cross-border e-commerce has emerged as a transformative force in international trade. Over the past decade, the sector has experienced exponential growth, driven by internet penetration, logistical innovations, and evolving consumer demands for globalized markets. According to recent industry reports, the global cross-border e-commerce market is projected to exceed $7.9 trillion by 2030 transforming conventional trade paradigms and fostering interconnected economic ecosystems (Statista,2025)[16].

However, this rapid expansion has amplified the complexities of intercultural communication in digital trade. Language barriers, cultural mismatches, and divergent pragmatic norms frequently impair transactional efficiency and hinder trust-building in cross-border interactions. For instance, indirect expressions in English communication—often rooted in politeness strategies—may lead to misinterpretations between Western and Eastern business stakeholders, while mismatched expectations of formality or transparency can escalate conflicts. Such challenges highlight the critical yet understudied role of pragmatic competence, particularly the application of politeness principles, in navigating the nuanced dynamics of intercultural business exchanges.

Existing research on Leech's Politeness Principle has predominantly focused on general business communication or diplomatic discourse, with limited attention to the unique demands of cross-border e-commerce. This gap becomes increasingly salient as digital platforms prioritize brevity and speed, often at the expense of cultural sensitivity and relational nuance. Furthermore, the lack of systematic strategies to reconcile politeness-related ambiguities with transactional clarity perpetuates inefficiencies, as evidenced by rising dispute rates in cross-border transactions.

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Against this backdrop, this study positions itself at the intersection of pragmatics, intercultural communication, and digital trade. It seeks to address how the Politeness Principle can be strategically adapted to mitigate communication barriers, enhance mutual understanding, and optimize outcomes in English-mediated cross-border e-commerce. By doing so, the research responds to an urgent need for actionable frameworks that align linguistic politeness with the fast-paced, culturally heterogeneous realities of global digital commerce.

1.2 Literature Review

In the research of English communication in cross-border e-commerce, scholars generally focus on the root causes and coping strategies of language and cultural barriers.

Ma Shuang pointed out that the obstacles under the RCEP framework mainly stem from deep differences in values and ways of thinking[1], while Li Zhiling found that Business English faces a contradiction between practicality and cultural compatibility in pursuing efficiency[2]. Several researchers have emphasized the importance of cross-cultural communication strategies. Liao Liling believes that adapting to local language and culture strategies can promote the development of cross-border e-commerce ecosystems[3], while Liu Yaqiong specifically analyzes the mechanism by which Business English promotes global market penetration through standardized terminology and cultural adaptation[4].

The research on the application of politeness principle presents a diversified perspective. Zhao Wantong revealed the professional doubts that may arise from the literal translation of Chinese modesty[5], while Jin Hongxia pointed out the mismatch between context-independent politeness frameworks and dynamic cultural environments**Error! Reference source not found.**. Ruan Simei and Liu Junbing found through empirical research that fuzzy strategies can improve satisfaction[6], but there is a lack of systematic explanation for the balance mechanism of strategy criteria. Hu Mingyin pays special attention to the role of subjunctive mood in conveying politeness and diplomatic ambiguity[8], while Song Chenchen emphasizes the value of customer-centric principles in improving transaction efficiency[9].

Edward T. Hall's cultural context theory provides a framework for understanding communication differences between high and low context cultures[10]. Liu Huali discussed the applicability and discourse function of English euphemisms based on the theoretical framework of politeness principle. By studying how euphemisms regulate interpersonal dynamics, such as reducing face threatening behavior in professional discourse or encoding cultural taboos in cross-cultural communication, she aims to optimize the use of euphemisms in daily communication[11]. From a cross-cultural comparative lens, Geoffrey Leech's "Grand Strategy of Politeness" offers a fresh perspective on East-West differences. His principle of "ascribing high value to others/low value to self" manifests complex variations in cross-border e-commerce contexts [12]. Geoffrey Leech's six politeness criteria and Brown & Levinson's face theory together form the theoretical foundation for analyzing politeness strategies[13],[14]. These studies collectively indicate that cross-border e-commerce English communication requires the establishment of polite strategies that combine cultural sensitivity and operational feasibility. Ashley positioned within the field of professional writing pedagogy, the handbook systematically addresses core genres of commercial correspondence—including inquiries, offers, orders, complaints, and responses—through templates, annotated examples, and language frameworks. Its strength lies in its task-oriented approach, which prioritizes clarity, conciseness, and audience awareness as key principles for effective business writing[15].

In summary,in the context of the rapid development of the global digital economy and cross-border e-commerce, research on practical strategies for cross-cultural English communication is increasingly receiving attention from both academia and industry. Existing research has explored the application of language services in cross-border e-commerce from multiple dimensions, but there is still a theoretical gap in studying the dynamic adaptation mechanism of politeness principles from the perspective of foreign trade personnel. This paper will analyze the problems of English communication in cross-border e-commerce online platforms from the perspective of foreign trade personnel, and propose corresponding strategies based on politeness principles to solve the problems.

1.3 Research Significance

This study explores cases where foreign trade personnel fail to communicate in cross-border e-commerce English due to violating the principle of politeness, and solves related problems by applying specific principles of politeness. By analyzing the corpus of customer service conversations on different cross-border e-commerce platforms and interviewing foreign

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trade personnel from different industries, the paper identified communication problems among foreign trade personnel and proposed three strategies: cross-cultural contextual adaptation strategy, information transparency compensation strategy, and trust preservation framework strategy to solve the problems.

This study contributes to existing literature in two aspects. First, at the theoretical value level, the study innovatively integrates Leech's politeness principle and cross-cultural adaptation framework in the traditional application direction of politeness principle, providing a new research perspective for pragmatics theory in real-time information transmission and cross-border e-commerce platform communication with different cultural backgrounds. In addition, by integrating interdisciplinary approaches from linguistic pragmatics and e-commerce research, this study reveals the interrelationship between cultural norms and language strategies on cross-border e-commerce platforms. Second, in terms of practical value, the pragmatic strategies proposed in the study, such as context adaptation, transparent compensation, and trust preservation, provide reference and guidance for foreign trade practitioners to resolve cultural conflicts and improve communication efficiency. The research also provides empirical solutions to address the increasing communication risks in the global e-commerce market expansion, helping to cultivate trust relationships, optimize cross-border transaction operating costs, and enhance customer satisfaction. Ultimately, these research findings also provide suggestions and references for business English educators to design a curriculum system centered on cross-cultural pragmatic competence, aligning the training direction of business English talents with the ability needs of foreign trade personnel on cross-border e-commerce platforms.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this section, the information of the Politeness Principle and the role of the Politeness Principle in cross-border e-commerce will be introduced as follows.

2.1 The Politeness Principle

The Politeness Principle is an important theory in pragmatics, proposed by the British linguist Geoffrey Leech. It aims to guide people on how to express their opinions and emotions more politely and appropriately in linguistic communication, thereby promoting harmony and smoothness in interpersonal interactions. The Principle of Politeness (PP) is a constraint observed in human communicative behaviour, influencing us to avoid communicative discord or offence, and maintain communicative concord(Leech,1983)[13]. By using polite language, we can communicate more effectively and open doors to dialogue and making others more willing to listen and accept our opinions, thereby avoiding or resolving potential conflicts. Moreover, the politeness principle fosters a positive social atmosphere and strengthens social cohesion in public interactions, and it facilitates intercultural mutual understanding in cross-cultural communication.

Leech's Politeness Principle ensures the fluidity of intercultural exchange by balancing linguistic strategies with cultural ethics through the coordinated application of its six maxims. The core lies in minimizing behavioral costs for counterparts through indirect expressions (Tact Maxim) and conveying service sincerity by proactively assuming responsibilities (Generosity Maxim), while maintaining buyer engagement by downplaying criticism and amplifying recognition (Approbation Maxim). To avoid excessive self-promotion, credibility is established through objective descriptions (Modesty Maxim), and consensus is prioritized to defuse conflicts in disagreements (Agreement Maxim), complemented by emotional connectivity to compensate for the absence of nonverbal cues in online interactions (Sympathy Maxim). These maxims ultimately merge professionalism and approachability in virtual cross-border scenarios, ensuring transactional efficiency while fostering the subtle integration of cultural values, achieving the dual realization of commercial objectives and cultural adaptation(Leech,1983)[13].

Collectively, Leech's Politeness Principle serves both as a linguistic strategy and an ethical guideline for cross-cultural communication in cross-border e-commerce. Its six maxims balance interests, emotions, and information exchange, enabling practitioners to uphold professionalism and approachability in virtual, cross-cultural environments, thereby achieving dual effectiveness in commercial objectives and cultural adaptation.

2.2 The Role of the Politeness Principle in Cross-Border E-Commerce

Cross-border e-commerce refers to international business activities that involve conducting transactions through e-commerce platforms, making payment settlements, and delivering goods through cross-border logistics to complete a series of transactions. This method of trade is cost-effective and highly interactive,

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allowing transactions to be completed under various circumstances via e-commerce platforms, followed by cross-border logistics distribution for the successful transaction of goods, thereby enabling online cross-border purchases(Liu Yaqiong,2023)[4]. The mainstream cross-border e-commerce platforms include: Amazon, AliExpress, Shopee, eBay,Wish, Lazada, Etsy, Temu and Walmart Marketplace.

In cross-border e-commerce, the Politeness Principle plays a core role in reducing cross-cultural trust friction, shaping brand image, and optimizing consumer experience. Its essence is to establish sustainable business relationships through the appropriateness of language and behavior, especially reflected in the adaptive regulation of cross-cultural communication. The cognitive differences in politeness among different cultures require foreign traders to implement localization strategies to avoid cultural conflicts and the risk of negotiation failure.

This principle is also a key principle for building brand trust. Neutral and humble language can enhance the credibility of user comments, especially when consumers have doubts about exaggerated promotional language. Using honest and straightforward expressions of minor flaws can actually strengthen trust. In the long run, emotional building relies on polite communication. If we can timely pay attention to the sensitivity of emerging market consumers to emotional interactions such as holiday care, we can improve customer loyalty to the brand(Jin Hongxia,2020)[6].

In dispute resolution scenarios, the principle of politeness becomes the underlying logic for maintaining customer relationships. In the face of high conflict events such as cross-border returns or logistics delays, language prioritizing empathy, clear attribution of responsibility, and compensatory measures can effectively reduce the negative review rate.

In cross-border e-commerce communication, the implementation of language strategies based on Leech's Politeness Principle faces multiple challenges due to cultural cognitive differences, the absence of nonverbal signals, and the limitations of virtual interaction.

First, discrepancies in cultural values may lead to misinterpretations of the Tact Maxim and Generosity Maxim. For instance, indirect expressions in low-context cultures risk being perceived as ambiguity, while excessive modesty might undermine trust in professionalism. Second, the asynchronous nature and text-based format of online interactions weaken the emotional efficacy of the Sympathy Maxim, making it difficult to replicate the empathetic connections inherent in face-to-face communication through text alone.

Additionally, balancing the Approbation Maxim and Agreement Maxim proves challenging: overly positive feedback may be dismissed as formulaic marketing rhetoric, while downplaying disagreements could distort critical information—both potentially raising doubts about communicative sincerity among cross-cultural audiences.

Finally, adapting the six maxims of the Politeness Principle to commercial objectives requires meticulous calibration. Strategies must avoid both cultural insensitivity that sparks conflict and excessive localization that fractures brand consistency. These challenges stem from the need for dynamic recalibration of politeness norms across cultural and digital contexts—preserving ethical linguistic standards while reconciling business efficiency with relationship-building. This demands heightened cultural sensitivity and strategic flexibility from cross-border e-commerce practitioners.

III. PROBLEMS OF ENGLISH COMMUNICATION IN CROSS-BORDER E-COMMERCE

This chapter, grounded in Leech's Politeness Principle theoretical framework, employs a hybrid methodology:(1)Interviews with 10 foreign trade staff members from 5 cross-border e-commerce enterprises, documenting multiple communication failure cases; (2)Corpus analysis of authentic customer service dialogues from platforms including Amazon Seller Forum, eBay Dispute Center, Reddit, and Trustpilot, with a focus on conflict scenarios. It systematically analyzes three major problems faced by foreign trade staff in English communication within cross-border e-commerce: lack of cultural adaptability, insufficient information transparency, and ineffective trust maintenance.

3.1 Lack of Cultural Adaptability

The manifestation of cultural adaptation deficiency is that foreign trade staff fail to dynamically adjust language strategies and content based on the customer's cultural background, religious beliefs, and taboo customs during the communication process, resulting in ineffective information transmission, lack of emotional resonance, and even cultural conflicts. Its essence lies in the insufficient cross-cultural cognitive ability of foreign trade staff.

According to the interview,when communicating with customers, foreign trade staff

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often use inappropriate communication methods due to ignoring the context in which the customer is located. When communicating with high context cultural clients, foreign trade personnel often make mistakes in using direct expressions commonly used in low context, such as using rigid SVO sentence structures, omitting necessary emotional foreshadowing, such as ignoring greetings to family or holidays, and directly using negative expressions(Zhao Wantong,2023)[5]. Such behavior will be seen as rude and indifferent, seriously damaging the trust foundation established by both parties and leading to a sharp decline in customer willingness to cooperate. However, for low context cultural clients, there are opposite problems: excessive use of vague modifiers, lack of specific time or quantity expressions, and dilution of key information with redundant greetings. Such vague expressions can easily lead to information misunderstandings, causing economic losses to customers and weakening professional credibility.

Case 1: Shipment delayed. No solution.

In high context cultural communication,the root cause of the failure of this error case lies in the use of overly official statements to convey information, without expressing apologies or explaining the cause of the problem or remedial measures(Liu Huali,2020[11]. This seriously violates the three core principles of politeness: at the level of the Tact Maxim, using "No solution" to completely eliminate opportunities for communication with customers, failing to minimize customer losses; At the level of the Sympathy Maxim, completely ignoring the anxious impact of logistics delays on customer plans; At the level of the Generosity Maxim, refusing to proactively offer compensation responsibilities such as discounts or expedited plans.

Case 2: Many items are ready for shipping soon.

The root cause of the failure of this case lies in the incorrect use of vague language: specific numbers were not used to indicate the quantity of goods, such as order numbers and boxes, and verifiable time nodes were missing, such as dates and time zones, forcing low context cultural customers such as Germany and the United States to bear the additional cost of obtaining information and facing the risk of production interruption or storage loss due to unclear timeliness. This action violates two maxims of the Politeness Principle. At the level of the Tact Maxim, the fuzzy quantifier "many" and the time word "soon" significantly increase the customer's understanding burden and fail to minimize their decision-making cost; At the level of the Generosity Maxim, this case refuses to provide key logistics data.

Meanwhile, foreign trade staff said that they often overlook the gap between their own mastery of professional terminology and that of their clients.

Case 3: Your container is FCL at CY.

The core issue of this error case lies in the improper use of professional terminology and the neglect of customer needs. There are two main shortcomings in the description of the case: on the one hand, industry terms such as "FCL"(full container load) and "CY"(container yard) are used without explanation, assuming that customers have equal professional knowledge, which may actually cause comprehension barriers; On the other hand, incomplete information dissemination and lack of specific information that customers are most concerned about, such as clear delivery time windows, force customers to ask additional questions in order to obtain complete information. This way of expression violates both the Sympathy Maxim and Agreement Maxim: it fails to understand the practical operational difficulties that customers may face during the pick-up process (such as the need to contact freight forwarders or arrange truck transportation on their own), and unilaterally uses industry terminology without considering the customer's professional knowledge level, failing to establish an effective communication foundation. This communication method can easily lead to confusion and dissatisfaction among customers, affecting the smooth development of business relationships.

In addition, from the interview,foreign trade staff may also fail to communicate with customers from different religious backgrounds due to offending their religious taboos. In Islamic cultural exchange, the use of words related to pigs is taboo, and conveying good news with a purple background (because purple symbolizes mourning) and collecting payments during Ramadan (when commercial activities need to be reduced) both constitute serious disrespect and violate the Tact Maxim and the Sympathy Maxim. For customers of Indian culture, promoting cowhide products would desecrate their sacred animal faith, which would violate the Approbation Maxim. When it comes to Buddhist culture, using red markers to delay notification or using Buddha statue elements for promotion is considered offensive and violates the Tact Maxim. Regarding Christian culture, sending reminder emails during Christmas or ignoring Easter reply delays (the holiday is

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essentially a time for family reunions) will be seen as extremely disrespectful and a violation the Generosity Maxim(Li Zhilin,2024)[2]. The essence of these taboos is that foreign trade personnel subconsciously apply their cultural habits to customers, ultimately leading to an irreversible collapse of trust.

3.2 Insufficient Information Transparency

Insufficient information transparency manifests as passive waiting for customers to inquire about key information, which is scattered across multiple pieces of information and needs to be pieced together by customers themselves. Additionally, foreign trade staff said in the interview that they believe that customers understand professional terminology or industry rules, but this illusion results in slower response time and increased communication costs. Its essence is the unilateral communication of foreign trade staff, making customers to search for effective information on their own.

Case 4: We might adjust the delivery date.

This case did not explain the reasons for the adjustment, such as customs delays or inventory issues, failure to provide estimated new dates, failure to assess the impact on customer production plans, and failure to specify the next update timeline. This behavior further exacerbates customer anxiety, manifested as neither actively providing alternative solutions (such as air freight options) or compensation commitments, nor forcing customers to repeatedly inquire about specific details, essentially transferring communication costs to the other party. This case violates four major principles simultaneously: the Tact Maxim (failure to minimize the risk of customer loss), the Generosity Maxim (reluctance to provide solution resources), the Sympathy Maxim (ignoring the damage to the customer's production chain caused by adjustments), and the principle Agreement Maxim (unilateral decision-making deprives customers of their participation rights), ultimately leading to the destruction of business trust relationships.

Case 5: Customs rejection: HS code 8708.29 invalid.

This error case is manifested as a serious lack of key information: the customs refused to notify only stating “HS code 8708.29 invalid”, but did not explain the specific reasons for the invalid code (such as classification errors, format inconsistencies, or usage deviations), nor did they provide correction guidance (such as correct coding suggestions or update processes), impact assessment (such as the consequences of customs clearance delays), or next steps (such as contact windows or time limits), forcing the customer to passively inquire and integrate relevant information on their own. This communication reflects the foreign trade officer's wrong belief that the customer understands professional terminology and unilaterally let the customer to collect relevant information on their own. From the perspective of politeness principle analysis, this statement violates four major branches: the Appropriateness Maxim (failure to minimize the risk of economic losses to customers), the Generosity Maxim(reluctance to invest resources to provide alternative solutions), the Sympathy Maxim(ignoring the destructive pressure of invalid codes on customer supply chains), and the Agreement Maxim(unilateral notification without seeking consensus through negotiation), ultimately exacerbating the crisis of trust.

Case 6: We guarantee fast shipping!

This case has serious deficiencies in terms of information transparency: the promise of “fast shipping” does not clearly define the specific time standard for “fast” (such as 3 days or 3 weeks), nor does it specify remedial measures or compensation plans in case of breach, resulting in customers being unable to accurately judge service reliability. This vague expression violates the Tact Maxim principle as it fails to minimize the logistics risks and economic losses that customers may face; At the same time, violating the Generosity Maxim, refusing to invest resources to clarify safeguard terms, and completely transferring logistics risks to customers.

3.3 Failure in Trust Maintenance

The core of the failure to maintain trust relationships lies in the lack of reciprocal relationships between platforms and customers in cross-border e-commerce, mainly manifested as platforms unilaterally considering their own interests without considering customers. The core of the inability to maintain trust relationships lies in the lack of reciprocal relationships between platforms and customers in cross-border e-commerce, mainly manifested as platforms unilaterally considering their own interests without considering customers. Some foreign trade staff mentioned in interviews that they would enforce unequal terms through rule hegemony (such as mandatory return policies), create false promises through emotional fraud (such as exaggerated advertising), or use responsibility transfer as a strategy (such as transferring customer complaints)

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to gain more benefits for themselves.(Ma Shuang,2024)[1].

Case 7: Our factory is the best in Asia.

The abuse of superlative adjectives in this case without providing objective data support (such as production capacity, yield, or industry ranking) has raised fundamental doubts among customers about the credibility of the information; At the same time, "best in Asia" implies a tendency to belittle other manufacturers in the region, ignoring existing cooperative relationships that customers may have and exposing a lack of understanding of the complexity of the supply chain, as customers may have worked with other high-quality factories. Simultaneously,this case violates branches of the Politeness Principle: violating the Modesty Maxim by subjectively asserting self praise, which can arouse customer suspicion; violating the Tact Maxim due to potential disparagement of existing partners by customers, resulting in rudeness.

Case 8: Returns accepted within 7 days.

The 7-day return policy described in this case has serious flaws: the time limit is too short and does not consider cross-border logistics, which can take a long time. At the same time, this clause lacks flexibility and key information is missing (process, shipping cost, refund time), resulting in consumer rights being compromised. From a communication perspective, it violates four principles of politeness: failure to understand the customer's situation (the Appropriateness Maxim), unwillingness to bear reasonable costs (the Generosity Maxim), disregard for reasonable return reasons (the Sympathy Maxim), and unilateral imposition of terms (the Agreement Maxim).

Case 9: The issue was caused by your improper use. Our product has no defects.

The core issue of this case is that the foreign trade staff directly attributes the problem to the customer ("your improper use") through language, and even if the customer makes operational mistakes, public blame can still trigger negative emotions. At the same time, it arbitrarily claims that the product is "no defects" without providing any testing evidence, showing a posture of shirking responsibility. This communication method denies the customer's ability and ignores the authenticity of the problem. At the same time, this case directly accuses the customer of the problem, damages the customer's face, and violates the Tact Maxim; Refusing to take on basic responsibilities such as testing or exchanging goods violates the Generosity Maxim; Completely ignoring the customer's anxiety about encountering a malfunction violates the Sympathy Maxim.

IV. PRAGMATIC STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNICATION OF FOREIGN TRADE STAFF BASED ON POLITENESS PRINCIPLE

This chapter proposes relevant pragmatic strategies based on politeness principles to address various issues of violating politeness principles in online English communication in Chapter 3 interviews and platform corpus cases.

4.1 Context-Adaptive Politeness Strategy

Cross cultural context adaptation strategy is to flexibly adjust communication methods based on the characteristics of different cultures, so that people from different cultural backgrounds can understand each other and reduce misunderstandings. The essence of this strategy is to balance cultural differences between both parties through language and thinking adjustments, making communication effective without harming harmony. Foreign trade personnel can effectively solve communication barriers and other problems caused by the misuse of words that are originally applicable to one culture but cannot adapt to another culture, as mentioned in the interview in Chapter 3, through this strategy. In cross-border e-commerce online communication platforms, foreign traders need to accumulate sufficient cultural knowledge, religious beliefs, and taboos from different countries in order to successfully fulfill orders.

For clients from low context cultures such as Germany and the United States, they prefer the subject verb object (SVO) basic framework and should avoid the vague modifications commonly seen in high context cultures(Ruan Simei & Liu Junbing,2022)[7]. Therefore, when communicating with customers from low context cultures, foreign traders should use subject verb object sentence structures and appropriate quantifiers (such as time quantifiers and quantity quantifiers) when responding to customer logistics or order information to ensure the accuracy of information and prevent customers from incurring economic or time consumption due to guessing vague words, which reflect the Tact Maxim.

Example 1: Payment confirmation required within 24 hours to ensure June 5th delivery.

In order confirmation, direct statements like this utilize explicit timelines to replace ambiguous phrasing so that foreign trade staff can save unnecessary time or costs.

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However,when interacting with high context cultural clients in Japan or the Middle East, they place more emphasis on emotional building and prioritize the principle of relationship building. Before formal communication, they need to ask about their family's recent situation or holiday wishes to bridge the gap between the two parties. They prefer indirect expression and do not like direct negation(Song Chengcheng,2021)[9]. Therefore, according to the Sympathy Maxim, when communicating with high context clients, foreign trade personnel should prioritize bridging the gap between themselves and the clients, and avoid using overly absolute words on this basis.

Example 2: Your satisfaction drives our commitment (emotion) → Customs clearance requires supplementary documents (fact) → May we assist in preparing the required files? (collaboration)

By applying three-part structure like above, foreign trade staff can effectively preserve client dignity while advancing issue resolution in logistics delay scenarios.

Due to the difference in professional knowledge between customers and foreign trade personnel according to interviewees, when a certain trade term is understood by the foreign trade personnel but not by the customer, the foreign trade personnel mistakenly believe that the customer also understands the trade term and naturally do not explain it when communicating with the customer, directly sending out the trade term, which has caused customer dissatisfaction. Foreign trade staff should first consider which level of professional terminology should be used based on the customer's level of professional knowledge when using trade terms(Zhao Wantong,2023)[5]. If the customer has a high level of expertise, they can directly issue trade terms. If the customer has a low understanding of trade terms, they can communicate with them by converting them into sentences related to their daily life, this method of adjusting strategies based on the customer's professional level can minimize the cost of understanding others, maximize the efficiency of information reception, and comply with the Tact Maxim.

Example 3: API integration failure.

The sentence can be reconstructed as “temporary disconnection between ordering and inventory systems”, which clarifies technical malfunctions for non-specialists through functional specificity. Meanwhile, when interpreting international trade clauses, “force majeure clauses” may be rephrased as “unforeseen circumstances like natural disasters or pandemics may affect delivery schedules” anchoring legal concepts in relatable scenarios. Such linguistic transformations ensure informational professionalism while mitigating comprehension gaps caused by terminological barriers.

In terms of religious taboos, some respondents stated that they sometimes experience communication failures due to unfamiliarity with different countries or religions. Therefore,when communicating with customers of different religions, foreign trade personnel need to adjust their communication strategies based on each customer's different religious beliefs and taboos. For example, when conveying information, foreign traders should pay attention to the prohibition of pig graphics and derivative designs in Islamic culture, while the prohibition of cowhide product labeling in Hindu culture. When it comes to color patterns in communication, foreign trade personnel also judge whether to choose patterns of that color based on the customer's background. For Buddhism, as red symbolizes celebration, it should not be used to label negative information; Purple is considered a mourning color in Islam(Liu Yaqiong,2023)[4], so it should be avoided when communicating. This approach of actively removing religious sensitive symbols to avoid triggering cultural conflicts minimizes offense to others' values, maximizes cultural sensitivity, and follows the Tact Maxim.

4.2 Information Transparency Compensation Strategy

Information transparency mechanism is a systematic approach aimed at compensating for information loss caused by professional terminology, cultural differences, or media restrictions by actively providing supplementary information and eliminating blind spots in cross-cultural or knowledge asymmetric communication scenarios. The essence of the information transparency compensation strategy is the act of actively disclosing key information in exchange for customer trust, and making a reward through institutional design. This strategy mainly addresses communication failures caused by foreign trade personnel mechanically responding to customers, trust crises caused by customers' low understanding of logistics information, and the handling of different cultural compensation mechanisms.

Example 4: Your shipment EX123 has departed Frankfurt Hub (14:30 CET). Next status update within 3 hours via DHL Tracking link: [direct URL]

In addition to the standardized notification

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that like this, an explanatory statement should be added: "To ensure you have full visibility, our system auto updates every 90 minutes. Would you wish to check specific details earlier, our logistics team remains at your proposal via WhatsApp Business+49 123 456 789." This approach maximizes the reflection of logistics information to customers by establishing a precise time node (Central European Time Mark) and physical node (Frankfurt Hub), eliminating customers' doubts about unclear understanding of logistics information, and reflecting service proactivity through humanized supplementary terms. This strategy minimizes the decoding cost of customer information, maximizes information transparency, reflects the Tact Maxim, and provides a 24-hour exclusive logistics channel, reflecting the Generosity Maxim.

Example 5: We will provide responsive customer service.

Instead of using the above sentence, it is more reasonable to use "Ensure response time within 12 hours, upgrade to senior manager for handling after 24 hours". This formulation enables customers to perceive that foreign trade personnel are also concerned about their situation and eager to help customers solve problems(Jin Hongxia,2020)[6]. This responds to the Sympathy Maxim. According to the Generosity Maxim, compensation clauses can be integrated (such as "compensation of $10 for each delayed response event") to transform unilateral commitments into mutually binding agreements, which can gain the trust of customers.

When customer complaints arise due to logistics delays caused by technical issues, the initial response should prioritize cultural consistency: "We truly understand the frustration caused by delayed shipments" (the East Asian market may need to add honorific suffixes' - san' or '- sama' to Japanese letters). This approach of using emotional resonance to alleviate negative customer emotions is in line with the Sympathy Maxim. Secondly, technical explanations must be easily understandable to customers in order to ensure information transparency matches their cognitive level and reduce comprehension barriers(Hu Mingyin & Wang Yang,2021)[8], such as not using jargon: "Delayed customs clearance is due to HS code misclassification, which has been corrected through priority processing", which reflects the Agreement Maxim. At the end, it ends with compensation, such as "30 USD account points+free shipping for orders", which not only solves the immediate loss but also motivates customers to participate again in the future, following the Generosity Maxim.

When adopting the information transparency compensation strategy, it is also necessary to adopt different compensation methods for customers in different regions. For Latin American clients, substituting monetary compensation with extended return windows (e.g., 60-day returns instead of 30 days) often better aligns with local commerce norms. Because Latin American consumers generally prefer a sufficient product experience period, and a 60 day return period can alleviate the regret caused by impulsive purchases, enhance shopping security, and Latin American consumers value service flexibility more than immediate monetary compensation(Zhao Wantong,2023)[5]. Adopting this compensation method can better meet the needs of local people, which follows the Sympathy Maxim. On the contrary, in the German market, there is a greater emphasis on regulatory compliance in explaining the process of returns, such as "compliance with EU Customs Law § 26A". This approach of listing specific regulations can enhance credibility and make customers consciously comply with relevant regulations. This strategy resolves disputes by ensuring that customers comply with consistent regulations, reflecting the Agreement Maxim.

4.3 Trust Preservation Framework Strategy

The trust preservation framework strategy is a practical method for foreign trade staff to establish and consolidate customer trust through a series of language and action designs when communicating with cross-border e-commerce customers. Its core is to use polite, transparent, and timely communication to reduce customer uncertainty and dissatisfaction, thereby maintaining long-term trust relationships. This strategy addresses the issues identified in Section 3.1. By applying this strategy, conflicts between platform policies and customer rights, as well as issues such as customer distrust caused by excessive praise or modesty from foreign trade personnel, can be resolved.

Example 6: Under our global warranty policy, we regret replacements aren't feasible after 90 days. However, as a compensatory concession, we offer:Free accessory replacement or 30% discount on a new purchase with priority shipping.

While clearly conveying policy restrictions, it is also crucial to provide empathetic alternatives based on the Sympathy Maxim, such as free replacement of accessories (chargers, batteries, etc.) or priority shipping, with a 30% discount on

newly purchased products. This can soften the rigidity of the policy by expressing "we sincerely regret this restriction, but provide compensatory goodwill measures" in order to gain customer trust.

Example 7: Orders cannot be canceled after shipment.

It can be rephrased as "we will immediately initiate return authorization upon confirming logistics status, with an option to intercept parcels at the next hub for a $15 fee in urgent cases",which thereby reduces client frustration by creating actionable pathways according to the Tact Maxim.

Example 8: You're the most professional buyer we've ever met!

In cross-border e-commerce communication, excessive use of praise by foreign trade staff may backfire and weaken customer trust(Liu Huali,2020). The use of exaggerated adjectives ("most professional") in the original sentence violates the authenticity principle of praise standards and can easily trigger customers to question the sincerity of foreign trade personnel. After revision, it is "We appreciate your detailed specifications, this helps us provide precise solutions." By emphasizing the specific behavior of customers and replacing subjective evaluations with facts, it not only conveys respect but also maintains professionalism, in line with the Approbation Maxim.

Example 9: We are the best supplier in China with no competitors.

This sentence excessively boasts of its own corporate strength by using superlative modifiers, and lacks data support, which can easily lead to customer questioning and a decrease in trust in foreign trade personnel. It can be changed into "As a Top 10 exporter verified by China Customs (2023 data), we specialize in precision machining with 98.7% on-time delivery rate." By replacing subjective evaluations with authoritative data, it not only demonstrates strength but also maintains objectivity(Li Zhilin,2024)[2], making it easy to gain customer trust and conforming to the Modesty Maxim.

V. CONCLUSION

5.1 Summary

This study investigates the application of Leech's Politeness Principle in English communication within cross-border e-commerce, exploring the commonalities among cross-cultural pragmatics, digital trade, and global business. The study first established the theoretical basis of politeness theory and conducted background analysis on its relevance to cross-border e-commerce communication, emphasizing the communication barriers caused by different cultures and the unique challenges brought by foreign traders' inability to accurately convey emotions due to pure text communication on cross-border e-commerce online communication platforms. Through a mixed-methods approach, including empirical data collection and analysis, the study identifies critical issues in English communication, such as cultural misinterpretations, information asymmetry, and trust deficits, which hinder transactional efficiency and stakeholder rapport. This study identified key issues in English communication, such as offending customers due to a lack of understanding of their country or religion, losing their trust due to humility or confidence, and triggering customer inquiries owing to imprecise or inadequate communication or information transmission, by using methods including interviews and collecting language materials on different cross-border e-commerce platforms for analysis. These issues hinder transaction efficiency and the establishment of long-term cooperative relationships between foreign traders and customers.

Based on these findings, this study proposes three pragmatic strategies rooted in the principle of politeness: cross-cultural context adaptation, which advocates adjusting language politeness to conform to specific communication styles for specific cultures; Information transparency compensation aims to reduce ambiguity by compensating for information and eliminating cross-cultural or knowledge asymmetry between both parties; The trust protection framework aims to enhance the stability of the relationship between buyers and sellers in their interactions. These strategies collectively improve communication efficiency, reduce transaction friction, and provide reference opinions for foreign trade personnel in online English communication for cross-border e-commerce.

5.2 Research Limitations

Although this study provides critical insights into the application of politeness strategies in cross-border e-commerce communication, there are several limitations. Firstly, the research scope is limited to pure text communication from limited platforms and does not include new applications of politeness principles in different communication methods such as live streaming, email, language, etc. Secondly, the reliance on written data

overlooks nonverbal elements such as intonation, visual cues, or paralinguistic features (such as emoticons), which play important roles in digital cross-cultural communication. Thirdly, although the proposed strategy emphasizes cross-cultural adaptation, the analysis broadly categorizes cultural frameworks (such as high context cultures and low context cultures), which may oversimplify subtle regional or subcultural differences.

In addition, this study has several important limitations: the experimental environment is too idealized and only reflects common problems encountered by foreign trade personnel in English communication on cross-border e-commerce platforms, making it difficult to reflect other rare problems that occur on online platforms. Secondly, the number of interviewees in the study is relatively small and lacks sufficient quantitative data support. In addition, the subjective reports of the respondents may have modification or memory bias. These shortcomings suggest that in the future, it is necessary to expand the scope of research platforms and conduct surveys and research on multiple interviewees.

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Appendix

The following are the questions involved in interview with foreign trade staff:

1) When communicating with clients from different cultural backgrounds (such as Europe, America, the Middle East, Southeast Asia), do you adjust your politeness strategies in English expression? Please share real cases of cultural differences leading to misunderstandings of “appropriateness” (such as request wording, suggestion tone), and how to ultimately correct communication methods?

2) How to compensate for the lack of nonverbal symbols (such as facial expressions and tone) in pure text communication to convey empathy (such as handling complaints and logistics delays)? Please provide specific sentence structures or vocabulary strategies (such as mood markers, exclamation marks).

3) Cross border e-commerce often emphasizes technical parameters (such as “API integration” and “logistics cycle”), but excessive terminology appears rigid. How to balance “professionalism” and “customer friendly language”? Does excessive humility (such as frequent use of “possible” and “uncertain”) weaken customer trust?

4) Platforms often force the use of promotional language (such as “bestsellers” and “limited inventory”). Does the customer question the authenticity of 'excessive praise'? Please describe a case where 'forcibly agreeing with customer viewpoints' led to subsequent conflicts.

5) How to express “maintain rules” and “avoid confrontation” in English when customer needs conflict with platform policies (such as return disputes)? Please share successful or failed language strategy cases (such as conditional clauses, passive voice).

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6) Does the platform's emphasis on "instant response rate" force you to simplify polite expressions (such as omitting greetings or getting straight to the topic)? Please give an example of an incident where efficiency oriented communication caused customers to perceive "rudeness".