

DEVELOPING PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE
IN THE COLLEGE ENGLISH CLASSROOM IN CHINA

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Abstract

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Now in China, from kindergarten to college, English is the first foreign language studied in China. Since China joined the World Trade Organization and won its bid for the 2008 Olympics, there are more and more bilingual kindergartens emerged and Chinese Ministry of Education lowered the grade level for beginning English instruction from Grade 5 to Grade 3 and instructed English as the compulsory course for college students. Each year, vast numbers of Chinese students are graduating from colleges with some degree of English proficiency and English is becoming a part of everyday life for the young people. So communication in English for Chinese students is more and more important and necessary than ever in China now. While many college students even have studied English for many years, they don't know how to achieve cross-cultural communication properly. The situation is attributable to their lack of pragmatic competence. Pragmatic competence refers to the knowledge of a pragmatic system and the ability to use it appropriately. Learners with pragmatic competence should be able to "use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context (Thomas, 1983, p.92)." The keys to the concept are "context" and "appropriateness". How to change the situation and develop college students' pragmatic competence to help them achieve cross-culture communication in order to cultivate more and more talents to meet the need of the development of society in

China? It is a great challenge for our college English teachers. The paper firstly gives a discussion of the meaning of pragmatic competence in EFL communication. Then explains why it is crucial to cross-culture communication. In the following, it explores the relationship between L1 and L2 in developing pragmatic competence. Finally it provides some suggestions on how to developing students' pragmatic competence in college English classrooms in China.

Key Words: developing pragmatic competence, cross-culture communication,
suggestions

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Introduction

With the progress of modern society and the development of global economy, people from all over the world have more corporation than ever in many fields, such as politics, economy and culture, they communicate more frequently than ever. More and more people with fluent English, especially the people with fluent oral expressions who can achieve cross- culture communication properly in life are increasingly in demand in China now. After joining the World Trade Organization and won the bid for 2008 Olympic Games, English is learned by students as the first foreign language from kindergartens to colleges in China. No matter personal or professional needs, the reason for people's learning is that they learn English to qualify for education abroad, to achieve cross-cultural communication with colleagues in international companies, or to travel abroad and so on.

While at colleges, many students want to pass CET4 (college English Test Band 4) and CET6 (college English Test Band 6), which may help them find a good job after graduation in the future. They pay more attention to reciting English words and grammars. Meanwhile in order to help the students pass CET4 or CET6, many college students use traditional Grammar-Translation method, by focusing on grammar rules, getting the students to memorize the rules and literal meaning of words, not on the language contextual usage. Even learning English for many years, they don't know how to communicate with native speakers, some of them dare not open their mouths in public. They can't achieve cross-culture communication for their "Dumb English" (Wen, 2013). As we all know, language is the primary medium for transmitting among its speakers to convey a culture's beliefs, values, norms, and worldview. It functions as a tool for communication and an

indicator of culture's social relationship and their manifestations. English isn't an exceptional one. English is both a language and tool for EFL learners to exchange their thoughts and communicate with English speakers. For the strange phenomenon of "Dumb English" in some colleges, how to help college students achieve cross-culture communication and cultivate more and more talents to meet the need of the development of the society in China? It's still a great challenge for college English teachers. In order to achieve communication, Hymes (1974) said that the learners should have a kind of ability-- communicative competence, especially pragmatic competence. Pragmatic competence refers to the knowledge of a pragmatic system and the ability to use it appropriately. Learners with pragmatic competence should be able to "use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context" (Thomas, 1983, p.92).

Statement of the Problem

With the progress of modern society and economical development in China, more and more talents, especially those who can achieve cross-culture communication in English, are increasingly in demand. More and more people think learning English is more important than ever, English has been the first foreign language for people from kindergartens to universities to learn in China. But there's a strange phenomenon in China. Most of them just pay much attention to recite English words and grammars. They don't know how to communicate with foreigners with their poor oral English properly in their life. We call them studying "Dumb English" (Wen, 2013). Many of the EFL college students just wanted to get high academic scores or pass CET4 or CET6, so they specialized in memorizing grammars and English words, they neglected how to achieve cross-culture communication in their

learning. In order to help them realize the importance of pragmatic competence in cross-culture communication and cultivate more talents to satisfy the development of society in China. The study will answer the following questions:

1. What is pragmatic competence?
2. Why is pragmatic competence crucial in cross-culture communication?
3. Can L1 affect the development of pragmatic competence in L2 (EFL)?
4. How can we develop college students' pragmatic competence in classrooms in China?

Definition of Terms

1. Dumb English

It is a result of over-emphasis on grammar. In language teaching, especially in a foreign language teaching in China, it happens mostly with English teaching at secondary school level. Instead of focusing on developing students' skills of using the language for communication, too much attention has been laid upon teaching grammar for decades (Wen, 2013).

2. Pragmatic competence

It refers to the knowledge of a pragmatic system and the ability to use it appropriately. Learners with pragmatic competence should be able to "use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context (Thomas, 1983, p.92)". The key to define the concept are "context" and "appropriateness".

3. Illocutionary competence

It's the knowledge of pragmatic conventions for performing acceptable language function

(Bachman, 1990, p.90).

4. Sociolinguistic competence

The ability to be sensitive to regional and social language varieties; ability to be sensitive to difference in register; ability to produce and interpret utterance based on naturalness of language use and ability to understand cultural reference and figures of speech (Kamiya, 2006, p.74).

5. Pragmatic knowledge

The knowledge of the linguistic information available in a given language for realizing particular illocutions, of how to achieve speech acts, and the appropriate contextual use of the particular language's linguistic resources (Barron,2003). Pragmatic knowledge and skills that are essential to successful interpersonal communication, including knowledge of contextually situated vocabulary words, reutilized sentence patterns and extra linguistic behaviors, elaborations, conclusions and self and other corrections (Kim & Hall, 2002).

6. Cross-cultural communication

The interaction with speakers of other languages and cultures in a manner of appropriate utterance or response in one language or culture (Rizk, 2003). As Walton (1992) emphasized in truly foreign language learning and teaching, pragmatics or behavioral culture is key to the mastery of linguistic code. The negotiation of meaning, central to communicative competence, should be central to truly foreign language instructions.

7. Pragmatic failure

Here the term “failure” is used to account for cross-cultural problems or breakdowns, not necessarily from a learning point of view. Pragmatic failure refers to a misunderstanding of

the illocutionary force of an utterance or the problems with interactional conventions of target language and culture. (Wang, 1999, p.128)

8. Pragmalinguistic failure

A learner's deviation from the standard patterns of executing the act is called pragmalinguistic failure (Thomas, 1983).

9. Transfer

It refers to the fact that the first language may affect learning at all levels in L2 acquisition (Brown and Eisterhold, 2004).

10. Interlanguage

The language used by second language learners; an intermediate form that differs from both native and target languages (Brown and Eisterhold, 2004).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to make sense of the critical role of pragmatic competence in cross-culture communication for English learners and teachers in their learning and teaching process. They will pay more attention to developing the pragmatic competence in their future learning and teaching process and help them achieve cross-culture communication. It will also provide some suggestions on the development of pragmatic competence in EFL classroom at colleges. It is beneficial for English teachers to cultivate more and more talents to satisfy the need of the development of society in China.

Significance of the Study

More and more people who can achieve cross-culture communication in their work are increasingly in demand in the modern society in China now. The situation now in some

second colleges can't satisfy the need of the development in China. In order to cultivate more and more qualified talents who can achieve cross-culture communication in their life, the study will draw EFL teachers and learners' attention on developing pragmatic competence in their teaching and learning. It will also give a discussion of how to develop students' pragmatic competence in English classroom at colleges in China.

Methodology

According to my teaching experience at college, I have found that many college students paid more attention to reciting English words and grammar rules. Even if they have studied English for many years, they don't know how to open their mouths to communicate in their learning process, let alone communicate with native speakers in their future work. The reason for this is that they don't realize the importance of pragmatic competence in their learning and communication. Their lacking of pragmatic competence results in their dumb English studying in our teaching and their learning. It's a challenge for our EFL teachers at colleges to develop their pragmatic competence. So I chose the topic "Developing Pragmatic Competence in the College English Classroom in China". I'll do library research on the topic, and my literature review will answer the following research questions:

1. What is pragmatic competence?
2. Why is pragmatic competence crucial in cross-culture communication?
3. Can L1 affect the development of pragmatic competence in L2 and EFL?
4. How can we develop college students' pragmatic competence in classrooms in China?

Firstly I'll search on line for some sources to answer my research questions. Then

I'll read the materials and make notes to keep my secondary sources. Next I'll have a synthesis of the materials to get primary sources on my topic. The hypothesis is as following:
HA: We can cultivate college students' cultural awareness of target language with CLT in EFL classroom to develop their pragmatic competence.

Review of Literature

The Meaning of Pragmatic Competence

Farashaiyan & Hua (2012, p.33) said interacting with speakers of other languages and cultures need pragmatic competence as well as grammatical competence. Pragmatic competence in another language is significant to second (L2) and foreign language (FL) learners to communicate successfully in the target language (Kim & Hall, 2002). According to Bachman's (1990, p.90) CLA (communicative language ability) theory, he thought pragmatic competence is the knowledge of pragmatic conventions for performing acceptable language function. It mainly focuses on the relationship between what one says in his or her communicative acts and what functions he or she intends to perform through his/her utterances. It consists of illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence. The former can make a speaker to use his or her language to serve a variety of function and a hearer to interpret the illocutionary force of an utterance or discourse required of him or her. The latter means the knowledge of appropriateness based on the language use context in which he or she finds themselves when engaging in a communicative exchange (Kamiya, 2006, p.74). For pragmatic competence, Barron(2003,p.10) argued that it was the knowledge of the linguistic information available in a given language for realizing particular illocutions, the knowledge of the achieving of speech acts, and the knowledge of the appropriate

contextual use of the particular language's linguistic resources. It is the knowledge of how to make utterances properly in locally situated circumstances as well as (Davies, 1987). The integration of both linguistic and cultural knowledge. Pragmatic competence refers to the knowledge of a pragmatic system and the ability to use it appropriately in communication. Language learners with pragmatic competence should be able to “use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context” (Thomas, 1983, p.92). The key concepts which can define pragmatic competence, therefore, are “context” “appropriateness” and “communication”.

The Crucial Role of Pragmatic Competence in Cross-culture Communication

At colleges in China, regardless of students' major, English is a compulsory course for students to learn no matter what majors they are in. English is as the first foreign language learned by most people in China now, it's also an international language for global communication. While at some secondary colleges, many students focus on passing CET certificate to get a desirable job, a decent academic success and a certificate of graduation. Actually it is not an accurate gauge of students' English proficiency, as students with high CET scores cannot necessarily speak in English and their ability in reading and listening is very likely to be tenuous. As You (2010, p. 208) described it, “A typical college English curriculum in China works under the guidance of the College English Syllabus and is evaluated almost exclusively by the results of students' scores on the CET.” In such a curriculum, students' oral ability is poor and many teachers are predominantly concerned about teaching grammars and test-taking skills, instead of language skills for communication purposes. The result is that many college students have great difficulty in communicating

with native speakers after studying English for many years. Some of them even don't dare to speak with native speakers, for they don't know how to choose appropriate way and how to speak to them. Shu (2013, p.26) criticized the testing with college English teaching (CET) in China is that it lacks clear and realistic objectives. For many colleges, CET only serves the purpose of helping the students to pass college English Test Band 4 or Band 6, which means the most, students do not learn English for any practical purposes. As we all know language is used as a tool for communication. For English, Jenkins (2002, p. 85) said EFL is to use English as a "foreigner" to communicate with native speakers and the purpose of learning EFL is to gain the near-native competence. They don't know how to communicate in English because of their lack of the knowledge on actual speech use of idiomatic expressions and slang and not knowing which utterances are appropriate in the social situations. The ability to adjust one's speech to fit the situation in which it is called sociolinguistic competence. (Mizne, 1997), which is one of parts of pragmatic competence according to Bachman's theory (1990).

Rizk (2003) talked about the issue of appropriateness of the utterance and in one language and culture might be not the exact case in another language and culture or vice versa. Since language learners must deal with large amount of differences between native language and culture and their target language and culture, there may create inappropriate utterances and misunderstanding or even breakdowns in cross-cultural communication. For example, a Chinese saw off an American friend who would rush home at once.

A: Can't you stay a few more minutes with us? You see we all have a good time together.

B: Sorry, I'm afraid I must be off now. My girlfriend is waiting for me.

A: Ok. Walk slowly!

B: (confused)

In Chinese culture, people always show their enthusiasm by persuading their friend to stay longer. While in this situation, the American was urgent to go home to meet his girlfriend. The Chinese friend chose wrong expression, so he made a failure of illocutionary utterance, so the embarrassed situation emerged. Such failure of communication is called pragmatic failure. When pragmatic failure occurred, messages were incorrectly expressed or interpreted (Wang, 1999). Pragmatics plays a very important role in the production and perception of the language. Kim & Hall (2002, p.450) thought pragmatic knowledge and skills that are essential to successful interpersonal communication, including knowledge of contextually situated vocabulary words, reutilized sentence patterns and extra-linguistic behaviors, elaborations, conclusions and self and other corrections. That is why interlocutors should have enough pragmatic knowledge to produce and perceive the proper and intended speech acts based on the situation. Therefore, possessing pragmatic competence is one of the key factors in the cross-cultural communication.

The Relationship between L1 and L2 (or EFL)

Brown and Eisterhold (2004) thought there are at least two processes (transfer and interlanguage) in our L2 acquisition (or EFF). Our L1 always affect our L2 (or EFL) in all levels, the obvious example is our accent. When the learners get to a certain level of the target language (interlanguage), people who are learning a given language will make the same errors. Errors are predictable and obey the certain pattern. The same errors are directly

attributable to the learners' using similar cognitive/linguistic processes (Brown and Eisterhold,2004,p.83).In another important article, Taguchi(2007) did a research on examining development of pragmatic comprehension ability across time by testing 20 natives speakers and 92 Japanese college students of English. His findings suggested that exposure to the target language context and culture was not the only contributing factor in pragmatic development, the learners would be affected by their native competence. He also showed that pragmatic development in terms of speed and accuracy in comprehending implied meaning was related to the time in which the learners were experienced in foreign language context. It was the way in which learning was organized or fostered that enabled or hindered pragmatic development. The EFL learners in this study became more skilled at deriving implied speakers intentions over time because they could transfer L1-based inferential practice to L2 comprehension. While in Koike's (1989) study, he proved that the L2 classroom learners in their own country, their L1 socio-cultural rules could play an active role in L2 production, for these rules would control the syntax of the speech actual utterances. Even though the L1 pragmatic knowledge transferred to the L2 speech act situation caused learners to try to produce linguistic forms which they thought to be pragmatically appropriate to the context, many of them often recognized that the act was too difficult for their grammatical competence, and created a less appropriate but syntactically simple form. If inappropriate forms appear, we can regard these are attributable to pragmatic component (including L1) in their interlanguage, or as well as grammatical one. As a result, learners' pragmatic rules for politeness do not coincide with their limited ability on a grammatical and lexical level to communicate in cross-culture communication. From the above mentioned, we know that L1

can affect learner's pragmatic competence development greatly.

The Ways to the Development of Pragmatic Competence

Taking CLT as a Primary Teaching Method in EFL Classroom. Many teachers adopt traditional teaching method in EFL classroom, they focus on translation and teaching grammars. Obviously there's no much communication in these classes by the traditional teaching method. Communicative Language Teaching is a broad approach to language teaching. Brown (1994) describes six key words of CLT to better understand what it aims at: students-centered, cooperative, interactive, integrated, content -centered and task based. The role of the teacher is a facilitator who sets up communicative activities and an advisor in the process of activities. The target language is not only the objective but also a medium for classroom interaction. Games and activities are designed for students to communicate with each other. Target language is used in a real context and studied by students under any situations. The students can have real communication in EFL classrooms by teachers' CLT method. According to Taguchi's study (2007), classroom instruction of pragmatic comprehension could be beneficial for low proficiency learners. In terms of the teaching order, because the more conventional refusal items were found easier than to comprehend than less conventional optional items, the more conventional items should be introduced first.

Immersing Culture in Different Activities in EFL Classroom. We use language in order to tell others about our ideas, wishes, needs and experiences, to share our feelings, to understand the people around us, and for many other purposes. The selected words among the listeners considering the culture and people of the country where the language is spoken

(Bayyurt, 2013). Culture comprises a society's daily lifestyle, artistic works, language, religion, and traditions. Culture is continuously reconstructed in accord with knowledge and experience acquired as a result of interactions in different contexts (Baker, 2009).

Wolfson(1989,p.2) described the effects of different cultural context on language using as following: each community has its own unique set of conventions, rules, and patterns for the conduct of communication and these must be understood in the context of a general system which reflects the values and structure of society. So we can say culture is the most important factor which can affect the forms of language use. There many variance in cultural rules of speaking in different language; what is appropriate to say in one culture may be quite different in another culture. Even though the situations may be similar, the expressions aren't the same. That is why it is difficult for students to communicate in target language; the students have no awareness of these differences and use their expressions in their native culture to communicate in target culture. This causes the result that there are always misunderstanding and embarrassment in cross-cultural communication. In order to help students understand the difference between their own culture and target language culture, we can design different activities to contrast the two kind of culture and get the students engaged in sharing their thoughts and experience. For instance, role-play-Kamiya (2006, p.79-80) said that role-play is an effective way to develop students' pragmatic competence; the students can take different roles to act and interact verbally with target language in different situations. It can help the students acquire the right way to reach communication in their real life. Role-play is a learners-centered activity that calls for collaboration of interacting each other and there are communicative goals to be achieved by students, who

produce and interpret sentences for the exchange of society as well culture meaning.

Watching video materials is another effective way for students' development of pragmatic competence. Here video materials refer to original English videos which they combine and integrate the meaning-making resources of more than one semiotic modality- for example, language, gesture, movement, visual images, sound, and so on (Thibault, 2000). Authentic video materials can offer students genuine and correct English input. First, the video can provide students with authentic vocabulary, sentences and culture knowledge which the native speakers use and experience in their daily life, while in our traditional textbooks the language we learn is not commonly used by EFL speaker. The students can watch video materials which can provide native speakers' conversation in authentic situations. These videos not only evoke students' interest and motivate them to interact in English, but also teach them appropriate language use in conversations and dialogues. "The audio-visual methods will become more usable in language labs" (Wang, 2009, p.179). And Erickson (1996) advised that the students can study their own communicative experience and the nature and characteristics of social interaction in their target language so as to develop their L2 pragmatic competence. After watching video materials, we can make the students have a discussion of contrasting expressions and dialogues in the two different types of culture. For example, students might be asked to compare expressions like "you're careless about details sometimes and", "I'm afraid we're all careless about details sometimes" .Used in a conversation between a supervisor and an employee when the employee has made a mistake. The first expression is a direct complaint while the second is in general. In the context, the employee would understand it is a complaint about his performance. But the second is a

better way of making the complaint more polite and less offensive and it is more acceptable for a person in target language (Liu, 2008, p.84). Except for role-play and watching video materials, the teacher can teach students proverbs and sayings to develop their culture awareness in the target language.

Enriching the Knowledge of Speech Acts in EFL Classroom. Herk (2012, p.118)

claimed that speech acts are utterance of how to command, request, criticize, inform, warn, greet and so on in a certain group. Speech acts are the most obvious appearance in language use of varieties of culture. So in different culture, even in the same situation, the speech act may be quite different. For example, for the sentence "What a nice dress"! A Chinese may interpret it as a compliment and regard it as a request, "May I have a look at it"? While for an American, he/she may interpret as an attribution of wealth resulting in an answer. "This old thing? I've had it for a long time". This may contribute to the society's cultural value.

When Americans respond to a compliment, they frequently may show modesty by choosing to downplay the thing, for which newness is highly valued in American culture. A certain speech act and rules for how to give appropriate speech act may vary across cultures.

Because speech acts can carry a heavy social interaction load and can seriously offend people if not presented according to the proper form and under the proper situation (Mizne, 1997). So English teachers should give EFL learners more practice of speech acts in different circumstances and compare their usage in the two types of culture in classrooms. It will be beneficial to increase the students' awareness of the foreign language culture so that they can understand the target language in a better way. For this point, Fantini (1997) thought learning languages by comparing and contrasting the similarities and differences

between two cultures is a period of transition in which students awareness of the foreign language and the culture associated with that language increases. When teaching indirect refusals, teacher can highlight typical refusal patterns, emphasizing that these conventional features to help learners' comprehension. When teaching less conventional implications, the classroom teachers could take materials from movies and dramas into consideration. These sources are full of pragmatic input which conveys a variety of conversational situations. At the same time teachers could encourage learners to use contextual information, such as paralinguistic cues (e.g., intonation, tone of voice, pause length), background information and personal experience, to infer speakers' indirect meaning. These practices can help students recognize the situations what they do in Chinese and what they should be doing in English and develop their pragmatic competence in target language.

Summary

As discussed, pragmatic competence is the ability to speak properly under different situations in target language communication and the awareness of target culture and proper speech acts are two very important factors of pragmatic competence in cross-culture communication in L2 (EFL) acquisition. We can adopt CLT method in EFL classrooms to immerse the awareness of culture and cultivate students' speech acts in the process of developing their pragmatic competence. At the same time, we can use the relationship between L1 and L2 to help us develop students' pragmatic competence in our teaching process.

Conclusion and Recommendations

After the study, we get to know the situation of college students' English language

learning at some colleges in China. In order to change the situation and meet the development of globalization in China, the paper firstly give us an explanation of pragmatic competence in EFL learning and teaching, then analyzes the importance of pragmatic competence in cross-culture communication. We know L1 can affect L2 in the development of pragmatic competence and we can use the relationship to develop students' pragmatic competence and adopt some methods to develop their pragmatic competence in EFL classrooms according to Barron's (2003) theory. The development of pragmatic competence is still a long way for us to go, there are many ways for us to explore in our real teaching career.

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