

Chinese EFL Learners' Pragmatic Competence and Intercultural Sensitivity

Li Qi *

Graduate School PhD in English Language Studies, Lyceum of the Philippines University - Batangas, Batangas 4200, Philippines

* Corresponding author Email: risewickskali@gmail.com

Abstract: The objective of College English teaching is to develop students' comprehensive communicative competence, including pragmatic competence and intercultural sensitivity. Through the quantitative-descriptive research method, the study explored pragmatic competence and intercultural sensitivity of Chinese EFL learners and tested whether the respondents' pragmatic competence and intercultural sensitivity are significantly correlated with each other. The results reveals that Chinese EFL learners were at the intermediate level of overall pragmatic competence and intercultural sensitivity. The correlations between respondents' pragmatic competence and intercultural sensitivity were highly significant. The results of the study may give enlightenment on the cultivation of Chinese EFL learners' communicative competence.

Keywords: Communicative Competence; Intercultural Sensitivity; Pragmatic Competence.

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of globalization and the integration of economy around the world, the exchanges between countries are becoming increasingly frequent, and it is increasingly important to train international talents to meet the needs of international exchanges. Under this circumstance, College English Curriculum Requirements propose that the objective of College English is to develop students' ability to use English in a well-rounded way, so that in their future studies and careers as well as social interactions they will be able to communicate effectively, and at the same time enhance their ability to study independently and improve their general cultural awareness so as to meet the needs of China's social development and international exchanges. It can be seen that the objective of college English teaching is to develop students' overall communicative competence.

Pragmatic competence and intercultural sensitivity are two important indicators of communicative competence, which may influence the effect of cross-cultural communication [1]. Pragmatic competence refers to the ability to use language forms correctly in a certain context to carry out communicative functions and to follow the social rules of language use for proper communication [2], while intercultural sensitivity refers to the degree to which people understand, appreciate and accept cultural differences in the process of intercultural communication [3]. Intercultural sensitivity is a process of cognitive, emotional and behavioral development in cross-cultural communication.

Pragmatic competence and intercultural sensitivity are important components of cross-cultural communication ability, which have become research focuses of scholars in recent years. Scholars have applied the theory of cross-cultural competence to guide the second language culture teaching, cross-cultural education and training, which has certain reference significance for the current foreign language teaching and training in China.

2. Methods

2.1. Research Design

The study employed quantitative-descriptive method in hope of exploring the status quo and correlation among two variables of the pragmatic competence and intercultural sensitivity of the Chinese EFL learners in a local university in China. This study is descriptive for it described and interpreted the profile of respondents' English pragmatic competence and intercultural sensitivity. Meanwhile, it is also quantitative in nature as it collected primary data to acquire first-hand information by survey questionnaires. It also determined the correlations among Chinese English learners' pragmatic competence and intercultural sensitivity.

2.2. Participants

The respondents of the study were 322 freshmen, sophomores, junior and senior students from a local university in the central part of China. All students before being enrolled in this University have been learning English under the systemic instruction for at least 6 years.

The respondents were elected to complete the questionnaires at random. Four majors were chosen for the research: they are journalism, preschool education, computer science and mechanical design and automation major. There was total 2018 students from these four majors ranging from freshmen to senior students. The number of people the researcher calculated using the Raosoft online sample size calculator was 322(The margin of error is 5% and the confidence level is 95%). Therefore, a total of 322 questionnaires was distributed to the target respondents.

2.3. Instrument

This study employed the quantitative research tool of questionnaire as its main research instrument. The questionnaire consists four parts. The first part concerns the respondents' personal data, providing information about their sex, major, and grade levels. The self-assessment questionnaire in the second part is designed on the basis of CSE (China's Standards of English Language Ability). It has

two sub-scales: pragmatic comprehension and pragmatic expression. The third part of the questionnaire used to test grammatical competence is edited according to the scale of English Grammatical Competence for Chinese students. It has three sub scales in terms of form, meaning and use with 26 items altogether. And the fourth part is adopted from ISS, the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale designed by Chen & Starosta [4], which is a 24-item self-reporting measurement that contains five dimensions, namely interaction engagement,

respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment and interaction attentiveness.

In the pilot testing stage, all the modified indicators of questionnaire had the result of Cronbach $r > .700$, which means the test result of pragmatic competence and intercultural sensitivity was reliable and consistent.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 1. EFL learners' Pragmatic Competence

Indicators	Weighted Mean
Pragmatic comprehension	2.83
Pragmatic expression	2.65
Composite Mean	2.74

Legend: 3.50 – 4.00 = Strongly Agree; 2.50 – 3.49 = Agree; 1.50 – 2.49 = Disagree; 1.00 - 1.49 = Strongly Disagree

Table 1 presents the assessment on EFL learners' pragmatic competence in terms of pragmatic comprehension and pragmatic expression. The composite means of 2.74 reveals that the respondents agreed in general. Among the sub-scales cited, pragmatic comprehension with the mean of 2.83 scored higher than pragmatic expression with the mean of 2.65. The results show the respondents perform better in understanding the speakers' intentions than expressing appropriately under certain context in communication. Under the current exam-oriented teaching environment, instruction of English reading comprehension outweighs oral English teaching, leading to students' better pragmatic comprehension than pragmatic

expression.

The result is echoed by Huang [5] who took more than one hundred of non-English major freshmen from three parallel classes to investigate the level of college students' pragmatic competence and analyzed the factors that influence the development of college students' pragmatic competence. The results revealed that the students' pragmatic competence was in the average level. It was also found that students can better understand the speech acts that often appear in daily communication. However, their ability to speak and express themselves in formal situations is far from satisfactory. The results are consistent with this research.

Table 2. EFL learners' Intercultural Sensitivity

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Rank
Interaction Engagement	2.87	2
Respect for cultural differences	3.07	1
Interaction confidence	2.75	4
Interaction Enjoyment	2.66	5
Interaction attentiveness	2.83	3
Composite Mean	2.84	

Legend: 3.50 – 4.00 = Strongly Agree; 2.50 – 3.49 = Agree; 1.50 – 2.49 = Disagree; 1.00 - 1.49 = Strongly Disagree

Table 2 reveals the overall assessment of EFL learners' intercultural sensitivity. The composite mean of intercultural sensitivity of the respondents was 2.84, indicating that the respondents generally agreed on the above indicators. Among them, the dimension of "respect for cultural differences" got the highest weighted mean score of 3.07 and assessed as agreement, followed by "interaction engagement" with the weighted mean score of 2.87, then "interaction attentiveness" with the mean score of 2.83, ranking third, "interaction confidence" with the mean score of 2.75 and "interaction enjoyment" with the mean of 2.66, ranking last.

The respondents got the highest mean score in the sub-scale of "respect for cultural differences", indicating that a majority of students could show respect to the living manners and way of act of individuals from other cultural contexts during the intercultural interaction. This result is in line with the findings of studies conducted by Zhang [6], Hua [7] and Li [8]. Above all, the increasing global economy and culture integration progress offer students more opportunities to be exposed to foreign cultures in various ways. Through these ways, students can perceive various cultural differences. Furthermore, the cultivation of intercultural communicative competence is valued highly by more and more educators in recent years, which could be reflected in the compilation and

selection of teaching materials, diversity of teaching contents, and novelty of teaching methods. For example, college English textbook has relevant materials with abundant contents about cultural differences. In addition, after the publishing of the new curriculum standards, teachers may pay more attention to the introduction of English cultural knowledge.

The participants gain the relatively low score in the dimensions of "interaction enjoyment" and "interaction confidence", indicating that students neither gain adequate pleasure nor have enough confidence to deal with the sense of frustration and alienation caused by cultural differences. Such result is consistent with that of Li [9], and Wang [10]. This may be due to the learners' language barriers, shyness, fear of making mistakes, and different views on things, which make it difficult for them to reach a consensus when communicating with people from different cultures. For example, some students are introverted and tend to have cross-cultural anxiety or even cultural shock in cross-cultural communication. Sometimes they can't get a few words in because of the language barrier, and sometimes they will feel anxious when corrected in communication with foreigners. Over time, they will be afraid of difficulties and become timid, and feel nervous and cramped in communication, so the

pleasure of cross-cultural communication is low.

Meanwhile, most students lack an authentic English language environment and the ways of communicating with foreigners. It is also conformed to the results of the questionnaire. Due to the lack of experience in practical communication with foreigners, students have relatively poor oral English ability and pragmatic ability. Thus, students are likely to be anxious about making mistakes in intercultural communications, and even have a certain degree of intercultural anxiety. Many students state that they often feel

nervous and embarrassed when communicating with foreigners.

In addition, many teachers only emphasize on the introduction of English cultural knowledge, paying inadequate attention to cultivating the affective and behavioral aspects of intercultural communicative competence. Accordingly, students may have difficulty in communicating with foreigners and lack sufficient interaction confidence.

Table 3. Relationship between the EFL learners' Pragmatic Competence and Intercultural Sensitivity

Pragmatic Comprehension	<i>r-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>
Interaction Engagement	.609**	0.000
Respect for cultural differences	.516**	0.000
Interaction confidence	.571**	0.000
Interaction Enjoyment	.584**	0.000
Interaction attentiveness	.599**	0.000
Pragmatic Expression		
Interaction Engagement	.604**	0.000
Respect for cultural differences	.505**	0.000
Interaction confidence	.538**	0.000
Interaction Enjoyment	.569**	0.000
Interaction attentiveness	.546**	0.000

Legend: Significant at p-value < 0.01

Table 3 displays the association between EFL learners' pragmatic competence and intercultural sensitivity. It was observed that the computed r-values indicated a strong direct correlation and the resulted p-values were less than the alpha level. This means that there is significant relationship between the respondents' pragmatic competence and intercultural sensitivity, indicating that the more the learners are pragmatically competent, the better is their intercultural sensitivity.

With the increasing communication among countries around the world, a growing number of people realize that the ultimate goal of learning English is to achieve successful communication between different cultures. In addition to language competence, pragmatic competence and intercultural sensitivity are two important factors to measure cross-cultural communication competence, which cannot be ignored within the framework of intercultural communication competence training and are also the shortcomings of English teaching [1]. Pragmatic competence reflects intercultural action, then intercultural sensitivity presents the emotional level of human beings and it is the first priority to improve intercultural communication competence, because consciousness comes first and then action will change. Many scholars at home and abroad have conducted researches on pragmatic competence and intercultural sensitivity from various perspectives.

In terms of the correlation between intercultural sensitivity and pragmatic competence, Huang [1] investigated the relationships between pragmatic competence and intercultural sensitivity of senior English majors in China. The results showed that the level of both intercultural sensitivity and pragmatic competence of the respondents were at the medium level. In addition, it was also found that the intercultural sensitivity was highly correlated to the pragmatic competence, which is consistent with this study. It is also echoed by the study conducted by Liu, Qian and Li [11] who

reported the intercultural sensitivity of college students was correlated with their pragmatic competence, and the pragmatic competence of college students may affect their performance in intercultural communication activities.

From the results of this study, it is found that pragmatic competence is closely related to intercultural sensitivity, and intercultural sensitivity is a necessary and sufficient condition for pragmatic competence. The researcher believes that the cultivation of intercultural sensitivity can improve the application of pragmatic competence. This conclusion can be applied to English teaching and intercultural communication ability training, so that students can enhance their understanding of other cultures and customs in their minds.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the assessment of the respondents' pragmatic competence is at the middle level and their pragmatic comprehension is better than pragmatic expression. Meanwhile, the respondents are at an intermediate level in intercultural sensitivity, with the best performance in respect for cultural differences and the difficult part in interaction enjoyment. The correlations between respondents' pragmatic competence and intercultural sensitivity are highly significant.

According to the results of the study, most students have a high sense of respect for cultural differences. However, the inadequate pragmatic competence may lead to the low interaction confidence and enjoyment of students which is not conducive to the participation of the cross-cultural communicative activities. In English instruction, teachers may focus on pragmatic and cultural knowledge so as to stimulate students' interest in different cultures and enhance their confidence in communication, reaching the goal of enhancing their communicative competence in the end.

References

- [1] Huang, W. (2014). Correlation between intercultural sensitivity and intercultural pragmatic competence. Northeast Forestry University.
- [2] Chen X. (2009). A New Coursebook in Pragmatics. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- [3] Mekheimer, M.A. (2019). Developing and accessing the relationship between intercultural communication competence and intercultural sensitivity in the EFL classroom. *Journal of Research in Curriculum, Instruction and Educational Technology*, 8: 107-134.
- [4] Chen, G. M. & Starosta, W. J. (2000). The development and validation of the intercultural sensitivity scale. *Human Communication*, 3, 1-15.
- [5] Huang, B. (2021). The effects of explicit instruction on Chinese college students' English pragmatic competence. Guangdong University of Foreign Languages.
- [6] Zhang, F.J. (2019). The Application of the Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity in College English Teaching. *Journal of Heilongjiang Institute of Education*, 38(9), 147-149.
- [7] Hua, Y. (2020). A study on intercultural sensitivity and strategies of English majors in Ethnic colleges and universities. *Chinese educational technology and equipment*, 19:19-27.
- [8] Li, N. (2020). A study on the development of intercultural sensitivity in task-based English reading teaching. Shanghai Normal University.
- [9] Li, X.M. (2020). A study on intercultural sensitivity of senior high school students: A case study of a high school in Chongqing. Sichuan Normal University.
- [10] Wang, S. (2020). A survey of cross-cultural communication sensitivity of non-English major college students. *Think Tank Era*, 7: 240-242.
- [11] Liu, L, Qian, J. & Li, Z.M. (2015). Correlation analysis between intercultural sensitivity and pragmatic competence of college students. *Education teaching forum*, 32:98-99.