

An Investigation of the Non-English Majors' Pragmatic Competence*

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Abstract—Learning a foreign language means not only the cultivation of linguistic competence, but more importantly, the cultivation of pragmatic competence. Due to the poor pragmatic competence, pragmatic failures or even communication breakdown will be given rise to in real communication. The aim of this research is to investigate Non-English majors' pragmatic competence and explore the corresponding methods in raising their pragmatic competence. The result shows that their pragmatic competence is still of low level. According to the weaknesses and problems, the present author proposes some pedagogical suggestions aimed at developing the non-English majors' pragmatic competence.

Index Terms—non-English majors, pragmatic competence, pragmatic failure, linguistic competence

I. INTRODUCTION

Leech (1983) divides pragmatics into pragmalinguistics and sociolinguistics, accordingly pragmatic competence consists of pragmalinguistic competence and sociopragmatic competence. Pragmalinguistic competence is based on grammatical competence, and deals with the rules of language usage, and it includes not only the competence of correctly using the grammar rules to make sentences, but also the competence of appropriately employing the language form in a specific context in achieving a certain communicative goal. Sociopragmatic competence refers to the patterns of appropriately understanding and using utterances in interpersonal communication, such as the Cooperative Principle (CP) and the degree of appropriateness in a verbal exchange.

Pragmatic failure, a concept proposed by Jenny Thomas (1983), refers to the inability to understand what is meant by what is said. As Thomas (1983, p.97) puts it, "while grammatical error may reveal a speaker to be a less proficient language-user, pragmatic failure reflects badly on him/her as a person". To native speakers, the grammatical error appears to be superficial and the hearer takes little effort to understand an utterance with errors and has no difficulty in making allowance for it and thus the communication is likely to continue, while the hearer has not any reason to put up with pragmatic failure made by a non-native speaker who has good command of the foreign language.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

After Thomas (1983) put forward the theory of pragmatic failure, great interests have been aroused among scholars in China. Many Chinese scholars made great contributions in introducing the theory and integrating it with English teaching. Based on the researches on pragmatic failure, Chinese scholars are interested in how to avoid pragmatic failure and promote learners' pragmatic competence. The domestic studies on the two aspects are closely linked with each other. The studies on pragmatic failure stress three main issues, namely, classification of pragmatic failures; explanation of sources of pragmatic failure; implications on the instruction of English as a foreign language.

Huang Cidong (1984) first put forward the concept of "pragmatic error". By analyzing ten pragmatic errors in detail, he stated that learning a language, besides mastering its knowledge and skills, must highlight the different applications of linguistic forms in varied non-linguistic contexts.

HeZiran & Yan Zhuang (1986) made a quantitative research on pragmatic failures, focusing on pragmatic differences. It took the theoretical framework of Thomas and analyzed cross-cultural pragmatic differences in both pragmalinguistic and socio-pragmatic aspects. Its result showed that pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge is the main cause of pragmatic failure for Chinese learners, so they suggested that cross-cultural pragmatic knowledge should be taught in class.

Wang Dexing (1990) introduced the reasons of pragmatic failure and in which aspects Chinese learners tend to produce the most possible pragmatic failure. Probing into the process of cross-cultural communication, Wang put forward that pragmatic failure concern with both the cultural and linguistic conventions, and the differences between them in two cultures are the ultimate cause of it.

HongGang(1991) found that learners of high-level linguistic competence produce nearly as many pragmatic failures as those of low-level competence do, which demonstrates that good linguistic competence does not stand for good pragmatic competence. He draws the conclusion that pragmatic knowledge needs to be taught in order to advance

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pragmatic competence; otherwise pragmatic competence will stay unchanged. Since then, pragmatic failure and its related researches have been brought into a new phase. More and more researchers later set about the pursuit of pragmatic competence with pragmatic failure as a medium.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Objectives

This survey is carried out with three objectives.

- a. To investigate the current pragmatic competence of non-English major college students.
- b. To investigate the correlation between linguistic competence and pragmatic competence.
- c. To find out problems and weaknesses in the students' pragmatic competence according to the correct percentage of each item.
- d. To put forward some pedagogical implications according to the weaknesses reflected in the survey.

B. Subjects

Due to some objective limitations, it is difficult to choose the subjects by means of random sampling, so a convenience sampling is adopted instead. Convenience sampling, as the name suggests, means that elements are selected as the sample for the convenience of the researcher, or the researcher tends to choose subjects that are readily available (Wen Qiufang, 2001).

There are altogether 279 subjects participating in the present study. The subjects in this study involve 93 juniors from School of Information Science and Engineering, Shandong Normal University, 90 juniors from School of Computer Science, Dezhou College, and 96 juniors from College of Chinese Language and Literature, Shandong Normal University. They are respectively grouped as A, B and C. In group A, there are 54 subjects who have passed the College English Test Band 4 (CET4); the remaining 38 subjects are those who have not passed CET4. 35 of them are females and the other 58 are males. In group B, there are 43 subjects who have passed CET4, and the rest of the 37 subjects have not passed CET4; among them there are 36 females and 54 males. In group C, 59 subjects have passed CET4 and 37 have not passed CET4; and there are 62 females and 31 males. In summary, among the total 279 subjects, 156 of them have passed CET4, and there are 133 females and 146 males. They have similar English learning backgrounds; almost all of them began to learn English from Middle school and have learned English for 9 years by the time of the investigation.

C. Instruments

In this research, the questionnaire method, which can quickly produce desirable data and also can be easily controlled, is applied.

The questionnaire applied is composed of 20 multiple choice questions with brief explanation of the speaking context and status of both speakers given before each question. The testees are allowed to choose the most appropriate one from the listed choices. Due to the high reliability of the questionnaire developed by Prof. He Ziran (1987), it was chosen, selectively by deleting those questions out of date for the current days, as a source of the questions in the present questionnaire. And some questions are chosen from the questionnaire put forward by Zhang Xiaomei (2002), the questions of which better suit the present learning conditions. Some examples of pragmatic failures employed in A Survey of Pragmatics (He Ziran, 1987) are incorporated in the questionnaire.

CET, as a nation-wide large-scale standardized test, is held twice each year. It has undergone an unceasing process for perfection since the first implementation in 1987. Through a series of empirical researches and questionnaires among college teachers it is proved that CET has a high validity and reliability. The achievements of CET4 are regarded as the representation of the testees' linguistic competence. The pragmatic competence questionnaire was administered to gain information about the pragmatic competence of the testees who are representatives of non-English majors.

D. Procedures

The subjects of group A took part in the investigation on November 11th 2005, the subjects of group C took part in the investigation on November 12th, and the subjects of group B on November 15th. The investigation, held as a quiz in class, was administered by their English teacher, that is, the questionnaires were handed out and collected by them. In order to prevent difficulties in understanding the questions, students were allowed to consult the dictionaries, but not permitted to discuss with others. They were required to finish the questionnaire individually, and time was not limited. Therefore the problems of understanding the languages in the questionnaire and the limitation of time could not be counted as factors influencing the choices or as causes of their failures.

E. Data Collection and Data Analysis

The full score for each question is 1 point. In this way, the scores the students get for each question can be figured out. The total score of this pragmatic competence questionnaire is 20 points. The scores of all the students are input into the computer and are analyzed using the SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) 11.5.

F. Results

TABLE 3.1:
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF THE PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE OF EACH GROUP

Group	N	Max	Mini	Range	Median	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. Error Mean
A	93	17	2	15	11	10.85	2.31	0.24
B	90	16	2	14	10	9.76	3.02	0.32
C	96	18	3	15	10	10.07	2.87	0.29
Total	279	18	2	16	11	10.23	2.78	0.17

The descriptive statistics of the pragmatic competence of each group is presented in Table 3.1. On the first glance, there aren't distinct differences among the three groups. The results of the T-test, listed in the following Table 3.2—Table 3.4, showed that the difference of the mean scores of the three groups are not significant, the pragmatic competence of the students of the three groups are on approximately similar level. Due to the insignificant difference among the three groups, the achievements of the pragmatic competence questionnaire from the three groups can be incorporated together and be processed as a whole.

TABLE 3.2
T-TEST FOR GROUP A AND GROUP B

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Equal variance assumed	2.345	181	.020
Equal variances not assumed	2.335	167.462	.021

TABLE 3.3:
T-TEST FOR GROUP B AND GROUP C

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Equal variance assumed	-.735	184	.463
Equal variances not assumed	-.734	181.579	.464

TABLE 3.4:
T-TEST BETWEEN GROUP A AND GROUP C

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Equal variance assumed	-2.043	187	.042
Equal variances not assumed	-2.050	181.157	.042

TABLE 3.5:
THE FREQUENCIES OF THE PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE

Score	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
2	2	.7	.7	.7
3	5	1.8	1.8	2.5
4	3	1.1	1.1	3.6
5	6	2.2	2.2	5.7
6	11	3.9	3.9	9.7
7	13	4.7	4.7	14.3
8	18	6.5	6.5	20.8
9	40	14.3	14.3	35.1
10	35	12.5	12.5	47.7
11	51	18.3	18.3	65.9
12	48	17.2	17.2	83.2
13	27	9.7	9.7	92.8
14	6	2.2	2.2	95.0
15	4	1.4	1.4	96.4
16	6	2.2	2.2	98.6
17	3	1.1	1.1	99.6
18	1	.4	.4	100
Total	279	100	100	

According to the Pearson Correlation analysis, the pragmatic competence and the linguistic competence is slightly correlated ($r=0.192$), with its significance being .01. The result proves that the development of linguistic competence is the foundation of the development of pragmatic competence, without appropriate linguistic foundation it is difficult and impossible for the learners to develop their pragmatic competence. The result is inconsistent with the previous studies, in which most of the subjects are advanced English learners but demonstrate rather low pragmatic competence, such as the young college English teachers in He Ziran&Yan Zhuang's (1986) study, the junior English majors in Wang Dexing's (1990) study and so on. In regard to the relationship between linguistic competence and pragmatic competence, Kasper and Rose (2002) propose that they are separate from each other. The two kinds of competence are independent and at the same time interdependent from each other. Linguistic competence development will not naturally lead to the appropriate use of the target language, or we can say a good command of language knowledge does not guarantee knowing how to use it appropriately. They are interdependent because linguistic competence is the foundation of pragmatic competence and pragmatic competence is the ability of appropriately using the linguistic forms in context, the combination of the two is the communicative competence. They are like the two wings of a bird; in order to develop communicative competence, both of them should be paid attention to.

TABLE 3.6:
CORRELATION BETWEEN PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE AND LINGUISTIC ACHIEVEMENTS

		Linguistic Achievements	Pragmatic Competence
Linguistic Achievements	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.192 * *
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
Pragmatic Competence	Pearson Correlation	.192 * *	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	

* * : Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)

In order to get a further understanding of the pragmatic competence of the subjects, an analysis of the answers given by the subjects on each item is introduced in the following part. As is reflected in Table 3.7, there are many items with comparatively higher correct percentage. The subjects perform well in many particular contexts. For example, the correct percentage for item 3, 5, 12, 19 are higher than 90%. This reflects that the subjects have accumulated much knowledge on how to choosing the appropriate utterances according to the given context, and on how to behave by the western ways of behavior. At the meantime, there are still many weaknesses and problems reflected in the questionnaire of pragmatic competence.

TABLE 3.7:
DESCRIPTION OF CORRECT PERCENTAGE OF EACH ITEM

Items	Nc	%	Items	Nc	%
1	36	38.7	11	70	75.3
2	28	30.1	12	91	97.8
3	87	93.5	13	21	22.6
4	5	5.4	14	30	32.3
5	89	95.7	15	62	66.7
6	70	75.3	16	43	46.2
7	70	75.3	17	81	87.1
8	59	63.4	18	48	51.6
9	52	55.9	19	89	95.7
10	44	47.3	20	25	26.9

Notes: Nc: Number of correct answers
%: the percentage of the correct answers to each item

According to the results of the questionnaire, it is obvious that these subjects know, to some extent, how to perform certain speech acts and can differentiate the foreign culture and the Chinese culture and are equipped with certain basic pragmatic knowledge. Why can the subjects perform well on these items? First, in previous researches made by researchers and English teachers, pragmatic failures related with these aspects, especially the difference of response to appreciation and difference on views towards age and weight, etc, have frequently been mentioned and thus been paid special attention to in teaching practice. Second, the increasing contact with the English speaking countries and the accessible ways of acquiring knowledge provide the students more opportunities of learning and practicing English. Also, due to the open-door policy of our country, there are more and more authentic materials introducing the foreign way of life and differentiating cultural differences. At the same time the students can learn English through various channels: TV, Internet, VCR, etc. All these factors broaden the horizon of the students and make them familiar with both the foreign languages and the foreign ways of life. So many of the Chinese learners of English can behave and speak in

the western way.

Apart from the improvement having been made, there are still many problems reflected through the investigation. The reasons for the problems are: First, in the teaching process, when the cultural differences are mentioned the teachers often refer to the specific often-quoted examples that are always mentioned in researches, in this way the students' ability in these aspects are strengthened while the remaining aspects of cultural differences are neglected. For example, when the interviewees are required to list some cultural differences, most of them refer to the differences on how to answer others' compliments and how to initiate conversations with strangers. These examples are often referred to in our English class, while the remaining parts of cultural differences are seldom paid attention to, which will give rise to the pragmatic incompetence in communication. Second, Both the teachers and the students have limited exposure to authentic learning environments. The teachers themselves do not have the opportunities of learning and practicing English in native environments either; most of their knowledge about the speaking principles and cultural differences are learned indirectly but not experienced in person. Third, in our country the reality for teaching English is the mastery of new vocabularies, the improvement of comprehension skills, listening and writing skills, while the speaking abilities are often ignored. Most of the students are learning English driven by the motivation of passing CET4, which is a prerequisite for the Bachelor's degree in many universities, and CET6. In class, it is the teacher who is the center of the whole class and who takes almost all the time in explaining to the students the usage of the new words, the translation of the texts, the analysis of the sentence structure. On the contrary, the students do not have the opportunities of speaking in class, which leads to imbalanced learning habits, that is, much more attention is paid to the accumulation of linguistic knowledge while the pragmatic competence which should be the primary and vital objective of learning English is ignored. Though the teachers repeatedly emphasize that speaking ability is important, they do not give the students much opportunity to practice it. Indeed, some students do go to English corners, but what they do is always repeating the simple self-introduction and greetings and never talks deep. Fourth, in the teaching process, the teachers always neglect the explanation of the pragmatic principles, for example, the PP, the face theory, the speech act theory, according to which the language users organize and comprehend the languages. Without the basic knowledge of these principles, the language learner will not fully understand what others say and will not utter appropriate languages.

Pragmatic competence is one of the aims of EFLT, while the present study reveals that the pragmatic competence of the non-English majors at present is of low level. It is essential for linguistic researchers to put forward realistic and practical pedagogical suggestions on how to cultivate students' pragmatic competence. The result of the present study proves that linguistic competence and pragmatic competence are slightly correlated and deficiency in linguistic competence will result in pragmatic incompetence and give rise to pragmatic failures. Linguistic competence is the necessary but not sufficient condition for the development of pragmatic competence, without certain accumulation of pragmatic knowledge, there is no need to talk about the development of pragmatic competence. In the teaching process, the development of pragmatic competence and the development of linguistic competence should be integrated and balanced. The teachers should not only attach importance to one factor and neglect the other, which will eventually result in the imbalance of the knowledge and ability structure of the learners. Linguistic competence is not the focus of the present study, so the ways of raising students' linguistic competence will not be touched upon. In the following part, the implications on the ways of promoting students' pragmatic competence will be introduced.

IV. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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[1] Teaching Language in Context

In the traditional teaching process, the teachers always first give an utterance and then explain the students the meaning of this utterance only and let the students mechanically practice it, but the context of this utterance is not given. As a result, though the students can utter different sentences and know clearly their semantic meanings, they cannot use it appropriately; instead, they will use it according to their own understanding and the Chinese translation of this sentence, that is, they are influenced by pragmatic transfer. In the future teaching process, the teachers should give the context of one utterance and pay much more attention to it, in this way, the students can know better when, where and to whom they can use this utterance instead of regarding it only as an English equivalence of the Chinese utterance.

[2] Integrating Cultural Knowledge in the Teaching Process

Language teaching and culture teaching are two aspects of the same teaching process, they should not be separated. In view of foreign language learners, learning a foreign language is to command a new tool of communication and to learn to know the culture of the target language. From the point of FLT, teaching language is teaching the culture of the target language. If cultural background knowledge is not taken into consideration, foreign language cannot be acquired well enough.

[3] Increasing Exposure to Authentic Materials

Authentic material presents the students with the “real” language, and provides them with valid linguistic data for their natural acquisition process. Once they get into contact with plenty of authentic materials, they can imitate the manners of native speakers, and use the language in the way of the natives, gradually, their sense of appropriacy will be formed. Authentic materials are needed for learners to learn the correct use of the target language in teaching and reaming activities.

[4] Encouraging Language Output and Employing Task-based Classroom

Many researchers have proved that the most effective way of developing pragmatic competence in class is to ensure that learners have sufficient opportunities to practice. Task-based language teaching is an effective teaching approach employed in class, which aims to develop learners’ pragmatic competence. In a task-based classroom, the teaching process is completed in the process of organizing a series of tasks, which can be pedagogical tasks and real-world tasks. And students master specific language forms and its corresponding functions in the process of fulfilling these tasks. It is a student-centered form of organizing the class. In a task-based classroom, teachers must instruct the students to pay attention to the form, meaning and social nouns simultaneously, for they are cultivating students’ ability to use English to achieve an effective communication. And teachers should take both accuracy and appropriateness into consideration while conducting a task-based approach in a certain class. Tasks must include ways that will combine meaning with form in order to balance the development of fluency with accuracy.

[5] Teaching Pragmatic Theories

Pragmatic instruction is necessary and effective. Though learners can have a large amount of pragmatic knowledge like pragmatic universals and L1-based knowledge for free, they are not often found using them in the L2 communication. Studies examining the effect of pragmatic instruction show that most pragmatic features are indeed teachable and there is a distinct advantage for explicit metapragmatic instruction.

Teaching the theories of pragmatics is an effective way. Teachers can give designed lectures on pragmatics. College students have grasped a great deal of linguistic knowledge that can help students to understand the basic pragmatic theories. And the understanding of pragmatic theories also can direct students to practice the language, make students consciously use pragmatic rules and develop pragmatic competence in the course of communication.

Teaching linguistic knowledge integrating with pragmatic knowledge can let students not only learn the linguistic forms, but also understand the communicative function of the forms. If the teacher only explains the meaning of words and analyzes the sentence structure in teaching, it is not beneficial to cultivate students’ pragmatic competence. The pragmatic knowledge that the teacher explains should be well chosen. That is, the teacher should consciously analyze the language points from the view of both English and Chinese. The usage, which easily leads to failure in the intercultural communication, should be paid special attention to.

Pragmatic knowledge imparting involves both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge. Pragmalinguistics refers to the devices to implement the communicative acts including pragmatic strategies like directness and indirectness, conventions and a large amount of linguistic forms which can choose from in order to perform appropriate speech act, while sociopragmatics refers to the social perceptions underlying participants’ interpretation and performance of communicative action. For instance, by helping students realize what function complimenting has in mainstream American culture, what appropriate topics for complimenting are, and by what linguistic formulae compliments are given and received, they can acquire both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge.

The pragmatic knowledge can be imparted to the students regularly by introducing the natural models, such as complimenting, apologizing, opening and closing a conversation, leaving and taking and etc. By introducing the authentic examples, the students can get high quality input, and thus have the possibility to prepare well for the appropriate output.

In conclusion, pragmatic competence is one of the aims of college English teaching and should be integrated with the cultivation of linguistic competence. The above-mentioned methods of promoting students’ pragmatic competence are only tentative ones and should be experimented and verified in the future teaching process.

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