The Study on Learning Strategy Based on Pragmatic Competence

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Abstract

Pragmatic competence is the ability to use the language properly and appropriately. Reviewing China's foreign language teaching process, we can conclude that the cultivation of students' pragmatic competence is often ignored. Students can speak grammatical sentences, but they cannot express their views accurately in specific communication situations.

Language learning strategies are influenced by individual differences, and the study of language learning strategies in pragmatic development becomes an important topic. People often use cognitive processing theory to explore pragmatic development. Moreover, learning strategies in cognitive theory is considered a complex cognitive skill. Thus, they are related to each other theoretically.

This thesis attempts to investigate English learners' pragmatic competence, learning strategies, and the relationship between them. The subjects include 50 English-major students and 50 non-English major students. The two instruments of the study are He Ziran's (1987) Pragmatic Competence Questionnaire and Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). The results show that there are

differences in the use of learning strategies among two groups. Moreover, there are obvious differences in pragmatic competence between English majors and non-English majors, which indicates that learners' pragmatic competence is influenced by the use of learning strategies.

The study confirms that the use of learning strategies can really affect learners' pragmatic competence. Thus, in order to improve students' pragmatic competence, teachers should teach not only students' pragmatic knowledge, but also the use of learning strategies. At the same time, students can choose appropriate learning strategies according to their own characteristics and needs to improve their pragmatic competence.

Keywords: Pragmatic Competence; Language Learning Strategies; Pragmatic Knowledge

1. Introduction

The development of society has increased the exchange and cooperation between countries. In order to convey the information accurately, it is necessary to improve foreign language learners' pragmatic knowledge.

Pragmatic competence is the ability to use a target language in an appropriate way. It needs to know how to connect discourses to locally situated contexts. It has been subdivided into pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competences (Thomas, 1983).

Interlanguage pragmatics concerns both foreign language (FL) and second language (L2) learners' use and acquisition of pragmatic knowledge. Interested in understanding how languages are learned, researches and teachers pay great attention to FL/L2 learning strategies. Therefore, learning strategies on pragmatic development is very important. Many studies have been done in language learning and pragmatic competence fields. But few people have explained the impact of learner's learning strategies on pragmatic development. So the study aims to explore the use of learning strategies that have an influence on the development of college students' pragmatic competence and proposes suggestions for English teaching.

2. Literature Review
2.1 Research on Pragmatic Competence

Chomsky is the first person who proposes the term "competence". He holds that pragmatic competence is "the knowledge of condition, the manner of appropriate use (Chomsky, 1980:224)." This definition pays close attention to the grammatical knowledge of the ideal speakers and ignores the use of language in actual situations.

Since Chomsky (1980) comes up with the term "pragmatic competence", many scholars express their interests in it. The research on the development of pragmatic competence can be divided into three phases (Kasper 2001). At the first stage, only a few studies have been done to examine the relationship between grammatical competence and pragmatic competence. The second stage is that the researcher treats the development of learners' pragmatic competence as an independent component. The third stage is related to the relationship between linguistic and pragmatic competences.

According to the current study, Kasper (2001) has raised two contentious points. One side insists that learners acquire grammar before pragmatic knowledge, while the other side holds the opposite view. Ellis supports the first view, and he suggests that language competence is the primary factor in promoting L2 pragmatic development (Ellis 1994). The latter is supported by Schmidt's famous research.

All the studies listed above lay a solid foundation for the research of pragmatic competence in the future.

From 1980s, Chinese researches began to investigate the pragmatic competence of English learners in China.

He Ziran and Yan Zhuang (1986) study the cross-cultural pragmatic competence of 79 College English teachers, which reveals the beginning of the study of pragmatic competence in China.

According to He's survey of English pragmatic competence, Meng Mei and Liu Qinliang (2000) study the pragmatic competence and sociolinguistics competence of 95 non-English majors. The result shows that there are differences between liberal arts students and science students.

Gan Wenping (2001) tests 65 people, including some first-year high school students, some young English teachers and some one-year college English majors, to study their pragmatic competence and basic knowledge of pragmatics. The results present that both students and teachers have poor pragmatic ability.

2.2 Research on Language Learning Strategy

The study of foreign language learner's strategies first began in western countries in the middle 1970s. Language teachers and researchers found that although students were exposed to the same teaching methods and learning environments, some students appeared to be more successful in learning than other students.

The most recent and comprehensive learning strategy list is by Oxford (1990). In an attempt to include every strategy that is referred to in literature, she describes sixty-four strategies.

Wen Qiufang (1995) reported "L2 learner variables and English achievement" and "Learning strategies compared: A case study"; Wang Wenyu (1998) and Wu Xia (1998) investigated vocabulary learning strategies;

Studies concerned with learning strategies are very rare. Moreover, Investigations about the role of learning strategies in language learning usually focus on linguistic knowledge rather than pragmatic knowledge.

The present study on language learning strategy has enhanced our understanding of the second language learning process and the interactions of multiple factors.

3. Theoretical Framework of the Thesis
3.1 Pragmatic Competence Theory

Thomas defines pragmatic competence as: "the ability to use language effectively for specific purposes (Thomas, 1983:94)."

Bachman believes that pragmatic competence is composed of sociolinguistic competence and illocutionary competence. The former is the knowledge of sociolinguistic conventions that properly perform linguistic functions in a given situation. The latter expresses the realization of the pragmatic conventions for performing acceptable language functions (Bachman, 1990:36).

Bialystok believes that pragmatic competence is the ability to use and interpret language in context. It includes speakers' ability to use language for instruction, demand, and change. It contains the ability of listeners to understand the speakers' true purposes. And it also includes an order of the rules in which the utterances connects together to create speech（Bialystok, 1993:43）.

He believes that pragmatic competence is the ability to use language in order to comprehend language in context (He Ziran, 1997:102).

At present, it is widely believed that the final plan of English teaching is to boost students' learning ability, including pragmatic competence and linguistic competence. The former is the basic requirement of the latter. In the authentic communication, pragmatic competence is an indispensable factor in effective communication.

3.2 Learning Strategy Theory

Oxford's (1990) six language learning strategy subclasses are introduced as follows:

Direct strategies are composed of memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies (Oxford, 1990:37). The direct strategies of all these groups have something in common. They all need the psychological processing of language. But they are used for different purposes.

Indirect strategy is the strategy without directly concerning the target language. The indirect strategies consist of metacognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies. Metacognitive strategies include focus, arranging, controlling evaluation, etc. Affective strategies are for regulating feelings. Social strategies are concerned about learning with others.

4 Experiment Design

4.1 Subjects

A total of 100 subjects are involved in the questionnaires, including 50 non-English college students and 50 English major students. The age of participants ranges from 19 to 26.

4.2 Instruments

Two questionnaires are used in the paper: He's Pragmatic Competence Questionnaire (revised) and Oxford's (1990) SILL (Chinese version).

4.2.1 Pragmatic Competence Questionnaire

It is not an easy job to design a questionnaire. Fortunately, the multi-questionnaire developed by He (1987) is of great help and significance.

There are 25 items all together in the questionnaire. Each item gives a brief description of the situation. The subjects are required to read the provided situation carefully and then choose the most appropriate answer.

4.2.2 Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)

The SILL Version 7.0 (ESL/EFL), developed by Rebecca Oxford (1990), has been translated into Chinese to ensure greater understanding of the problems and more natural responses. There is a Likert scale of 1 to 5 to assess the frequency of students' use of learning strategies. The points on the scale are: (1) never or almost never true of me; (2) generally not true of me; (3) somewhat true of me; (4) generally true of me; (5) always true of me. The SILL has been widely used around the world. There are the six categories of the SILL.

1）Memory strategies

This measure includes 9 items assessing how often students use them to memorize and retrieve new knowledge.

2）Cognitive strategies

This measure includes 14 items assessing to what extent learners use them to grasp and acquire new knowledge.

3）Compensation strategies

This measure includes 6 items assessing to what extent the learner use information to understand and learn knowledge.

4）Metacognitive strategies

This measure includes 9 items. It evaluates the frequency of learners who use them to control their own

perceptions.

5）Affective strategies

This measure includes 6 items. It measures the degree to which students use them to adjust their senses, motivations and attitudes to learning.

6）Social strategies

This measure includes 6 items and assesses how often students learn by interacting with others.

4.3 Data Collection and Analysis
4.3.1 Data Collection Procedures

All the data collection of the study was carried out in the Internet. The participants were asked to finish the SILL with numbers presenting the frequency they use the learning strategies. The respondents were informed that the answers would only be used for research.

4.3.2 Data Analysis
4.3.2.1 Students' Use of Pragmatic Competence

Table 1 Scores of Pragmatic Competence

score	frequency	percent
＞20	15	15%
15-20	29	29%
＜15	56	56%

Table 1 provides the result of students' pragmatic competence in the research. Generally speaking, only when a student correctly answered 60% questions, can we think that he/she passes the exam. Just as the scores present, only 44% learners can be regarded as reaching the passing line, and 56% of participants are under the standard level, taking up a large number of testers. The result reveals that the students' pragmatic competence is still at a low level.

Table 2 Group Statistics of Pragmatic Competence

Score	Frequency		percent
＞20	English major	8	53%
	Non-English major	7	47%
15-20	English major	17	59%
	Non-English major	12	41%
＜15	English major	25	45%
	Non-English major	31	55%

Table 2 shows only 15 participants gets the score more than 20, among which, 53% are English major students. On the contrary, there are 31 non-English students getting the score below 15, accounting for a percentage of 55%. From the table, we can conclude that comparing to English major students, non-English major students' pragmatic competence is relatively poor.

4.3.2.2 Students' Use of Learning Strategies

Consistent with previous research issues, we are trying to determine the general trends in the use of learning strategies. The results are as follows:

Table 3 Statistics of Strategy Used in Each Category of the Six Strategies

	Mean	Rank order
Memory	2.80	5
Cognitive	2.90	3
Compensation	2.95	1
Metacognitive	2.93	2
Affective	2.82	4
Social	2.73	6

Table 3 shows the differences in the type of using learning strategies. All the means of six strategic categories belong to the medium use.

Table 4 Group Statistics of Strategy Use

	Level	Mean
Memory	English major	3.11
	Non-English major	2.49
Cognitive	English major	3.25
	Non-English major	2.54
Compensation	English major	3.33
	Non-English major	2.57
Metacognitive	English major	3.26
	Non-English major	2.59
Affective	English major	3.13
	Non-English major	2.50
Social	English major	3.17
	Non-English major	2.28

The differences between English and non-English major students in strategy use are shown in Table 4.

The results of Table 4 show the frequency of English major students' strategy use: compensation (3.33) ＞ metacognitive (3.26) ＞ cognitive (3.25) ＞ social (3.17) ＞ affective (3.13) ＞ memory (3.11). And that of non-English majors is metacognitive (2.78) ＞compensation (2.57) ＞cognitive (2.54) ＞ affective (2.50) ＞ memory (2.49) ＞ social (2.28). We can clearly see that the strategy use of the two groups is significantly different.

5. The Study of Learning Strategy Based on Pragmatic Competence
5.1 Analysis of Strategy Use

Compensation (2.95) and metacognitive (2.93) strategies are reported as most commonly used in the frequency of learning strategies in different categories, whereas social strategies (2.73) are the least frequency used. And we can see from statistics that affective strategy (2.82) is also greatly neglected among our college students.

The results show that compensation strategies are frequently used. According to Oxford (1990) compensation strategies are the heart of strategic competence. SMetacognitive strategies can help learners control the whole process of language learning. So metacognitive strategies are significant because they somewhat determine the effectiveness of learners' use of other kinds of learning strategies.

However, the use of memory strategies are the second least reported. This finding is consistent with those in Nyikos & Oxford（1987）that although memory strategies can be influential elements of language learning, college students seldom use memory strategies. Affective strategies are one of the least reported in the study. This is perhaps because learners are not familiar with paying attention to their feelings in the learning process. Social strategies are generally not used possibly.

Since students use learning strategies differently, what is the relationship between the use of strategies and pragmatic competence?

5.2 The Relation between Strategy Use and Pragmatic Competence

Until now what the studies have demonstrated before us is the level of learners' pragmatic competence between two groups and the frequency of their use of the learning strategies based on Oxford's categories. The two questionnaires can prove whether the use of learning strategies can affect learners' pragmatic competence.

By comparing the results of English majors and non-English majors in the questionnaires, this paper investigates the relationship between the use of strategy and pragmatic competence. From the statistics, we can clear see that English major students' pragmatic competence level is higher than that of non-English major students. Therefore, learners who adopt multiple strategies tend to achieve his goals in communication more easily.

Moreover, English major students use compensation strategies (3.33), most frequently. It means that the more frequently using of compensation strategies, the better pragmatic competence a learner may have. Because social strategies (2.73) are least used, learners should find opportunity to communicate with native speakers as much as possible to make up for the inadequacy in communication.

In all, the present study shows the frequent use of various learning strategies may result in high pragmatic competence. Thus, it is better for teachers to teach not only students pragmatic knowledge, but also the use of learning strategies to improve their pragmatic competence from another perspective.

5.3 Pedagogical Strategy

From the above discussion, we can clearly understand the importance of learning strategies in improving learners' pragmatic competence. Hence, several pedagogical strategies are proposed in this section in order to improve students' pragmatic competence.

Firstly, teachers should not only strengthen their own professionalism, but also know enough knowledge about learning strategies. Many of the learning strategies learned by teachers come from practice, such as a list of learning strategies from successful learners. Because the lack of comprehensive and systematic understanding of learning strategies often hinders teachers from guiding students to develop effective learning strategies, it is suggested that teachers should strengthen their theoretical study on learning strategies.

Secondly, it is important to arouse students' interests in study and improve their learning initiatives. In China, teachers play a dominant role in class. In this way, students do not actively participate in learning, but only passively receive the information. Therefore, before learning strategy training, students should be fully aware of the purpose and significance of training. In the training process, teachers should cultivate students'

learning initiatives so that students can choose the appropriate strategy according to their own characteristics and needs.

Thirdly, original newspapers, magazines and other data not only help students become familiar with the language itself, but also transfer the culture and customs of the target language to the students. It is essential for teachers to instruct the students what to read and how to read after class. The teacher chooses the suitable teaching material for the student, and instructs the student to exchange the opinion in the discussion after reading.

Conclusion

Based on the pragmatic competence of English majors and non-English majors, this thesis gives an analysis of the learning strategies. According to the research, the major findings are as follows:

(1) The level of the subjects' pragmatic competence is relatively low. And the use of learning strategies can help students develop a better pragmatic competence.

(2) Meta-cognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies are three kinds of learning strategies that are used frequently in improving students' pragmatic competence.

This study shows that learning strategies are equally important in the development of pragmatic competence in foreign language learning. Thus, students should be aware that the proper use of learning strategies can improve their pragmatic competence. And teachers should integrate learning strategies into pragmatic instruction in order to raise learners' pragmatic awareness through classroom instruction.

Although the study has offered several factors that can improve students' pragmatic competence based on learning strategies, it still has some limitations just as discussed above. In the future study, the research scope can be enlarged and more students can be expected to participate in the research. Due to the limit of time and energy, the author fails to collect more data from this empirical study. More researches are expected to be done to explore learning strategies to facilitate the development of pragmatic competence.

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