An Investigation into Chinese EFL Learners' Pragmatic Competence

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ABSTRACT

Successful communication is influenced not only by language accuracy, but also by language appropriateness in various social contexts. Accordingly, second/foreign language (L2) learners' pragmatic competence as well as how they develop the competence has attracted much attention in the research field of interlanguage pragmatics (ILP). The existing literature on Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic competence focuses on their awareness of contextually appropriate language and neglects their production of the language. This study investigated Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic competence in terms of both awareness and production. Three research instruments were employed to collect data: a multiple-choice discourse completion task (MDCT), a written discourse completion task (WDCT), and a retrospective interview. Eight-five English major undergraduates from a university in China participated in the study. The results showed that Chinese EFL learners' ability to identify and produce contextually appropriate utterances needed to be promoted, and their pragmatic awareness was found to be positively correlated with their production. Compared with the ranking of imposition, Chinese EFL learners were more aware of the interlocutor's social power and tried to display the power distance in their language. However, they had difficulties in using appropriate strategies and linguistic features to achieve communicative intentions, and a very serious problem that they encountered was the intended meaning and force of different linguistic forms and strategies. The research findings provide evidence that Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic competence is still much influenced by Chinese language and culture, and some form of pragmatic instruction to raise their awareness or understanding of pragmatic features and force relation is crucial for the learning of L2 pragmatics.

Keywords: pragmatic competence; pragmatic awareness; pragmatic production, speech act; Chinese EFL learners

INTRODUCTION

Ever since the identification of pragmatic competence as an indispensable component of language ability (Bachman, 1990), researchers have directed their attention to the research field of interlanguage pragmatics (ILP), which examine "non-native speakers' use and acquisition of L2 pragmatic knowledge" (Kasper, 1996, p. 145). It has been found that L2 learners deviate from native speakers and even advanced learners are limited in their use of contextually appropriate language. Researchers

believe that this limitation is very likely to cause serious problems in communication with native speakers because native speakers typically interpret the pragmatic errors as arrogance, impatience and rudeness, and thus they are less likely to forgive the errors (Nelson et al., 2002). For this reason, how L2 learners acquire pragmatic competence has become an issue of enquiry.

Researchers believe that pragmatic awareness is necessary for the acquisition of pragmatic knowledge (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Kasper, 1996; Schmidt, 1995) because "people learn about the things that they pay attention to and do not learn much about the things they do not attend to" (Schmidt, 2010, p. 27). However, to date the majority of studies on L2 learners' pragmatic competence focused on either their pragmatic awareness or production, and pragmatic awareness is seldom inspected together with production for the same group of L2 learners. This study investigated the two aspects with a group of Chinese learners of English as a foreign language (EFL).

Studies on Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic competence began to surface in the 1980s. Researchers mainly employ the multiple-choice questionnaire (MCQ) or combine the MCQ with the judgment task (He & Yan, 1986; Hong, 1991; Li & Jiang, 2014; Liu & Huang, 2012). However, these data elicitation methods only assess how L2 learners perceive and understand appropriate language use in English, leaving their productive ability seldom addressed. This study attempts to address this gap in research by investigating Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic competence in terms of both awareness and production. It intends to answer two research questions: (1) What is the current level of Chinese EFL students' pragmatic competence in terms of pragmatic awareness and production? (2) What is the relationship, if any, between Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic awareness and production?

LITERATURE REVIEW

PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE

Pragmatic competence has been identified as one of the important components of language ability in the recent decade. Before the 1970s, research on language competence focused on learners' ability to produce grammatically correct words and forms. It was not until 1990 when Bachman (1990) put forward the model of language ability that the notion of pragmatic competence became an integral part of communicative language ability. According to Bachman (1990), pragmatic competence is independent from grammatical and discourse organization, and it is concerned with the functional aspect of language that coordinates with the formal aspects of language use to ensure successful communication.

Pragmatic competence has been defined from two perspectives: 'knowledge' and 'ability'. Barron (2003), for example, regards it as the "knowledge of the linguistic resources available in a given language for realizing particular illocutions, knowledge of the sequential aspects of speech acts and finally, knowledge of the appropriate contextual use of the particular languages' linguistic resources" (p. 10). Thomas (1983) defines pragmatic competence as the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context. The present study looks at the term from the 'ability' perspective, and Rose's (1999) definition is adopted. According to Rose (1999), pragmatic competence is the ability to use available linguistic resources in a contextually appropriate fashion.

Despite the 'ability' or 'knowledge' argument, researchers agree that being pragmatically competent involves two basic components: pragmalinguistic competence and sociopragmatic competence. The former refers to the resources that

learners use to perform communicative acts and express relational or interpersonal meanings, including selection of "pragmatic strategies such as directness and indirectness, routines and a large range of linguistic forms which can intensify or soften communicative acts" while the latter focuses on the social perceptions underlying learners' interpretation and performance of communicative action (Kasper & Rose, 2001, p. 2). This ability is closely related to social parameters such as social status, social distance, and the degree of imposition of specific communication acts. To be pragmatically competent, a language user should not only know the correct usage of linguistic forms but can also use these forms appropriately based on the knowledge of sociolinguistic rules.

Researchers in ILP have proposed several theories to account for the learning of L2 pragmatic and one of them is Schmidt's (1995) Noticing Hypothesis. According to the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1995), noticing or awareness of the target features plays a crucial role in the learning of L2 pragmatics. Schmidt (1995) proposes two levels of awareness: noticing and understanding. Noticing refers to the "conscious registration of the occurrence of some event", which is the surface level phenomena and item learning, while understanding is the higher level of abstraction about meaning, indicating learners' "recognition of a general principle, rule or pattern" (Schmidt, 1995, p. 29). In the process of converting the target language input into intake, noticing is necessary and understanding is facilitative (Schmidt, 2010). When L2 learners are acquiring pragmatic knowledge, they should consciously allocate their attention to and make efforts to understand the linguistic forms, pragmalinguistic functions and sociopragmatic constraints of the target language.

PRAGMATIC AWARENESS IN THE LEARNING OF L2 PRAGMATICS

According to the Association for Language Awareness (UK), language awareness is defined as the explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching, and language use. Researchers in second language acquisition have explored language users' awareness in different aspects, such as grammatical awareness and strategic awareness (Akkakoson, 2012; Shuib, 2009). In ILP, pragmatic awareness has been defined based on different research objectives. Schauer (2006) includes in this definition L2 learners' ability to identify and interpret the meaning of different utterances, as well as their ability to assess the appropriateness of different utterances. Hu (2007) refers to pragmatic awareness as the conscious perception and sensitivity to the stipulations of appropriateness which are restricted by specific communication contexts. Based on the definitions above, pragmatic awareness is defined as L2 learners' conscious and explicit knowledge about the appropriateness of language use constrained by communication contexts.

A number of researchers share the same idea with Schmidt (1995) that pragmatic awareness contributes to the learning of L2 pragmatics (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Kasper, 1996). Kasper (1996) puts forward three requirements for L2 pragmatic acquisition: pertinent input, the input to be noticed and ample opportunities to develop a high level of control (p.148). Unlike native speakers, L2 learners' attention to or awareness of the target pragmatic language features present in the abundant language input is needed for those features to be used appropriately. Bardovi-Harlig (2001) argues that 'if we expect learners to use speech addressed to them as input, we need to investigate how learners perceive and understand such input' (p. 24).

In spite of the early proposal of the awareness-acquisition interface, empirical studies in the research field of pragmatic awareness and production began only in

recent years (Bardovi-Harlig, 2014; Rafieyan, Sharafi-Nejad, & Lin, 2014; Tada, 2005). Tada (2005) investigated Japanese EFL learners' speech act production and their knowledge on the appropriate language to produce speech acts by using a written discourse completion task (WDCT) and a multiple-choice discourse completion task (MDCT) respectively. The results showed a moderate relationship between production and awareness.

More recently, two studies address the issue of awareness and production in the learning of L2 conventional expressions. Bardovi-Harlig (2014) examined pragmatic awareness on the meanings of L2 conventional expressions and the use of these expressions. A modified aural vocabulary knowledge scale was used to elicit data. The ESL participants were required to assess familiarity with the target conventional expressions, define them, and then use them. Results showed that many definitions were quantitatively and qualitatively consistent with the examples that learners gave. Bardovi-Harlig (2014) concluded that awareness was likely to predict the use of conventional expressions. Rafieyan et al. (2014) inspected pragmatic awareness on comprehension and production of conventional expressions among English learners in Malaysia using a judgment task, a multiple-choice listening test, and an oral discourse completion task (DCT). Results of the study showed that pragmatic awareness of the conventional expressions was able to predict L2 learners' production of these features.

Acknowledging the relationship between L2 pragmatic awareness and production, a few researchers have incorporated both awareness and production in the examination of L2 pragmatic acquisition. For example, Schauer (2009) investigated how German ESL learners developed their pragmatic competence by examining grammatical/pragmatic awareness and request production. In the study, L2 learners' grammatical/pragmatic awareness was assessed by a video-and-questionnaire task that required learners to identify the pragmatic and grammatical infelicities and to evaluate the severity of the inappropriate/inaccurate utterances; a semi-structured interview was employed for the problems that L2 learners perceived to be related to the inappropriate/incorrect utterances; a multimedia elicitation task tested L2 learners' productive pragmatic ability to make requests. Schauer (2009) found a significant increase in L2 learners' pragmatic and grammatical awareness after they had stayed in the target language for nine months, but the effect of residence in the target language environment on request production, i.e. request strategies, internal modifications and external modifications, was not as obvious as that on grammatical/pragmatic awareness.

In summary, researchers in ILP have started to focus on both pragmatic awareness and production in examining L2 learners' pragmatic competence, but the small number of empirical studies suggests that more empirical studies are needed in this field. This study attempts to do so by investigating both pragmatic awareness and production among a group of Chinese EFL learners.

STUDIES ON CHINESE EFL LEARNERS' PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE

Researchers began to investigate Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic competence since the 1980s, and they explored learners' knowledge of routines, speech acts, conversational implicature and culture (He & Yan, 1986; Hong, 1991; Li & Jiang, 2014; Liu & Huang, 2012). Among those studies, more attention was given to Chinese learners' knowledge of routines and responses to speech acts such as apology, gratitude, and request. For example, He and Yan (1986) investigated 79 college English teachers in a seminar using a multiple choice questions (MCQ) test.

The study found that the participants lacked both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge when responding to gratitude and apology. Hong (1991) investigated 94 English majors in their first year and fourth year of tertiary-level learning using an MCQ and a judgment task. The study found that most Chinese EFL learners' pragmalinguistic failures were in the use of routines, and their sociopragmatic failures were mainly caused by cultural differences. Interestingly enough, there was no big difference in pragmatic competence between first year and fourth year students.

Liu and Huang (2012) inspected routines, conversational implicature and the speech acts of request and apology among three groups of Chinese EFL learners with different levels of English proficiency using MDCTs. The researchers found significant differences among the three groups of learners in their performance on routines and speech acts, but not on conversational implicature. The result indicated the imbalance development of different aspects of pragmatic competence.

Li and Jiang (2014) reported on a survey of English majors' pragmatic competence in terms of their knowledge of speech acts, appropriate language use, and culture. An MDCT, a judgment task, and a retrospective interview were employed to collect data. Learners' knowledge of speech acts was measured according to their knowledge on expressions of how to produce speech acts; language appropriateness which dealt with their knowledge of ellipsis and the appropriateness of some English expressions with regard to the context, interlocutor's identity, and the relationship with the interlocutor; learners' knowledge of culture involved differences between high-context culture and low context culture, the meaning of gestures and business etiquette. The study showed that Chinese learners' linguistic knowledge did not contribute to their pragmatic competence and they scored highest in cultural knowledge, followed by the appropriateness of language use. They, however, did poorly in speech act knowledge. The result of the interview, however, was not discussed by the researchers.

The studies discussed have identified Chinese EFL learners' lack of pragmatic competence, especially in the use of routines and responses to speech acts. However, the multiple-choice tasks and the judgment task employed in those studies only measured how Chinese EFL learners' perceive and understand L2 pragmatic knowledge rather than their productive ability. The exclusion of pragmatic production in assessing L2 pragmatic competence may be related to the difficulty in scoring the productive data. This study attempts to assess both Chinese learners' awareness and production. The focus is on speech act performance, which Li and Jiang (2014) have found to be the weakest aspect of pragmatic competence among Chinese EFL learners.

METHOD

This study adopted a mixed-method research design to investigate Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic awareness and production. The mixed-method research design was chosen in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the issues under study using both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

PARTICIPANTS

The participants were junior English majors studying in a university in China. According to the Teaching Syllabus for English Majors (MOE, 2000) in China, English majors, under the completion of their foundation stage of the first two years

of learning, should be able to acquire communicative strategies and grasp communicative functions to use appropriate English in different contexts. Therefore, junior English majors in their first semester were chosen as the target respondents in order to determine how well they have met the requirement. The study collected data from 85 junior English majors. All of them were in their early twenties (20-23), with 70 females (82.4%) and 15 males (17.6%). They had been learning English for the duration of around ten years (9.89), and only two of them had ever visited an English speaking country for a period of between 2 to 3 months.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS AND PROCEDURE

Three instruments were used to collect data: an MDCT and a WDCT to assess the participants' pragmatic awareness and production and a retrospective interview for their decision-making rationales in completing the WDCT and MDCT. The WDCT and MDCT were adapted from Tada's study (2005), which involved three speech acts of apology, refusal and request. The situations in the WDCT and MDCT were the same, and they had fixed social distance (acquaintances only) but different social power (teacher and student, student and student), and low and high levels of imposition.

In order to increase the validity and reliability of the WDCT and MDCT in the present study, they were adapted following two steps. In the first step, a metapragmatic assessment was conducted among 51 first-year and second-year English majors, asking them to reveal how familiar the situations were to them and to assess the imposition degrees. 12 situations were chosen and adapted according to the metapragmatic assessment and the Chinese cultural and social environment. Table 1 presents a general description of the situations.

TABLE 1. General description of the situations

Speech act	Situations	Imposition degree (R)	Social power (P)
Apology	1. Breaking the classmate's CD	High	Equal
	2. Leaving the professor's book on the train	High	Low
	3. Knocking the classmate' s books on the floor	Low	Equal
	4. Forgetting to return the professor's book	Low	Low
Refusal	5. Refusing the classmate's request for taking over his/her job	High	Equal
	6. Refusing the professor's request for taking over another student's job	High	Low
	7. Refusing the classmate's invitation to a party	Low	Equal
	8. Refusing the professor's request for filling up a questionnaire	Low	Low
Request	9. Asking the professor to check a speech	High	Low
	10. Asking the classmate to lend a book	High	Equal
	11. Borrowing a pen from the professor	Low	Low
	12. Asking the classmate for information about an organization	Low	Equal

In the WDCT, each situation is followed by a short dialogue, and the participants were asked to complete the dialogue with what they would say in the situation. The following is an example of the WDCT.

Situation: A week ago, you borrowed a book from Professor Johnson. You are supposed to give it back to him/her today. You forgot to bring it with you. You meet Professor Johnson in the hall. You apologize to him/her.

Professor Johnson: Hello, Lin, how are you?

You: Hello, Professor Johnson. I'm fine, thank you. Oh, you know, you lent me a book last week.
Professor Johnson: Yes.
You: _____.

The second step dealt with the three options in the MDCT. The most appropriate utterance in Tada's study (2005) was retained, because it had been validated by native speakers of English in that study. Following Liu (2006), the distracters in the MDCT were selected from Chinese learners' responses. Thirty-one English majors (out of those 51) completed the dialogues in the WDCT, and their responses were rated by two native speakers according to the holistic rating scale by Eisenstein and Bodman (1993). Four responses were chosen after the grammatical errors were corrected, and then distributed to five native speakers. Two of them that had the highest agreement of inappropriateness were selected as distracters in the MDCT.

Instead of the video prompt format employed in Tada's study (2005), the WDCT and MDCT were administered in written form for two reasons. First, the participants' listening comprehension ability might interfere with their performance in the pragmatic task. The other reason was administrative and practical in nature: the participants were from 4 separate classes and had different curriculum schedule, so data had to be collected at night to avoid disrupting their schedule. Owing to the fact that the audio lab was not easily accessible at night, a written form was more convenient for data collection.

The third instrument was a semi-structured retrospective interview. Following Cohen (2004), the retrospective interview focused on the interviewees' perceptions of the situations in completing the WDCT and MDCT task, and how they planned their responses.

Data were collected in two phases. In the first phase, the WDCT was tested, followed by the MDCT. The WDCT was administered before the MDCT in order not to give participants any ideas on how to complete the WDCT. In the second phase, the retrospective interview was conducted with twelve participants (because this study is a part of a larger project on Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic competence and their motivation, a stratified sampling method was used to select interviewees based on motivation level and demographic information). Each student was interviewed individually for a duration of about 20 minutes.

DATA ANALYSIS

In order to answer the two research questions, the participants' responses in the WDCT were assessed first according to the holistic rating scale of language nativeness and appropriateness developed by Eisenstein and Bodman (1993). Responses were rated as native or near native, acceptable, problematic, unacceptable and others (i.e. resistant or not comprehensible). Two native speakers of American English were recruited to rate the WDCT responses. They were trained for one and a half hours to ensure that they understood and agree on the holistic rating scale. In addition, the two raters were asked to underline the inappropriate use of language and give brief comments on the responses.

Kappa statistic was used to examine the interrater reliability of the two raters. The final ratings in the current study showed a very good interrater reliability with Kappa = 0.808.

The native or near native response was given 4 points, and the other three categories of acceptable, problematic and unacceptable were given 3 points, 2 points

and 1 point, respectively. The two scores given by the raters were averaged and the average was the final score that the participants got in the WDCT. In order to make the scoring consistent with that in the written DCT, 4 points were given for the correct choice, and 0 point was given for the incorrect choice. The total score for the WDCT and MDCT were both 48 points.

The internal consistency of the WDCT and the MDCT was tested using Cronbach's alpha as the indicator of reliability before the data were analyzed to answer the research questions. The cutoff value of an acceptable reliability coefficient is commonly set at 0.7. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients of the WDCT and the MDCT were 0.735 and 0.698 respectively, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

For research question one, both quantitative data and qualitative data were analyzed. Quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 22.0 (SPSS 22.0), with descriptive statistics analysis, one-way repeated measures ANOVA, and paired sample t-tests. Descriptive data analysis was used to obtain the mean score, standard deviation, and other information pertaining to the data from the MDCT and WDCT. One-way repeated measures ANOVA and paired samples t-test were conducted to identify whether students' performance in the MDCT and the WDCT varied across speech acts, social power and ranking of imposition. The qualitative data from the interview were analyzed according to the content analysis method.

As for research question two, the correlation analysis was conducted in order to reveal whether or not and how Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic awareness and production were correlated. Before the analysis, two assumptions for Pearson correlation analysis were checked: linearity and bivariate normally distribution. The results are discussed next.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

CHINESE LEARNERS' PRAGMATIC AWARENESS AND PRODUCTION

QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

The statistical analysis of the WDCT and the MDCT showed an overview of the participants' pragmatic awareness and production. Table 2 presents the results. Compared with the total score of 48 points, the mean scores of MDCT (30.306) and WDCT (34.677) were relatively low.

TABLE 2. Descriptive statistics of pragmatic awareness and production

	N	Total score	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Awareness	85	48	8	48	30.306	10.909	-0.392	-0.583
Production	85	48	23	44	34.677	5.010	-0.308	-0.150

The participants' performances in the WDCT and the MDCT by speech acts were examined. In the MDCT, the highest score (10.447) was found for request speech act, followed by apology (10.306), and the lowest score was for the speech act of refusal (9.553). One-way repeated measures ANOVA showed that the average scores for the speech act of apology, refusal and request in the MDCT were not significantly different at 0.05 level, $F(2,168) = 1.464$, $p(0.234) > 0.05$. There were no significant differences in the scores for apology and refusal, $p(.181) > 0.05$, apology and request, $p(.818) > 0.05$, and refusal and request, $p(.084) > 0.05$. The results indicated that the

participants' awareness of the appropriate utterances to make apology, refusal and request did not vary significantly.

In the WDCT, the participants performed the best in request speech act (12.465), followed by refusal (12.382), and they scored the lowest in the speech act of apology (9.829). One-way repeated measures ANOVA showed that the average scores for the speech act of apology, refusal and request in the WDCT were significantly different at 0.05 level, $F (2, 168) = 62.768$, p (.000) < 0.05. Table 3 presents the results in terms of the differences when the three speech acts were compared in pairs. The results showed that the difference between the average scores of refusal and request was not significant, p (.676) > 0.05. However, significant differences were identified between the average scores of apology and request, p (.000) < 0.05, and between apology and refusal, p (.000) < 0.05. The results indicated that the significant difference in speech act production was mainly caused by the low scores for apology.

TABLE 3. Difference in production by speech acts

		Mean difference	Std. Error	Sig.(two-tailed)
Pair 1	Apology- Refusal	-2.553	.296	.000
Pair 2	Apology- Request	-2.635	.298	.000
Pair 3	Refusal- Request	-0.082	.196	.676

Subsequently, the paired samples t-test was conducted for the difference in the average scores between situations with low and equal social power in the MDCT and the WDCT. Table 4 presents the results. The participants scored higher in low power situations (15.341) than in equal power situations (14.965) in the MDCT, but the difference was not significant, t = -0.615, p (.540) > 0.05. However, the difference with regard to production was significant, t = 3.516, p (.001) < 0.05 (See Table 4). The results indicated that the participants' speech act production varied in equal power situations and in low power situations. Considering the average scores in equal power situations (17.812) and in low power situations (16.865), it can be suggested that the participants' ability to produce appropriate speech acts decreased significantly with the decrease of social power distance.

TABLE 4. t-test for equal and low social power situations

	Social power	N	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig(two-tailed)
Awareness	Equal	85	14.965	5.795	-0.615	84	.540
	Low	85	15.341	6.469			
Production	Equal	85	17.812	2.791	3.516	84	.001
	Low	85	16.865	2.800			

Next, the mean scores for situations with high and low imposition degrees in the MDCT and the WDCT were compared respectively. Table 5 presents the results. The results showed that the participants' awareness did not vary much in low and high imposition situations (t = 0.427, p (.671) > 0.05. However, the difference with regard to production was significant, t = -5.021, p (.000) < 0.05 (See Table 5). The average score was higher in low-imposition degree situations (18.065) than in high-imposition degree situations (16.612). The results indicated that the participants' ability to produce appropriate speech acts decreased significantly with the increase of imposition degree.

TABLE 5. t-test for high and low imposition situations

	Imposition degree	N	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig(two-tailed)
Awareness	High	85	15.294	6.330	0.427	84	.671
	Low	85	15.012	6.169			
Production	High	85	16.612	3.263	-5.021	84	.000
	Low	85	18.065	2.337			

In summary, the quantitative analysis showed that Chinese EFL learners were relatively weak in identifying and producing appropriate language in contexts. Their pragmatic awareness did not differ significantly by speech acts, social power and imposition degree. However, their productive responses differed significantly in situations with different social power and imposition degree, and they did better in equal power situations and low imposition situations. Among the three speech acts, Chinese learners encountered difficulties the most in making apologies.

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

Analysis of the raters' comments showed three major findings. One was the lack of certain strategies in some situations. A case in point was the language produced in the two high-imposition situations of apology (situation 1 & 2), in which the speaker makes an apology for breaking a classmate's CD or leaving a professor's book on the train. For example, the speaker made an apology and explained why the offence happened in the utterance "*I'm so sorry that I broken it when I playing with my dog. Can you forgive me?*". However, raters rated the response as either 'problematic' or 'not acceptable' because they commented that a statement of regret and an explanation were not enough to deal with the serious mistakes. The raters had expected the response to include suggestion on how the speaker can rectify his/her mistakes.

Thirty-five responses in situation 1 (talking with a classmate) and forty-five responses in situation 2 (talking with a professor) were rated as problematic. This finding could explain the low average score for apology production. In addition, considering the social power parameter in the two situations, this result may, to some extent, account for the low average score in the low social power situations.

The second finding was the inappropriate use of strategies. For example, the raters viewed the direct strategy in request situations as demanding, just like in the utterance "*I know you are good at giving speech, so I want to ask for your help. You just take a look at it to check the grammar and organization.*" In this utterance, the external modification of complimenting the hearer was used to mitigate the request rather than the employment of the conventionally indirect request, such as "Could you please…" Besides, more direct strategies were employed in the high-imposition situations. For example, fifteen participants produced direct strategies in situation 9 (high-imposition situation), while no direct strategies were found in situation 11 (low-imposition situation).

The third finding was the misuse of linguistic forms. One example was the use of language mood. In the refusal situations, some students wrote "*I'm very glad to help you, but I'm so busy today, sorry.*" or "*It's my pleasure to attend your party, but I have to do something with my cousin.*" Raters commented that the first parts of the utterances were likely to cause misunderstandings in communication, because they indicated that the speaker would accept the invitation or request, which were, however, followed by explanations of refusal. In those cases, subjunctive mood

should be used, such as "It would be my pleasure, but …" or "I would be glad to help you, but…".

Another misuse of linguistic forms that caused misunderstanding in communication was the use of the internal modifier "maybe", as in the sentence "*I'd like to, but I have some other things today. Maybe I can't take over for you. I'm sorry for that.*" The raters commented that "maybe" might cause confusion about whether the person was refusing a request or not.

In addition, students employed more modifiers when talking with a professor, such as the terms of address, but some modifiers were used inappropriately. For example, in the utterance "*It's great honor for me to work for you, but unluckily I have much other work to do. I feel very sorry.*" to refuse the professor's request in the low power situation, a special adjunct "It's my honor to…" was viewed as over polite.

The retrospective interview was analyzed for the participants' decision-making rationales. The results showed three major findings. First, being polite was an important consideration among Chinese EFL learners in communication. All of the interviewees mentioned the word "politeness" when describing how they completed the MDCT or the WDCT.

Second, social power was emphasized when the interviewees planned their language. Seven out of twelve interviewees mentioned that they would be more polite when talking with a professor, while more casual when the person they were talking to was a classmate. For example, Student 10 said, "*I chose the delicately expressed utterances… I need to use more words, more explanations and more honorifics when I was talking with a professor. Refusing a classmate was different from refusing a professor. I only need to tell him/her my thoughts.*" Student 3 explained that in doing the WDCT, "*If (I was talking) with elderly people, such as a professor, I would consider politeness. If with classmates, I would try to let him/her know that I was sincere, and express myself clearly. Talking with classmates could be casual.*" However, the contextual-internal variables that indicate the degree of imposition of the situations were seldom discussed by the interviewees, such as the severity of offence in making an apology, the degree of difficulty in fulfilling a refusal and the difficulty to request (Tada, 2005). Only two students mentioned that it was emergent in situation 8 (the student was going to catch the bus when she/he was asked by the professor to fill up a questionnaire), and they must refuse. However, they continued that they should try to make themselves polite and give clear explanations because they were talking with a professor.

Third, Chinese learners lacked the knowledge of the pragmatic meaning and force of different linguistic features and strategies to achieve their communicative intentions. Eight out of twelve interviewees expressed their difficulty in using linguistic features. For example, in completing the MDCT, student 2 expressed the difficulty in differentiating imperative sentences in choosing an option for the situation about borrowing a book from a classmate.

> "*I could not tell the difference between b (do you think I could borrow your copy? I'll get it back to you by this Friday.) and c (I want to borrow your copy. I'll get it back to you by this Friday.). I know that I do not need to consider too much about politeness when talking with people at my age, but I felt that maybe b (do you think…) was more appropriate here… I do not know the difference between the imperative sentence and the interrogative sentence to express the same idea.*"

Being unable to use an appropriate linguistic feature also influenced Chinese EFL learners' responses in completing the WDCT. Student 9 explained her difficulty in finding a proper sentence structure in refusing the professor's request to fill in a questionnaire.

> *"I thought this situation was more emergent than the previous one, so I can refuse directly, but I should give some explanations to make her understand me because she's a professor. I knew, while writing the sentence, that I should use a different sentence when talking with the professor from that one when talking with a classmate, but I could not feel the difference after I finished writing the sentence. It's really hard for me to find a (proper) sentence."*

In addition to the use of linguistic features, some interviewees talked about their problem in using the strategies to make speech acts. When recalling what she was thinking of in the situation of refusing a classmate's request for taking over her job, Student 1 said,

> *"Both a and b were only refusals with an apology or a wish. They gave me a sense of stalling off other people. I also thought that the last part of option c (You should have asked me earlier. Why don't you call Xu?) was like Chinese refusals. However, compared with a and b, I chose c…I should say more to make the other person less unhappy…Should I give more explanations (in this situation)? But do more explanations mean the exposure of an individual's privacy?"*

Student 12 expressed a similar idea in making an apology while completing the WDCT: *"I offered a repair in this situation (apologizing for leaving the professor's book on the train), but not in situation 4(forgetting to bring the book borrowed from the professor). I did it very casually because I do not know what a good apology is in American culture"*.

To summarise, the qualitative analysis showed that the participants had the consciousness and inclination to be polite, and they tried to vary their language according to the interlocutor's social power. However, they had difficulties in using appropriate strategies and linguistic features to achieve communicative intentions. A very serious problem they had to deal with was the pragmatic meaning and force of different linguistic forms and strategies.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PRAGMATIC AWARENESS AND PRODUCTION

The assumptions of linearity and bivariate normal distribution for correlation analysis were checked first. The skewness and kurtosis of pragmatic awareness and production were all between +1 and -1, showing that the data were relatively normally distributed (see Graph 1). The scatter plot shown in Graph 1 indicated linearity of pragmatic awareness and production.
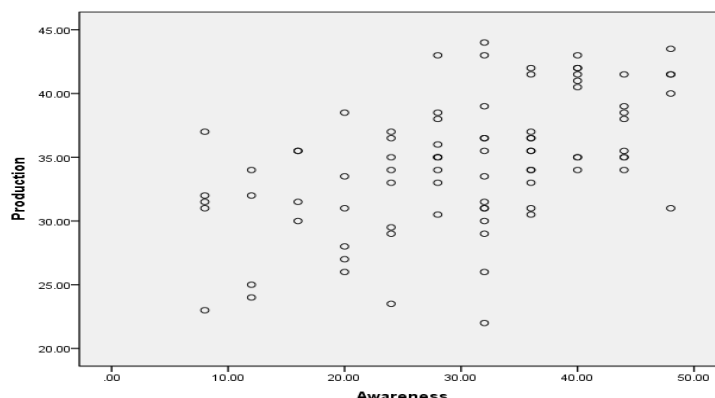
GRAPH 1. The scatter plot of the relationship between pragmatic awareness and production

The assumptions of linearity and bivariate normally distribution were satisfied, so the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was used to reveal whether pragmatic awareness was correlated with pragmatic production. The result showed that awareness and production were positively correlated, $r = 0.518$, p $(0.000) < 0.05$. The result suggested that the increase of pragmatic awareness can lead to the enhancement of L2 learners' production of appropriate language.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study found that Chinese EFL learners were still weak in identifying and producing contextually appropriate language, and their pragmatic awareness was significantly correlated with production. The results can be interpreted in the following ways. First, Chinese EFL learners' sociopragmatic competence is still underdeveloped, and this underdevelopment has much to do with their ignorance of the different degrees of imposition present in different social contexts. For example, they failed to produce the "offer of repair" strategy in the high imposition situations of apology, and they used more direct strategies in the high imposition situations of request. The retrospective interview revealed that they did not pay much attention to the imposition degrees involved in social contexts. This finding is contradictory to other studies in which the imposition degree has been found to influence Chinese speakers' speech act production, such as Wang (2001). However, it is consistent with Li's (2009), who found that the degree of imposition was not a main factor that Chinese EFL learners considered in communication, but social power was. The consistency may be related to the use of similar data elicitation method because Li (2009) also used recall protocol interviews to investigate Chinese learners' thought processes in using request strategies after they completed a role-play task.

Compared with the ignorance of imposition degrees, Chinese EFL learners showed much concern about social power. This finding reflects the influence of Chinese culture. Chinese society has a hierarchical structure, where people have prescribed roles to play in social interactions, and those at the relatively low social status are expected to show enough politeness and respect to their superiors. In this society, personal relationship is emphasized in social interactions rather than the content of communication. Accordingly, the correct judgment of the interlocutor's social power and the appropriate use of language to represent the power distance are crucial to a successful communication (Li, 2009).

Second, the study indicates that Chinese EFL learners' pragmalinguistic knowledge needs to be expanded as they are still struggling with linguistic forms and strategies to achieve communicative functions. On the one hand, they cannot use correct linguistic forms to realize communicative intentions. On the other hand, they have trouble dealing with the connection between linguistic forms and pragmatic meaning and force that different forms may convey. The results suggest that it may take time for L2 learners to grasp the linguistic form and pragmatic force relation even after they have learned different linguistic forms. Given that the target population is the junior English-major graduates, this result is consistent with Hassal (2006) who found that the advanced L2 learner still has problems understanding the connection between linguistic form and pragmatic force, i.e. pragmalinguistics.

Chinese EFL learners' inadequate pragmatic knowledge is greatly influenced by their L1 transfer. For example, in making a request, they could not differentiate the use of imperative sentence and interrogative sentence when completing the MDCT and in the WDCT, direct request strategies were employed. The two problems reflect learners' dependence on L1 pragmalinguistic knowledge. In Chinese, the employment of imperatives is the typical Chinese way to make a request, such as 我想要 (I want to/I'd like to), and native speakers of Chinese commonly resort to external modifications to mitigate the offence caused by direct requests. However, the imperatives are the least effective way to make a request in English; English speakers would prefer internal modifications, such as the bi-clausal structures and verbal conditionals to lessen the force of requests (Faerch & Kasper, 1989).

Another example of the influence of L1 transfer is the use of "maybe" in refusal. In Chinese, "maybe" (可能) expresses a kind of uncertainty, and when it is used in refusal speech act, the speaker intends to mitigate the offence that direct refusals may cause. Hsieh (2010) finds that direct refusals with such a mitigating device as "maybe" in Chinese can still convey politeness. However, in the present study the direct transfer of "maybe" to English made it unclear as to whether a request was refused.

Moreover, the increase in the level of Chinese learners' pragmatic awareness can predict the enhancement of their ability to produce appropriate language. This result corroborates previous studies (Tada, 2005; Rafieyan et al., 2014; Bardovi-Harlig, 2014), and confirms Schmidt's proposal (1995) that L2 learner's conscious noticing or awareness of the target features is the essential condition for L2 pragmatic acquisition. In the process of language learning, L2 learners have to deal with the challenges of resisting the application of their L1 knowledge to the second language when the L1 knowledge is a source of errors. Noticing the gap between what they have already known and what they should know is quite necessary to help L2 learners deal with the challenges. For foreign language learners who are not provided with adequate L2 input and opportunities to use the language, this awareness is more crucial in order to convert the limited input into intake.

In addition, the lower score in the MDCT than that in the WDCT needs to be addressed here. This result may be due to the different methods used to complete the WDCT and the MDCT. The interviewees mentioned that they tended to write down the first utterance that came to their minds when completing the WDCT, but they had to compare the three options while doing the MDCT. Since the distracters in the MDCT were chosen from Chinese EFL learners' responses with the correction of the grammatical mistakes, identifying the distracters is harder than writing down a sentence in the WDCT.

Chinese EFL learners' different scores in the MDCT and the WDCT may also reflect Schmidt's (1995) proposal for noticing and understanding. Both noticing and understanding contribute to L2 production. On the one hand, noticing the linguistic forms may, to some extent, directly lead to the performance of those forms in completing the WDCT. An example is that two students in the interview attributed their decision on the sentence "I'd love to, but…" when refusing a classmate's invitation to a party to the fact that they have seen other people use it. On the other hand, understanding also influences their language use. When the interviewees expressed their indecisiveness in using different linguistic forms and strategies in certain situations, they displayed a lack of understanding of pragmatic rules in language use. Compared with the language production in the WDCT, identifying the correct option in the MDCT may mostly depend on L2 learners' understanding of L2 pragmatics. In other words, only when they can "analyze", "compare", "reflect", and "comprehend" the general principle, rule or pattern in language learning, are they likely to score high in the MDCT. In other words, understanding is the higher level of awareness, and it may take more time to develop than the use of the linguistic forms as a result of noticing. This finding echoes the view of Bardovi-Harlig (2014) who says, "plausible meanings may be gradually associated with a conventional expression and refined rather than acquired at the same time as the expression" (p.53).

Chinese EFL learners' weak pragmatic competence reveals pedagogical problems in English education in China. Although the pragmatic aspect of English use has been established as one of the objectives in the Teaching Syllabus for English Majors (MOE (Ministry of Education of China), 2000), there has not been much attention paid to its teaching. Two students during the interview complained about the lack of pragmatic teaching in class. They said,

> *"I don't really understand the American culture. My teachers rarely teach what to say in different situations, and even when they do teach, they teach what I have already known."* and *"I think I did not learn much about how to speak English appropriately. My teachers encouraged us to use the language, but we were not told whether our language was proper."*

The interviewees' words suggest that Chinese EFL learners' weak pragmatic competence can be attributed to the lack of attention to L2 pragmatics in English teaching. Teachers show much concern about their students' language accuracy and fluency, but they may not realize the importance of pragmatic knowledge in communication. Even if they do, they are not clear about what their students have already learned and what students still need to know about L2 pragmatics. Therefore, it is necessary to reform the English teaching in China. On the one hand, the teaching syllabus should be updated. As the syllabus (MOE, 2000) only states an abstract and general requirement for appropriate language use, it is necessary to provide more specific guidelines to help teachers interpret and follow the requirement in their teaching practice. It should also specify the pragmatic knowledge which students at different levels of English learning need to acquire. On the other hand, teachers should consciously integrate pragmatic knowledge in English teaching, such as the pragmatic meaning and force that different strategies and linguistic forms convey in English and the influence of contextual variables on language appropriateness, particularly the degree of imposition. In view of the finding that Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic awareness was positively correlated with their pragmatic production, some form of awareness-raising activities can be used to promote their

pragmatic competence. For example, teachers can encourage students to compare the speech acts produced in their first language and the target language. Teachers can also employ an MDCT to provide opportunities for students to compare the use of different utterances in the same situation.

This study investigated the current level of Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic competence in terms of their awareness and production. Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic competence needs to be promoted, and the increase in the level of their pragmatic awareness can predict the enhancement of their ability to produce appropriate language. The findings of the study will contribute to the body of knowledge about Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic competence, especially their productive ability to make speech acts, and will inform the way that English language is taught in China by providing information and suggestions on pedagogical intervention for L2 pragmatics such as the attention to the influence of L1 transfer on the learning of L2 pragmatic knowledge and the way in which L2 pragmatic knowledge can be consciously integrated into English language teaching. Future research can investigate the influence of the current learning environment in China on the learning of L2 pragmatics, such as the syllabi, course design and teacher beliefs and practices, because formal education in the EFL learning environment plays a major role in L2 learners' language development. Moreover, the factors contributing to the learning process can also be investigated, such as the effect of different instructional methods and individual variables (Kasper, 1996; Kasper & Rose, 2001), in order to determine how L2 pragmatic competence can be promoted.

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