

An Experimental Study of L2 Pragmatic Development in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract. The aim of this research was to examine whether Chinese learners of English develop their L2 pragmatic productive competence in the learning context in which certain types of instruction (i.e., explicit, enhanced and input-output) they received and to investigate the effectiveness of the three different instructions, if any. All together ninety Chinese university students with three different proficiency levels participated in this study. Their L2 pragmatic productive competence was elicited by Discourse Completion Test (DCT) through a pretest and a posttest. Results showed that pragmatic competence and grammatical competence were two independent abilities, and the development of the former did not rely on the latter. Additionally, the effectiveness of the explicit instruction is more salient than the other two types of instruction, for the students received explicit instruction tend to adopt the conventional indirect request strategy, whereas the other two groups of students did not demonstrate this tendency. Moreover, the explicit instruction failed to affect the acquisition of syntactic downgrading or lexical downgrading significantly; however, the enhanced instruction was beneficial to the mastery of “please” by L2 learners.

1. Introduction

Traditionally, language pedagogy has empathized form-focused instruction. The Grammar Translation Method and the Audiolingual Method both involve attempts to teach learners grammar, differing only in how this is to be accomplished [1]. More recently, however, second language acquisition (SLA) has begun to focus on the interface between explicit and implicit instruction. According to Ellis, all language instruction constitutes a form of intervention in the process of learning a second language (L2). In this respect, instructed language learning differs from the naturalistic language learning of L1 and in untutored L2 acquisition. Explicit instruction refers to direct instruction providing learners with explicit information about the target of the instruction, often together with opportunities to practice the target; implicit instruction aims to attract rather than to direct attention to form.

There is little research examining the effectiveness of instruction, especially the effectiveness of different instructional treatments, in interlanguage pragmatic development. The current study aims to examine the effectiveness of three instructional means, namely Explicit, Enhanced, and Input-output, in the process of L2 pragmatic development of Chinese university students. This study tries to answer the following questions:

- 1) Is instruction contributed to more uses of request strategies by the intermediate, intermediate advanced, advanced Chinese university students in EFL learning context?
- 2) Does instruction facilitate learners' acquisition of request modification?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Noticing Hypothesis

Schmidt claimed that in order to learn any aspect of the L2 (from sounds, to words, to grammar, to pragmatics) learners need to notice the relevant material in the linguistic data afforded by the environment [2]. Noticing refers to the brain registering the new material, with some fleeting awareness, even if beyond their understanding how the new element works. N. Ellis emphasized the

importance to the concept of “noticing” in SLA theory, a term borrowed from neuroscience, for its special role in the initial registration of memory traces, without which, implicit learning will never fulfill its task [3].

SLA investigates how input interacts with learners’ cognitive processes, transfers into intake, and results in output. Learning effects can be consequences of learners’ conscious processing. Consciousness at the noticing level is regarded as a prerequisite for subsequent learning to happen. Gass’s SLA model, simplified in Fig. 1, demonstrates the dynamic process of the component stages in the SLA process [4].

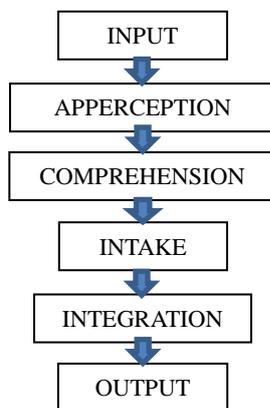


Fig. 1 A framework of basic components in the SLA process

2.2 Studies on L2 Requests

Bella argued that “requests are one of the most well studied speech acts in the ILP literature, due to both to their frequency of use and their notorious face-threatening nature that renders them ideal candidates for the study of sociopragmatic competence in general and polite behavior in particular” [5]. Besides, the majority of L2 learner’s interactions with target language speakers occur in the form of requests [6], and as a result, requests can be observed by L2 learners in the study abroad environment in a variety of contexts. Further, in order to make requests in the target language, learners need to have not only a certain degree of linguistic competence, which involves the use of a number of syntactic structures and lexical devices, but, in addition, they need to understand the rules of appropriate usage in the target culture.

Schmidt’s [7] study of a Japanese artist Wes was the first longitudinal study of L2 requests. Schmidt investigated the influence of social-affective individual differences, such as integrative or instrumental motivation, on the development of pragmatic ability and discussed the relationship between grammatical and pragmatic competence.

Ellis [8] examined the acquisition of L2 requests by two beginners (pre-teens) in the context of naturally-occurring classroom discourse. Findings show that learners failed to produce the full range of L2-like request types in either the initial or final phrases. His conclusion was that classroom contexts can foster L2 learners’ communicative needs, but do not fulfill a sufficient condition of real sociolinguistic needs.

Achiba [9] focused on the pragmatic development in requesting of a seven-year-old Japanese girl (an absolute beginner of L2 learning) over seventeen months spent in the target speech community, Australia. Data include diary-entries and tape-recorded data.

Schauer [10, 11] examined the internal and external devices used to mitigate requests by a group of sixteen German SA learners in Great Britain. She noted a clear pattern of development in the use of mitigating devices by the learners studying abroad that was linked to the length of stay in the target environment. Schauer also found several deviations from the norm that showed great individual variation.

Scarcella’s [12] cross-sectional investigation of requests is one of the earliest developmental studies in ILP. She compared requests made by beginners and advanced learners of English (with Arabic as a first language) with those of American English native speakers. Results revealed that both beginner and advanced level learners used more direct strategies than her native speakers.

Scarcella also argued that the acquisition of pragmalinguistic knowledge precedes that of sociopragmatic knowledge.

Nearly two decades after Scarcella's study, Trosborg [13] examined the development of pragmatic competence in requesting, complaining and apologizing by Danish learners of English. She analyzed the realization strategies, directness levels employed in the illocutions mentioned and the types of moves (initiating moves, responding moves, follow up moves) used.

Hill's [14] studied request utterances made by Japanese low, intermediate and advanced learners of English and compared them to native controls. Hill found that his learners employed more direct strategies than the native speaker group. Hill also found that his learner increased their employment of external request modifiers relative to their proficiency level towards the native speakers' use. The analysis of the use of internal downgraders revealed that both linear and non-linear developments may be typical for learners' acquisition of pragmatic features.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

There were three groups of participants in the study, all together ninety Chinese university students with three different proficiency levels (i.e., intermediate level, intermediate level and advanced level). They took a placement examination after their matriculation, and were divided into 3 classes with equal number. The three class means on the test and other demographic information can be found in Table 1.

Table 1 General information for the three classes

Class	Size	Proficiency		Age			Male/Female
		Mean	SD	Min.	Max.	Mean	
Explicit	30	50.21	21.23	17	22	20.93	13/17
Enhanced	30	64.35	21.01	18	21	20.66	15/15
Input-output	30	47.26	19.67	19	23	19.58	19/11

3.2 Instruments and Procedures

Although there are many ways to collect learners' productive data in interlanguage pragmatics, Discourse Completion Test (DCT) is the most frequently used due to its great advantages. DCTs allow researchers to collect a large amount of data in a fairly short period of time, and it is inexpensive. More importantly, following Turnbull, by employing DCTs, researchers could control certain variables, and then it would be easier to identify the mechanisms underlying the speech act behavior [15]. The DCT in this study consisted of eight scenarios created by combining three variables: Social Power, Social Distance and Imposition as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Combination of P, D and I in the request scenarios

Variables	Request scenarios							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Power	+	-	-	+	+	+	-	-
Distance	-	+	-	+	-	+	+	-
Imposition	+	+	+	+	-	-	-	-

A DCT pretest was administered to the three classes before teaching. A posttest was administered two weeks later after the actual teaching. Fig.2 is an example of DCT item of the current study.

You need to print out a letter but your printer is not working. You decide to ask your roommate Jack if you can use his printer. Jack is in his room reading a book as you knock at the door and walk in.
 [Jack: Hey, how are you?]
 You: _____
 [Jack: Sure, go for it.]

Fig. 2 Example of DCT item

3.3 Methods of Analysis

The directness / strategy categories of my classification scheme were based on Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper [16] and Trosborg. In the Cross Cultural Speech Act Realization Project, Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper provided L2 pragmatics researchers with nine request strategy types on the scale of degree of directness. Apart from the selection of a particular request strategy, speakers can further increase or decrease the force of their requests by using internal and / or external modifiers.

4. Results and Discussions

The results of pretest showed that all three classes adopted very rare request strategies; however, they showed a great tendency to opt out, namely 79.1% for Explicit, 82.2% for Enhanced, and 74.4% for Input-output. It appeared that the Input-output class, whose proficiency level was the same as that of the Explicit class and lower than that of Enhanced class, opted out less than the other two classes, whereas the Enhanced class opted out most in various scenarios. As for the directness level of strategy use, the most frequently used one was direct strategy (17.9% for Explicit, 14.2% for Enhanced, and 20.2% for Input-output).

We could conclude from the results of posttest that all the three class increased their use of requesting strategies, compared to the results of pretest, due to the great decrease in opting out options. The explicit class demonstrated the greatest progress with the rates of opting out declining to 43.2%, followed by the Enhanced class 51.7% and Input-output class 56.3%.

It is noteworthy to mention that participants in this study opted out in a variety of scenarios, especially on the pretest, which probably means learners were lack of metapragmatic knowledge, or incapable of recognizing the relevant contextual factors, or unfamiliar with the target language norms. On the other hand, more produced enhancement produced better effects on these learners' pragmatic acquisition. Thus, we could confidently response to the first research question with the answer that instruction can help to increase the use of requesting strategies in this study.

Moving to the modification data, we had to integrate all the modification strategies into three categories: syntactic downgraders, please, and support move, simply because some other subcategories of modification did not appear in this study or appeared with a very low rate. As summarized in Table 3, percentages were calculated on the basis of total requesting strategies.

Table 3 Percentage of request modification by class and test

Class	Test	Downgrader	Please	Support	Total
Explicit	Pretest	0	11.2	0.5	11.7
	Posttest	4.5	8.6	2.8	15.9
Enhanced	Pretest	0	9.8	1.1	10.9
	Posttest	3.6	13.7	14.1	31.4
Input-output	Pretest	0	8.9	0.8	9.7
	Posttest	1.9	10.5	4.8	17.2

Statistical analysis revealed that there was not significant differences between-class or within-class in the use of syntactic downgraders. As for the usage of Please, the three classes showed no significant differences in pretest and posttest; however, it is interesting to notice that explicit class overall used less this strategy in posttest than in pretest. Further, Enhanced and Input-output classes performed much better in producing support moves than Explicit class.

The reason why there was on salient progress on the use of request modification could be syntactic downgraders in English is more grammatical than pragmatic, so learners cannot master the usage of it until their proficiency level improve.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, pragmatic competence and grammatical competence were two independent competences and the explicit instruction played a better role in L2 pragmatic development than

other two teaching pedagogy in this study, for the students received explicit instruction tend to adopt the conventional indirect request strategy. Moreover, the explicit instruction failed to affect the acquisition of syntactic downgrading or lexical downgrading significantly; however, the enhanced instruction was very helpful when mastering “please” by L2 learners.

The pragmatic competence could develop in EFL learning context, and instruction would be beneficial to their development, this is probably because instruction itself may arouse learners’ attention, “noticing” we call it in SLA. It is not difficult to find that different types and features of instruction would catch different angles of the pragmatic characteristics, and then result in divergent effectiveness accordingly.

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