

Learning English Pragmatics in China: An Investigation into Chinese EFL Learners' Perceptions of Pragmatics

May 2015 – Volume 19, Number 1

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Abstract

This paper reports the findings of a study investigating Chinese English language learners' perceptions of pragmatics in the EFL learning context in China. A total of 237 Chinese EFL first-year university students participated in the study. A questionnaire and focus group interviews were used to collect data about learners' pragmatics insights during their English language acquisition process. The findings of the study have provided empirical evidence for English educators and practitioners in China, indicating that there have been substantive changes in Chinese university students' perceptions of English pragmatics. Except for organizational knowledge, they have a strong desire to acquire English pragmatic knowledge in their English language learning process, and would like to be pragmatically competent language users. This inquiry emphasizes the necessity to introduce pragmatics use and practice, which can effectively facilitate Chinese English learners to achieve pragmatic competence in communication.

Keywords: English pragmatics, pragmatic knowledge, perceptions, Chinese university EFL students

Introduction

With rapid economic development and further implementation of reforms and an opening international policy, the role of English has become increasingly important in the daily life of people in China. Wu (2009), the ex-Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Education of China, has indicated that mastering English could enable Chinese people to successfully participate in international politics, trade and business and in information communication. Indeed, to meet this imperative, English has become the dominant foreign language in the curricula of educational institutions and in foreign language learning in China (Chang, 2006). It is estimated that there are 440-650 million English learners and users in China alone, making it the largest English learning and using population in the world (Bolton, 2003; He & Zhang, 2010; Jiang, 2002). While the number of students learning English in China is impressive, there is little research into English language students' perceptions of pragmatics in College English learning and teaching. This paper presents findings from the study addressing this issue.

Enormous government and non-government funding has been committed to the development and delivery of the English curriculum at all levels of education in China. Yet, students' learning outcomes do not always satisfy the government's expectations in a society where English is increasingly used as the lingua franca (He, 1988; Zheng & Huang, 2010). In other words, there is a mismatch between government expectations and students' interest in learning English which, for students, lies in the pragmatics of English learning and teaching. The term 'pragmatics' can be defined in various ways from different perspectives, and in applied linguistics, mostly focuses on the relationship between language use and the social and interpersonal context of interaction (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003; Roever, 2010). For the purpose of this paper, pragmatics means the proper and appropriate use of the English language in corresponding contexts.

In universities in China, English is a compulsory course that all students are required to complete and as a consequence, College English is receiving considerable attention from the Ministry of Education of China. Chinese English education experts have compiled the unified *College English Curriculum Requirements* (CECR) that has been approved by the Ministry of Education as a guideline for the teaching and learning of English. All universities are required to carry out their College English teaching and learning as set out in the CECR.

For example, one of the CECR (2007) guidelines states that: "The objective of College English is to develop students' ability to use English in a well-rounded way, especially in listening and speaking, so that in their future studies and careers as well as social interactions they will be able to communicate effectively, ..." (Chinese College English Education and Supervisory Committee, 2007, p.18). The objective has signified that College English learning and teaching should move beyond a linguistic model to focus on the communicative purpose, requiring both the pragmatic knowledge of a language and the ability to use that knowledge in social interactions (Barron, 2003; Hymes, 1972; Widdowson, 1992). This directive highlights the need for pragmatics to be included in the curriculum.

Pragmatic competence is an important ingredient for language proficiency (Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Palmer, 1996, 2010; Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980), which, to non-native English speakers, refers to the ability of a second language (L2) learner or a foreign language learner to use the target language appropriately in corresponding social contexts (Nureddeen, 2008; Savignon, 1991; Taguchi, 2009). For example, pragmatically competent learners need to utilize a range of linguistic forms, socio-cultural norms and rules, and processing skills in real time communication (Taguchi, 2009). However, English pragmatic knowledge and competence have been poorly taught in China for a long period of time. As a result, upon completing their English studies, Chinese students are not able to communicate effectively in English in social interactions.

Previous studies have indicated that Chinese College English learners' pragmatic competence, particularly their pragmatic knowledge was poor (Ji, 2008; Wang, 2010; Zhang, 2002). Pragmatic knowledge can be described as the knowledge that facilitates interlocutors' ability to interpret discourse by relating utterances to their meanings, the intentions of language users and the language use settings (Bachman & Palmer, 1996, 2010). Studies indicate that some learners do not know what pragmatic knowledge or pragmatic competence is (Ji, 2008; Liu, 2004; Men & Liu, 2000; Zhang, 2002). Past studies indicate that raising language learners' perceptions of pragmatics helps them obtain information about pragmatic features of language (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998; Neizgoda & Röver, 2001).

As indicated in the previous research, there is a close connection between language learners' pragmatic perceptions and their pragmatic competence (Schauer, 2006). Having good perceptions of pragmatics enables language learners to acquire adequate pragmatic knowledge and encourages the development of pragmatic competence (Bardovi-Harlig & Griffin, 2005; Martínez-Flor & Alcón-Soler, 2007; Takahashi, 2001; Tateyama, 2001). There is a need for Chinese College English students to increase their pragmatic knowledge which will enable them to become pragmatically competent language users.

It has been suggested by past studies that the language learning environment, especially classroom teaching, and language learners themselves play important roles in improving learners' pragmatic perceptions (Alcón-Soler, 2005; Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998; Bardovi-Harlig & Griffin, 2005; Martínez-Flor & Alcón-Soler, 2007). These aspects, particularly the third aspect, appear neglected in College English language teaching and learning in China. This study explores Chinese College English students' opinions of the pragmatic perceptions in the language acquisition process.

As Chinese College English students are English as foreign language (EFL) learners, there is a necessity to understand their perceptions of English pragmatics that impact their learning and use of English as a target language. To date, there is little specific research focusing on Chinese EFL learners' perceptions of pragmatics in their language learning process. It is this gap in the research that this study addresses by posing the following two questions:

RQ1: How do Chinese university EFL students perceive pragmatic knowledge in College English learning?

RQ2: What are their perceptions of pragmatics in College English learning?

Empirical evidence regarding Chinese university EFL students' perceptions of English pragmatics is provided by addressing these two research questions. It contributes significantly to our understanding of the present EFL teaching situation in China, and offers a new perspective for English language educators and practitioners into the teaching and learning of pragmatics.

Methods

Participants

Participants in the study were first-year university students from a second-tier university in Shanghai China studying College English courses in the second semester. As approximately 80% of universities in China belong to the second-tier group, the sample university can make generalizations and provide valuable empirical data for this study. Data was collected after students had completed their first semester of university study. This allowed them to have adapted to study at the university and to have acquired enough English proficiency to participate in the research.

A total of 237 students completed the questionnaire (213 male and 24 female students). All participants were adult learners, who were over 18 years old. Among the students, 11 of them (4.64%) majored in liberal arts, 122 (51.48%) majored in science or engineering, and 104 (43.88%) specialized in other subjects. Fourteen students (5.91%) had learned English for less than six years, 190 students (80.17%) had learned English for six to ten years, and 33 (13.92%) for over ten years. Only one student (0.42%) reported having overseas English language learning experience. From the study group, 18 students (11 male and 7 female students) volunteered to participate in focus group interviews anonymously. These 18 students were divided into two groups, nine in each group. All participants were informed by the researcher regarding the meaning of linguistic terms, such as 'pragmatics,' 'pragmatic knowledge,' 'pragmatic competence,' etc., before beginning this study so that they could better understand the content of the research and resolve misunderstandings raised in the data collection process.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire designed for this study consisted of five multiple-choice, close-ended questions, 10 Likert-type questions, and two open-ended questions to explore students' perceptions of pragmatics in familiar situations. Questions were adapted from previous studies or were modified questions from the literature (for example, see Ji, 2008; Keshavarz, Eslami & Ghahraman, 2006; Nureddeen, 2008; Yuan & Shen, 2009). Ten Likert-type questions with 5-point multiple choice answers range from: 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree. Sample Likert-type questions used in the research were: *I think that the knowledge of how to use the language is as important as linguistic knowledge; I think teachers should teach us how to communicate with people, and how to use English appropriately in the classroom.* The raw data were grouped and statistically transformed into tables reporting frequency counts. Open-ended questions aimed to draw out students' personal responses regarding

English pragmatics in their language acquisition process. A sample open-ended question was: *What kinds of tasks do you think are necessary to improve students' communicative ability in English language teaching and learning?*

Focus group interviews

The aim of the focus group interviews in this study was to collect data about students' viewpoints on pragmatic knowledge and competence in College English learning. The interview questions were modified questions from the literature (for example, see Chen, 2009; Ersözülü, 2010; Hudson, 2001; Martínez-Flor & Alcón-Soler, 2007; Takahashi, 2001; Tuncer, 2009; Yılmaz, 2010; Zheng & Huang, 2010), and from the questionnaire data, and were prepared in both English and Chinese. Sample questions were: *What kind of knowledge do you need most at the present stage of English learning, for example, linguistic knowledge, pragmatic knowledge, or both? How important do you think it is to develop students' pragmatic competence?*

Interviews were conducted in Chinese because participants could understand the interview questions better and express themselves much more freely and accurately in their first language (L1). All written records were in Chinese and back translated (Brislin, 1970): translating from Chinese to English, and back to Chinese to ensure the reliability of the data. The data collected from interviews assisted in learning more about the students' understanding of pragmatics in their English language learning. Frequently, there was a convergence of interviewees' opinions across the two group interviews. The collected data were compared and the overlapping data were removed so as to avoid redundancy.

Prior to this research being conducted a detailed ethics application was prepared and approval was obtained from the Human Ethics Committee of Queensland University of Technology, Australia.

Results and discussion

The frequency data from the questionnaire and supporting focus group interview data are presented below. Table 1 displays students' views on linguistic knowledge and pragmatic knowledge. A moderate degree of impact was reported for Questions 1 and 2. For example, less than 40% of the students agreed that learning English grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation meant learning English, while nearly 60% of the students believed that they needed to acquire other knowledge besides linguistic knowledge. More than 65% of the students believed that the knowledge of how to use the language – pragmatic knowledge – was equally important as linguistic knowledge in learning a target language.

Table 1. Students' views on linguistic knowledge and pragmatic knowledge

Question	SD	D	N	A	SA
Q1	16.87%	40.51%	5.91%	29.54%	7.17%
Q2	10.97%	21.10%	2.53%	50.63%	14.77%

Note: SD= Strongly Disagree, D= Disagree, N= Neutral, A= Agree, SA= Strongly Agree
Q1 I believe learning English grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation means learning English.

Q2 I think that the knowledge of how to use the language is as important as linguistic knowledge (e.g., vocabulary and grammar).

From the above data, it appears that students recognize that knowledge other than linguistic knowledge is important in language learning. The data suggest that students seemed to be aware of the importance of pragmatic knowledge in the use of English. These data were supported by the interview data in which two students stated: “Pragmatic knowledge, together with linguistic knowledge...support each other and help language learners achieve their language competence” (Ann & Sunny, pseudonyms).

These findings highlight that College English students’ perceptions of the importance of pragmatics appear to differ from the exclusive focus on linguistic knowledge in traditionally prescribed English language courses. They reported in the interviews that students who were impacted by the traditional English language teaching and learning in China were taught that learning English meant developing their linguistic competence, such as grammar, vocabulary, and syntax, but this led to a large number of ‘mute’ and ‘deaf’ (Zhang, 2008; Zhao, 2009) English language learners with high performance in linguistics and low pragmatic awareness (Ann & Cindy, pseudonyms). With the publication and implementation of the third version of CECR in 2007, developing students’ ability to use English effectively has become the objective of Chinese College English learning and teaching.

When asked to list their preferences regarding language skills in the English classroom, more than 50% of the students responded that they wanted to learn communicative skills, less than 20% of the students wanted to acquire knowledge about using English for global communication, and around 13% indicated that they wanted to learn cultural knowledge. Only about 11% of the students preferred to learn linguistic knowledge (see Table 2).

Table 2. Knowledge students want to acquire most in the English classroom

Question	Linguistic knowledge	Cultural knowledge	Communicative skills	Knowledge about how to use English
Q11	11.39%	13.08%	56.54%	18.99%

Q11 What kind of knowledge do you want to learn most in your English classroom?

Additionally, a significant proportion of the students – 66% would like to gain the ability to communicate with people. Around 17% of the students indicated that they sought the ability to do well in English examinations, and approximately 12% of the students wanted to acquire the ability to read materials related to their majors. Some 5% indicated that they preferred to gain the ability to translate (see Table 3).

Table 3. Ability students want to gain most in English learning

Question	Ability to communicate with people	Ability to do well in English examinations	Ability to read materials related to my major	Ability to translate
Q12	66.24%	17.30%	11.81%	4.65%

Q12 What kind of abilities do you want to get most in learning English?

Being communicatively competent language users appeared to be College English students' learning aim (Shen & Yuan, 2013). This orientation was reflected by the data that suggested that College English learners understand the need to develop communicative competency in English. They were aware of the English language needs of the society and the new requirements of College English, as well as the importance of pragmatics in achieving English language competence. A strong degree of impact was reported for Question 5 (see Table 4), where more than 75% of the students wished to speak like English native speakers and would like to imitate native speakers' pronunciation and intonation. Question 3 investigated the students' learning purpose with only 30% of the students conceding that the main reason for them to learn English was to pass the examination. This finding is different from that of past research which indicated that Chinese College English students' major learning goal was to pass examinations, such as the College English Test (Band Four and Band Six) in order to get English certificates (Shi, 2000). It was noted that students would like to learn more language knowledge, not just that necessary to pass examinations. It shows that students want to competently use English in communication rather than merely get English certificates.

Table 4. Students' views on English language learning outcomes

Question	SD	D	N	A	SA
Q3	18.14%	51.48%	0.42%	19.41%	10.55%
Q5	11.39%	12.24%	1.27%	37.12%	37.98%

Note: SD= Strongly Disagree, D= Disagree, N= Neutral, A= Agree, SA= Strongly Agree
Q3 The main reason I need to learn English is to pass the examination.
Q5 I wish to speak like native English speakers and would like to imitate their pronunciation and intonation.

These results were further supported by the interview data that "enhancing pragmatic competence helps students get more opportunities and create better developing space for their future study and careers" (Kevin, pseudonym), and "effectively communicating with people in English can help people find good jobs in China" (Ann, pseudonym). Influenced by society and the Chinese English language learning context, students have a keen interest to learn to be pragmatically competent English language users through their English studies. One could suggest then that students would be responsive to classroom teaching and learning that is focused on pragmatic competence in communication.

Table 5 indicates students' views on communicative language instruction and practices, which facilitate the enhancement of language learners' pragmatic competence (Salmani-Nodoushan, 2007; Willis, 1996). A strong degree of impact was reported for Question 7 and Question 8. Around 70% of the students showed a strong preference that English class activities should be concentrated on communicative language teaching (CLT) and practice, with grammar explained only when necessary, and more than 81% of the students indicated that language teachers should teach students how to communicate with people and how to use English appropriately in classroom activities. A weak degree of impact was reported for Question 6, where less than 20% of the students indicated that communicative activities in the English class were a waste of time. In contrast, nearly 80% of the students held the opposite view. These results highlight students' realization of including CLT and practice in the classroom.

Table 5. Students' views on communicative language instruction and practices

Question	SD	D	N	A	SA
Q6	39.66%	40.09%	0.84%	11.81%	7.60%
Q7	6.74%	7.60%	5.06%	40.09%	40.51%
Q8	9.70%	16.88%	3.80%	40.93%	28.69%

Note: SD= Strongly Disagree, D= Disagree, N= Neutral, A= Agree, SA= Strongly Agree

Q6 Communicative activities are a waste of time in the English class.

Q7 I think teachers should teach us how to communicate with people, and how to use English appropriately.

Q8 I prefer my English class to be focused on communicative language teaching and practice, with grammar explained when necessary.

It was found that College English students seek to acquire pragmatic knowledge to be used in English language communication. Students also indicated that CLT and learning, which aimed at helping language learners effectively use the target language (Hiep, 2007), served to enhance their pragmatic competence in communication. This finding supports reports in the literature that CLT and learning tasks, which are used for communicative purposes, could help language learners effectively develop their pragmatic competence in a target language (Salmani-Nodoushan, 2007; Willis, 1996). Participants were asked to list the tasks deemed necessary to improve their communicative ability in English. There were at least two tasks listed by each respondent. Tasks were classified and presented in a frequency table as follows (see Table 6):

Table 6. Tasks to improve students' communicative ability

Tasks	Number	Percentage
1. Watching original English films and videos	196	82.70%
2. Reading original English materials (e.g., newspapers, magazines)	182	76.79%
3. Group discussions	178	75.11%
4. Debate	107	45.15%
5. Pair-work	102	43.04%
6. Learning to sing English songs	97	40.93%
7. Role-play	72	30.38%
8. Presentations	25	10.55%

As can be seen in the above table, more than 82% of the students indicated that watching original English films and videos was helpful in improving their communicative ability. Around 77% of the responses showed that students preferred to improve their communicative ability through reading original English materials and participating in group discussions. Classroom tasks of debate, pair-work and learning to sing English songs were similarly preferred by the students 45.15%, 43.04% and 40.93%, respectively. About 30% of the students indicated that role-play was their preferred task. Around 11% of the students specified that doing classroom presentations was their preferred task to improve their communicative ability.

Different explanations were given by the students in listing tasks they thought essential in developing their communicative ability. More than 50% of the respondents explained that it was helpful to Chinese university students to be exposed to original authentic English materials, such as English movies and videos, English newspapers and magazines, English news reports, English songs and so on. These were interesting and vivid teaching materials through which students could learn native-like English. Meanwhile, using these materials, students could develop a feel for the language that could help them improve their communicative ability (Cai, 2007).

The interview data support the findings from the questionnaire, indicating that students would like to be exposed to authentic learning materials, such as original English movies, songs, newspapers and magazines, as they believed that they could “learn authentic English from these authentic learning materials” (Martin, pseudonym). They would like to imitate “singers’ pronunciation and intonation” (Edgar, pseudonym), and “learn to use the colloquial English language from movies” (Martin, pseudonym). Film watching and newspaper or magazine reading were suggested as being more authentic strategies for students to obtain both linguistic and pragmatic knowledge. Students indicated that with the help of visual images and music, they “can better understand the

target language used in certain contexts” (Victor, pseudonym), and they “might have more interests to learn a language due to the influence of singers” (Edgar, pseudonym). Newspapers and magazines were also cited as providing all-around information in every aspect of life, and that “students cannot only learn English but also keep the interest of reading and not get bored of English learning” (Martin, pseudonym). English magazines were also suggested as a way of providing students with updated, authentic English language.

Around 22% of the students highlighted that tasks, such as group discussions, role-play, pair-work and debate, would help them gain confidence in their use of English. This finding is also reported in the literature which suggests that group work helps build up students’ confidence where individual differences can support other’s strengths and overcome shortcomings (Fushino, 2010; Hoegl & Gemuenden, 2001). Only two students indicated a preference for group work over whole class presentations, conceding that formal presenting in front of the others in class made them feel nervous as they were afraid of making mistakes, especially grammatical mistakes, which made them feel embarrassed and lose face.

The interview data also indicated that due to a lack of confidence in using a foreign language, College English students preferred to conduct tasks in groups. Working in groups they could ask others for help when they had difficulties, and they suggested that they might feel more safe and confident in group work. Accordingly, in classroom teaching and learning, pragmatically oriented tasks such as debates, role-play, group discussions and pair-work were more welcomed by participants in the study than individual presentations in learning English.

Participants were asked to list pragmatically oriented tasks that College English teachers most often used in classroom teaching. Respondents indicated that group discussion (27.43%), debate (28.27%) and pair-work (27.85%) were used in the classroom with a similar frequency. Role-play was the least-used task in classroom teaching at 16.45% (see Table 7).

Table 7. Pragmatically oriented tasks most often used in classroom teaching and learning

Question	Group discussion	Pair-work	Role-play	Debate
Q15	27.43%	27.85%	16.45%	28.27%

Q15 What tasks do your teachers most often use in classroom teaching and learning?

Though a moderate degree of impact was reported for Question 10, more than 50% of the students indicated their dislike of “grammar translation” and “vocabulary translation” methodology. In terms of the tasks currently used in the classroom, a moderate degree of impact was reported for Question 9. More than 67% of the students did not believe that the tasks applied in the classroom would provide them with sufficient knowledge and skills to improve their abilities to use English appropriately (see Table 8). It appears that the traditional teacher-centered grammar translation approach is outdated. As students want to acquire more knowledge of the use of the English language and be given more opportunities to practice their English knowledge,

it is essential for language teachers to effectively organize student-centered classrooms that could meet students' needs.

Table 8. Students' views on classroom learning and teaching

Question	SD	D	N	A	SA
Q9	10.13%	56.97%	6.74%	16.46%	9.70%
Q10	10.55%	40.93%	0.84%	37.98%	9.70%

Note: SD= Strongly Disagree, D= Disagree, N= Neutral, A= Agree, SA= Strongly Agree
 Q9 Tasks used in English class provide me with knowledge and skills to improve my ability to use English appropriately.

Q10 I like grammar and vocabulary explanations, and sentence drills in my English class.

More than 82% of the students expressed their dissatisfaction with the present College English teaching. Students stated that current teaching was teacher-centered (Yuan & Shen, 2013) and that teachers paid little attention to developing students' pragmatic competence. According to the findings of this study, College English teachers spent most of the time in class explaining linguistic knowledge in detail, such as grammar, vocabulary, sentence structures, and so on. Students were not given chances or time to practice their English language ability in the classroom (Shen & Yuan, 2013; Zhao, 2009). Moreover, College English teaching is examination-oriented. This kind of assessment was described as the reason why both students and teachers focused their attention on passing the College English Test (Band Four and Band Six) which, by extension, might provide some explanation as to why less time was spent on developing students' pragmatic competence.

These results indicated that current College English teaching did little to help the development of students' pragmatic competence, in spite of the fact that they were concerned about achieving pragmatic competence within their study time at the university. Students had high expectations for successfully communicating with others in English after completing their university study.

The research data for this study indicate that Chinese College English students have recognized the importance of acquiring pragmatic knowledge in their English learning process. Their English learning goal is not simply to pass examinations to get English certificates. They would like to obtain knowledge about communicative skills, as well as the ability to communicate with people in their English language acquisition process. They wish to become communicatively competent English language users. Students indicated their dissatisfaction with the current College English teaching in China, which they believe cannot effectively help them improve their pragmatic competence. They requested more pragmatically oriented tasks, and authentic materials to be involved in the English language learning and teaching.

Conclusion

The findings of the study indicate that Chinese College English students' perceptions of English pragmatics have undergone significant transformation. It could be concluded that informed by the needs of society and the CECR, students recognize the importance

of the use of English in social interactions. Students value pragmatic knowledge while acquiring linguistic knowledge, which assists to enhance their pragmatic competence. They understand the significance of developing their pragmatic competence in the English language learning process, leading to language competence in communication. It was also found that lacking sufficient pragmatic knowledge instruction and practice in College English teaching made it difficult for students to become pragmatically competent. Students were responsive to the inclusion of pragmatic tasks or communicative tasks as well as authentic English language learning materials in CLT and learning.

The findings of this study provide empirical evidence for English language educators and practitioners in China, indicating there is a necessity for them to recognize the changes in students' perceptions of pragmatics in learning English as a foreign language. As classroom practitioners, Chinese EFL teachers themselves should try to grasp more pragmatic knowledge and enhance pragmatic competence to adapt the curriculum to fit the society. They should take large strides in reform of the EFL classroom by changing the traditional lecturer-led grammar-translation approach to the student-centered communicative method. Chinese EFL classroom practitioners and materials designers/developers should be required to include more practical pragmatic tasks or communicative activities as well as authentic learning materials to engage students' participation in English language learning.

In order to effectively assist Chinese EFL learners to be competent language users in communication, it is essential to learn what their level of pragmatic competence is. This was beyond the limitation of the current research. However, further research should employ sets of instruments, such as discourse completion tasks, to assess Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic competence, which could provide empirical evidence for educators to develop proper and appropriate teaching pedagogies, as well as teaching and learning materials and tasks to maximize learning outcomes.

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