



A Comparative Study of Grammatical and Pragmatic Awareness Between English Learners of Different Language Proficiency

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Abstract. In light of the traditionally accepted claim that grammatical knowledge is solely linked with one's language proficiency level, the continued development of pragmatic theories calls into question the components of language communicative competence. In this study, several Chinese learners of English at different language proficiency levels will be divided into two groups. One group is from low grades in high school while the other is from university. The instrument for this experiment is the judgment task questionnaire adapted from the original version of Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei [2]. The results show that two groups' awareness of pragmatic infelicities is rather comparable and there is a significant difference in identifying ungrammaticality. Based on the findings of the study, the paper concludes with an implication of pragmatic instructions in English language pedagogy.

Keywords: grammatical awareness · pragmatic awareness · Chinese EFL learners · second language learning and teaching

1 Introduction

Developing grammatical and pragmatic competence during language communication has long been a controversial focus in the process of composing communicative competence adequately [1, 4]. The traditional theories in grammar cannot fully explain its connection with language learners' proficiency level. It is commonly accepted that since the prevalence of poststructuralism theories, interlocutors have been aware of both producing grammatically correct sentences and using proper strategies in a given context to achieve successful communication. After that, more and more researchers are studying second language (L2) practices based on a holistic social and cultural background, which promotes to gain more popularity in sociopragmatic study. It highlights language users' choices and constraints in general social interaction and the effects their communication has on others in the speech act language practices [5].

2 Literature Review

The relationship between language learners' proficiency and their pragmatic competence has long been an interest and researchers have conducted numerous studies on pragmatic development during the language learning process. In the early literature, learners' pragmatic knowledge was generally considered as an isolated factor and little attention was paid to study the pragmatic awareness and especially its interaction with grammatical awareness [9]. Since Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei [2] took the initiative to study these two types of awareness, some researchers such as Bella [3], Niezgodna and Roever [8], Schauer [9] and Sorour [10] have also been interested in comparing the grammatical and pragmatic awareness of specific language groups (English, German, Arabic, etc.) where participants are at different proficiency levels. Results of these studies differ according to the factors referred to such as learners' language level, length of residence in targeted countries and learning environment. Still, language proficiency level shows a significant effect on learners' pragmatic comprehension which is closely related to their language competence.

While language pedagogical tools and methods have been refining in China these years, the instruction of learners' pragmatic awareness still has not received much attention as it doesn't necessarily develop at the same pace with students' grammatical awareness based on different language proficiency levels. It is commonly known that both grammatical and pragmatic awareness are significantly related to language proficiency level, where grammatical awareness develops prior to pragmatic development [6]. However, the effect of pragmatic awareness development was still neglected. It may also become more challengeable for learners to develop English pragmatic awareness because the focus on it in Chinese foreign language syllabus is relatively inadequate. Studies on comparing grammatical and pragmatic awareness of English language learners at different proficiency levels especially including high school students as one language proficiency group are even limited in a greater degree. Based on the findings of previous studies as well as their limitations, three research questions need addressing in this study:

1. How does language proficiency level affect their grammatical awareness?
2. How does language proficiency level affect their pragmatic awareness?
3. How does language proficiency level affect their tolerance of grammatical and pragmatic errors?

3 Methodology

3.1 Participants

96 students will be recruited for the present study and divided into two groups, specifically for Group 1 as low level (LL) and Group 2 as high level (HL). Students in Group 1 are all from low grades in high school. Students in Group 2 are from a second-tier university. All of the students in Group 2 have taken the course of the advanced English speaking and writing based on the current college English syllabus. Moreover, to better

Table 1. Comparison Between the Mean Scores (Grammatical Errors)

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Low	48	2.25	2.471	0.357
High	48	0.65	1.550	0.224

assess their language proficiency level as well as to clearly elicit background information, several questions including years of English study, experience of studying or living abroad and grades of English proficiency test like TOEFL (The Test of English as a Foreign Language) and IELTS (International English Language Testing System) will be asked at the beginning of the questionnaire.

3.2 Instruments

The judgment task in this study is adopted from Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998). While due to the administrative difficulty of traditional videotapes, the task will be delivered through online written questionnaire which can be made by an application named *Wenjuanxing*. All the 20 scenarios in the original version are then followed by three types of question, which have been adapted to current study. In order to avoid some salient limitations pointed out by Schauer [9], the first type of question is adapted from the origin “Was the last part appropriate/correct?” [2] into two parts. Participants need to judge “Was the last part (with #) appropriate” and “Was the last part (with #) correct (in grammar)” respectively. Besides, Schauer [9] also indicates that there is no interview or error correction component in the original survey. Therefore, for the third type of question, participants will be asked to provide a correct revision when they think there is a problem in the last part of the conversation.

3.3 Procedure

Participants need to provide the answer to each question. For the first one, those who can identify the last part appropriate or correct will get one point. Then, if the answer is “No”, participants will be asked to judge the severity of errors from one to six, which corresponds to the score they will have. Similarly, if participants judge the last sentence inappropriate or incorrect, they also need to revise it in the third part of the question. One point will be awarded to those who can provide the correct revision. After collecting all the results, several independent *t*-tests will be applied to compare the data between two groups in response to the research questions. Specific data results will be shown and discussed in the next part.

4 Result and Discussion

In response to the first two research questions, mean scores of identifying grammatical and pragmatic errors, as well as the controlled items (four scenarios without inappropriateness and ungrammaticality) between two groups are compared. Results are shown in

Table 2. Comparison Between the Mean Scores (Pragmatic Errors)

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Low	48	2.04	2.278	0.329
High	48	1.02	1.862	0.269

Table 3. Comparison Between the Mean Scores (Controlled Items)

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Low	48	3.13	1.160	.167
High	48	3.52	.967	.140

Table 4. Means of Severity Rating (Grammatical Errors)

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Low	48	8.58	10.962	1.582
High	48	2.40	6.324	0.913

Table 5. Means of Severity Rating (Pragmatic Errors)

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Low	48	8.08	9.142	1.319
High	48	3.79	7.092	1.024

three tables. According to Table 1, both groups remained in a low level of identifying grammatical errors. Interestingly, the mean score of HL group was significantly lower than LL group ($M1 = 2.25$, $M2 = 0.65$, $p < .001$). Table 2 shows that LL group still outperforms HL group ($M1 = 2.04$, $M2 = 1.02$) despite the increase of identifying pragmatic errors in Group 2 compared to Table 1. It was found that as language proficiency level increased, both grammatical and pragmatic awareness of participants didn't simultaneously increase. Both groups could identify most of the controlled items and the mean score of HL group is significantly higher than LL group based on Table 3 ($M2 = 3.52$, $M1 = 3.13$, $p = .038 < .05$).

In terms of the third question, means for both grammatical and pragmatic gravity ratings were calculated. The results in Tables 4 and 5 show that the HL group rated both grammatical and pragmatic errors less severe than the LL group while the former group considered pragmatic infelicities more seriously than grammatical ones. Obviously, this result exhibits the LL group in the current study rating grammatical errors significantly worse than pragmatic errors. Whereas participants of the HL group showed an increase

Table 6. Means of Grammatical Error Correction

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Low	48	1.71	2.221	0.321
High	48	0.54	1.237	0.179

Table 7. Means of Pragmatic Error Correction

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Low	48	1.58	2.019	0.291
High	48	0.63	1.393	0.201

in identifying pragmatic errors compared to grammatical ones, which means they even rated the grammatical errors less serious than the pragmatic errors. Moreover, as participants in the LL group were all in high school, they would generally lose points for making the related mistakes in their English exams, which may cause a low grade and other unsatisfactory results. In comparison, the HL group students in college didn't have the same burden or risk of being affected by the low grades. Therefore, it is not difficult to consider that students in the LL group had the relatively low tolerance of both grammatical and pragmatic errors.

To further investigate whether participants could provide revisions for specific errors, another independent *t*-test was applied to calculate means of both error correction scores. Compared to Tables 1 and 2, the result shows that accurately identifying the error type does not necessarily mean revising problematic utterances correctly. It is commonly known that Chinese students have grasped good knowledge in English grammar, despite a slight decrease in the pragmatic score, in this study participants especially in the LL group performed interestingly better in identifying both grammatical and pragmatic errors than those in the HL group. Tables 6 and 7 show that although participants in the LL group tended to correctly identify more grammatical infelicities than the HL group, they could not always provide correct revision, which can explain the decreasing mean score of grammatical error correction. Also, as in high school, students actually could have more opportunities to be exposed to both grammatical and pragmatic items in a number of English tests due to the exam-oriented syllabus. Instead, if participants in the college identified a grammatical error, they could provide corresponding correct revision. In terms of judging pragmatic errors, it is undeniable that students in the LL group had developed pragmatic awareness at the time when the current experiment was conducted. Based on the comparison of Tables 2 and 7, participants in both groups did not provide correct revision of some pragmatic errors after identifying them. This may suggest that being able to recognize the errors in others' utterances does not mean that learners can also produce proper utterances.

Notwithstanding the fact that participants of the low proficiency group in this study could identify more pragmatic errors and the less tolerance towards them than those of

the high proficiency group, they actually got the lower score for revising the inappropriate production for the third question. Some of them identified most of the pragmatic inappropriateness as grammatical mistakes despite the questionnaire instruction in their first language telling the difference between grammatical and pragmatic mistakes. In some cases, they even confused inappropriate sentences with ungrammatical utterances and provided a new revision that they thought was grammatically correct, which, to some extent, violated authenticity of the original version. Comparatively, those college students achieved the higher accuracy in judging both types of errors and revising them. This phenomenon indicates some students in high school are still not quite clear about the pragmatic concept and its related knowledge. It is undeniable that most students are more sensitive to incorrect expressions based on their solid grammar knowledge. Interestingly, rather than providing the revision for pragmatic errors, some of the participants in low proficiency group explained the reason why they identified those errors in the revision part, which was their “intuition”. The reason could probably be the recent growing emphasis on the instructions of learners’ English pragmatic awareness and the exploration of pragmatics teaching methods [7], which further facilitates students’ pragmatic “intuition” to identify the related errors.

5 Limitations

First of all, the sample size used in the current study is relatively small, which could still weaken the explanatory power of the experiment results. Then, the questions set to determine participants’ proficiency level may have validity issue. Last but not least, some judgment tasks in the questionnaire may be too hard and challenging for the participants in both groups, for some of them would skip the correct answer or simply chose “Yes” in order to avoid the trouble of further judging the severity and revising the errors, which to some extent affected the results.

6 Conclusion

The overall result suggests that learners of low proficiency outperformed the ones of high proficiency in identifying grammatical and pragmatic errors. Both groups showed a similar level of recognizing the controlled items, where HL group was slightly higher than LL group. The low proficiency learners were less tolerant of two types of errors while the tolerant of pragmatic errors also tended to decline as the proficiency level increased.

It is implicated that possessing a high language proficiency level does not necessarily entail a significant higher level of pragmatic awareness. Despite being replaced in rigorous grammar training as well as the advanced English speaking and writing, the pragmatic awareness does not dramatically develop as the proficiency level increases. In terms of pedagogy, more pragmatic instructions especially on the accurate production should be emphasized from the high school learning period to get students well-prepared for the further advanced English learning courses.

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