An Investigation into the Pragmatic Competence of English Language Learners Majoring in Tourism Studies within a Computer Mediated Activity in Macao

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Abstract. The purpose of this study attempts to investigate learners’ communicative competence in terms of pragmatic competence, by means of administrating a set of communicative task based activities within a computer mediated environment to provide evidence of the current learning outcomes. The administration of the set of communicative task based activities took place in November 2016. By means of adopting the six criteria of pragmatic competence to score the learners’ responses and based on the coding scheme, it can be suggested that the learners were influenced by Chinese culture which resulted in inappropriate responses to the situations. Therefore, this study suggests that Macanese learners of English need to improve their communicative competence, particularly in terms of pragmatic competence. Furthermore, it can be said that it is vital to adopt a communicative task based activity within computer mediated environment into classrooms in Macao to increase opportunities for learners to interact with each other and improve language learning and teaching contexts.

Keywords: Pragmatic competence, English Learners, computer mediated activity, Macao

Introduction

The development of English education has been considered as a strategy on increasing the competitiveness of Macao to international environment. Facing the arrival of the global village era, international affairs such as politics, economics and cultural exchange among countries rely on communication in English. Consequently, the English language is regarded as a necessary tool for communication universally. In Macao, receiving 30 million tourists every year from all over the world, the speed of internationalization is accelerating. It is suggested that English language learning in higher education needs to enhance the English communicative ability of learners and also equip their language

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abilities before entering their careers. Since language and culture cannot be separated, developing language learners’ pragmatic competence could facilitate language learners to interact with foreigners successfully. Therefore, the ability to speak the English language is seen by the government and people of Macao as being an important indication of gaining the status of an international and globalised country.

In the past, English learning focused on developing reading and writing skills resulting in learners not being able to master speaking and listening skills. An attempt to develop the ‘Communicative Competence’ [13,14] of language learners and improve English Education have been discussed many decades. In order to achieve this educational goal, many schools recently have been adopting the ‘Communicative Language Teaching’ approach and improving learning outcome. As a result, the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, that is, has been used in language teaching and learning contexts in recent years and is consequently developing the learners’ communicative competence.

A number of researchers are increasingly interested in examining the communication strategies and pragmatic competence of language learners [11,12,19] recently. Through the investigation of the communicative competence in terms of pragmatic competence, this researcher hopes to reveal some information in order to provide some suggestions for the Education department, and language learning and teaching contexts for further improvement of the communicative competence of language learners in Macao.

This study could potentially provide insights into the investigation of pragmatic competence of university students in Macao. Hopefully, the findings derived from this study will provide some suggestions regarding the development of language learners’ pragmatic competence to the Macanese Education department, and language learning and teaching contexts. Evaluation of the learners’ pragmatic competence will lend more potential to language learners in terms of successfully learning the English language.

**Literature Review**

Regarding to learners’ pragmatic competence in this study, emphasis has been placed on investigating learners’ judgment, comprehension and awareness of speech acts through their speech production. Two theories are introduced when discussing the illocutionary competence; the theory of the speech act suggested by Searle [21,22] and the notion of language function introduced by Halliday [8]. The discussion of these illustrates that the distinction of form and function in language use aid this study in identifying learners’ illocutionary competence. Also, in sociolinguistic competence, the concept of sensitivity to register is highlighted and discussed.

Importantly, the politeness theory proposed by Brown and Levinson’s model [3] illustrates the sequential procedure with named possible strategies for performing FTAs. Three social variables affecting the choice of pragmatic strategy are also essential for evaluating the learners’ perception on different culture values. The tasks associate differing degrees of social variables; relative power (P), social distance (D) and the absolute ranking (R) of imposition,
identified by Brown and Levinson [3], and play an important role in designing test tasks in DCT to investigate learners’ pragmatic competence.

The politeness theory has been challenged by many researchers such as Ide [15,16], Gu [9,10], and Mao [20], as they consider that the system of politeness theory cannot be universally applied to other cultures, for example, Chinese politeness. Other researchers criticised the model of Brown and Levinson [3] as it does not account for all the factors affecting the choice of politeness strategies and presents a static model to account for real interaction, when it should also take human emotion into account. In addition, another group of researchers such as Culpeper [7] also argue that the model of Brown and Levinson [3] does not account for face-attack or face aggravation.

Even though the model of Brown and Levinson [3] has weaknesses, it distinguishes between on record and off record as being universally available. This model is important to the current study as it offers a benefit in comparing and interpreting the learners’ speech production in different social situations and allows this researcher to investigate learners’ politeness manners on dealing with situations in the target language contexts.

Because politeness may be considered diversely in different social cultural situations, Chinese culture is discussed and taken into account while analysing speech data. The discussion concerning pragmatic transfer and pragmatic failure is helpful for this study in order to interpret the pragmatic failure on the performance of the learners. It may be because they were not aware of the pragmatics of the target language when transferring their native language-based pragmatic strategy that further resulted in them being rude to the native speakers.

The speech act of refusal is a function that allows speakers to deny the engagement of an action which is suggested by the hearers. Moreover, a refusal is also regarded as having a potential negative impact on future interaction. As a result, it is necessary to consider how to mutually avoid face-to-face confrontation and use the strategy of face-saving in order to achieve a politeness goal.

It is prominent that the speech act of refusal involves the different face-concerns between Chinese and western culture. Refusal in western culture depends on positive and negative face being driven from an individual’s ‘face-wants’ [3]. On the other hand, Chinese refusal mainly concerns maintaining ‘miansi’, that is, ‘face-saving’, as Chinese people perceive refusals as crucial to ‘preserve face’ for the hearers, and to ‘leave oneself a way out’ for the speakers [4]. In other words, to ‘preserve face’ is a fundamental principle for social interaction between interlocutors. The speakers prevent hurting the face of the hearers by refusing directly or immediately, and simultaneously gaining a return after having given face to the hearers. Therefore, the face of the speaker is preserved while the face of the hearers has been maintained.

The development of second language pragmatics has drawn attention to the language teaching and learning context. Many researchers have carried out studies of pragmatic instructions. The results prove that employing computer technology in classrooms can offer opportunities to engage in real
communication. Also, a good feature of the DCT is a resemblance to real world speech act performances where semantic formula can be elicited. Because of this, it has been adopted as a classroom activity to investigate learners’ realization of the speech acts by many researchers. This has inspired the current study to use the DCT to elicit learners’ speech production under a computer-mediated environment.

Finally, six criteria suggested by Hudson et al. [12] will be employed for two assessors to evaluate the speaker’s actual responses in order to provide more information concerning the learners’ pragmatic knowledge. Additionally, the studies of Beebe et al. [2] can assist this researcher in identifying the pragmatic strategies of the learners. By analysing the learners’ pragmatic strategies in different social situations, the strategies learners used when responding to the tasks can be better understood. As well comparing the social variables involved in the task items against the learners’ performances, information can be interpreted on whether the learners’ performances are better in one social situation than another and also whether they are affected by Chinese cultural norm.

**Research Methodology**

In choosing an appropriate methodology and the identification of suitable research techniques, it is crucial to consider the research aim and the research questions posed at the commencement of the study. Such consideration will assist in establishing the correct choice of research techniques for the data collection, and the analysis and the interpretation of such data in terms of its epistemological relevance.

The main research questions that shape this study have emerged from critical and extensive reading of the literature that deals with the investigation of language learners’ pragmatic competence through a computer-mediated oral activity. As in most research designs, questions evolve and change as the study develops. Therefore, the evolution of research questions will be used to guide methodological choice, to assist data collection, analysis and interpretation, and to frame the discussion of the findings.

**Research Question:**

To what extent do language learners of English demonstrate their pragmatic competence within different given social contexts?

- How do the learners perform when using speech acts of refusal?
- What discourse variances are there when the learners respond to the tasks?

**Oral Role Play Tasks**

Task items from the study of Hudson et al. [12] have been adapted for use in section two of the activity, namely the designed oral role play tasks (ORPT). In Hudson et al.’s [12] study, each version included twenty-four situational based tasks. However, this researcher considered that some of these situations may either be unfamiliar to Macanese university students or their daily life context, so a total of four refusal situational tasks were ultimately chosen. The reasons behind choosing certain tasks was that participants would be more familiar with those that are relevant to their daily lives, and therefore, they could employ the relevant knowledge (world schema) they had accumulated in
order to perform their pragmatics. each given situation associated with different relative power (P), social distance (D), and the absolute ranking (R) of imposition [3].

Those four situational tasks were as follows:

1. You work in a repair shop. One of your valued customers comes in with an antique that is to be a present for a fiftieth wedding anniversary. The customer asks that it be repaired for the party tomorrow. You look at the antique and realize that you cannot do the job in one day. It will take you at least two weeks to finish.

2. You are a teacher at a large school. You see the lead teacher on campus. The lead teacher asks you to call all of the other teachers tonight and tell them that there will be a meeting tomorrow. You cannot do it because you know that it will take hours and you have friends coming over to your house tonight.

3. You are shopping in a department store; You have selected an item and are waiting to pay for it. The sale clerk helps you and explains that there is a special offer on a new product and offers to show you a short demonstration. You cannot watch the demonstration because you are on your way to meet someone for lunch.

4. You are a tourist in a large city. You have taken your film to a photo shop. When you go into the shop to pick up the pictures, the salesperson asks if you would like some coupons for more film developing. You do not need the coupons because you are leaving the city today.

The Design of the Activity within the Computer Environment

The purpose of this study was to elicit the speech of the participants so as to investigate Macanese university students’ pragmatic competence in a computer mediated oral activity. The researcher’s intention was to employ this activity within a computer environment as an instrument for the collection of data in response to the research questions. In order to carry out this study, the researcher decided to design an oral activity to investigate within a computer based environment. Moreover, this activity incorporated a pilot study to further aid the design of the research instrument. By incorporating an activity within a computer-based environment into this study, the computer acts as a tool for using the Internet as a means of human interaction and for the delivery of the activity. Therefore, further considerations had to be taken into account in the planning of the design of the computer mediated oral activity. In particular, the fact that computer mediated activity tends to promote certain constraints from technical perspectives, including the consideration of hardware, software and the speed of the delivery or downloading of the tasks from the web.

As this activity took place in the university language laboratory, this facility was of a high standard, in terms of both the language laboratory and the computer rooms. This researcher therefore had confidence in the computer equipment and systems with regards to the efficiency of the hardware, such as hard disk size, central processing unit (CPU), screen resolution and network bandwidth for the Internet connection.
The Main Study

The main study was carried out at the school and the computer based oral activity was administrated in November 2016. This activity lasted around twenty minutes and the participants’ responses were recorded in the computer’s hard drive. The total number of participants who actually took part with this study was forty-two. After the introductory section of the activity, six students decided to withdraw from the study because they felt that they were not ready to undertake the activity. Another two students decided to withdraw in the middle of the activity. In accordance with ethical issues, the participants had the right to withdraw at any stage of the study; consequently, the researcher had a final number of thirty-four participants.

Coding and Data Analysis

In the stage of pilot study, additionally, a training session took place to practice grading and coding the responses collected from the pilot study. It was important to employ two native speaking assessors to ensure that all scores and responses coded were as reliable as possible. The two native speaking assessors involved in the study were very experienced as they carried out this role within many language institutions for many years. Both are British and also teach at the applied linguistic department of the university in Japan. Their involvement in this study was important for scoring the participants’ speech productions collected from the pilot study as well as the main study. The rating criteria given to the assessors provided a standard to which they could refer during the process of marking the learners’ speech production to promote reliable and consistent scores. Although they already had experience of scoring other kinds of oral assessments, this was the first time the two assessors scored speech samples based on this criteria suggested by Hudson et al. [12]; also a five-point scale rating system ranging from very unsatisfied (1), to completely appropriate (5), and evaluated the learners’ pragmatic competence. The purpose of training coders at this stage is that they can consistently apply the coding systems that have been developed by Beebe et al. [2].

Research Findings and Discussion

Data in this study were coded according to the taxonomy developed by Beebe et al. [2] in terms of semantic formulas (i.e. strategy) and adjuncts to refusals. The findings showed that the learners mainly used the strategies of direct refusal, reason, regret, and alternative proposals in their responses. In other words, this finding suggests that fewer types of refusal strategies were used by the learners in this study. This is in line with the study of Liao and Bresnahan [18], who argue that Chinese were more economic at making excuses and used fewer types of strategies in comparison to that of Americans. They also explain that this ‘economy of strategy use in the oriental countries may be due to their concern to end an awkward refusal situation as soon as possible’ [18]. Similarly, the study of Chen and Chen [5] also confirmed this result because the finding in their study suggested that language learners use less refusal strategies compared with those of Americans.

Another striking finding in this study was that almost every learner tended to use the strategy of reason to respond to the tasks. Liao and Bresnahan
[18] claim that Chinese people normally tend to apologize and then offer a reason. They also argue that using the strategy of reason for this economy of strategy use in the oriental world is attributed to their concern with ending an awkward exchange as soon as possible.

In addition, it is worthy mentioning that the social hierarchy plays an important role in refusal strategy choice [4]. The learners in this study more frequently employed the strategy of regret, that is saying sorry, when the situation involved lower social power (−P). The learners expressed their grovelling apologies by saying ‘sorry’ at the beginning and repeating ‘sorry’ at the end of their responses. For example, S20 responded to the second task by saying ‘Sorry if the job…sorry the job will spend me at least two weeks to finish it. I can’t help you and I am very sorry’.

By examining this speech data, another significant finding suggests that most learners highly adopted the strategy of alternative proposals in particular, and used this strategy more frequently in responding to a situation involving in a higher social power (+P). This is similar to the study of Chen et al. [4]. In their findings, it also indicated that the strategy of alternatives is the second most frequently used strategy in Chinese refusal, while the most frequent strategy usage is the strategy of providing a reason.

The function of alternative proposals is to compensate for refusals. This frequent use of alternatives by the learners in refusals represented the influence of the notion of ‘respectfulness’ and ‘self-denigration’ in Chinese politeness conceptions [9,10]. The strategy of alternatives provides a way of avoiding a direct confrontation and softens the threatening power of refusals. Hsieh and Chen [16] reflect on this viewpoint and argue that alternatives are a distinctive way of refusing in Chinese and the purpose of this strategy is to show goodwill. For example, a learner, S6, responded to the task and said, ‘…or maybe you go to another repair shop to see…if they could fix it by tomorrow’ and another learner, S5, responded to the task and said, ‘…you can have the coupons and you can give to the next person if they want it’.

As the study of Chen and Chen [5] suggest, they discovered that Americans had different strategy use in comparison with the language learners. Americans used more the strategy of alternative in refusing a superior’s suggestion while the higher frequencies were found in the language learners on offering alternatives in refusing inferiors’ suggestions. Both Chen and Chen’s [18] study and this present study showed that the language learners higher frequencies were found in offering alternatives when they were in a higher social power (+P) in refusing inferior’s suggestion. The findings show that the learners in this study also were influenced by Chinese culture while using alternative strategies in making refusal.

In addition, the strategy of positive opinion is used as adjunction of refusals to modify the main refusal head act and reinforce or protect the interlocutor’s positive face. Many researchers such as Liao and Bresnahan [18] suggest that western speakers and Chinese EFL learners had a different manner on using it. In particular, Liao and Bresnahan’s [18] study discovered that normally when Chinese speakers decide to make refusals, they generally do not
intend to express positive opinions. This is because they are afraid that once they express positive opinions, later they will be forced to comply with their utterances. In contrast, the findings of Takahashi and Beebe [25] showed that the American expression of politeness during a refusal, with the expression of a positive opinion such as ‘I would like to…’ was followed by one of the politeness markers of apology, providing reasons or excuses for refusal.

As these findings showed, most learners followed the Chinese tradition by not expressing positive opinions. The statement of positive opinion was a particular feature which was less used by the Chinese EFL learners. In this present study only few learners showed their positive opinion. This formula was also found in the learners’ responses in this study. One typical response from S8, used the American expression while making refusal; his response was ‘I love to…but I think I can’t because I have a friend to meet for lunch...so maybe I will see it next time...thanks’.

Furthermore, the findings in this study suggested that the learners used the address term more frequently and used at the beginning of the structure when the social status of the speaker is lower (–P). Traditionally, the socially inferior tended to choose address terms which were more formal and used them as a means of showing respect [10](p.251). When a speaker is in an inferior social position to refuse a superior social position, they required to soften the force of refusing and addressed his/her title or role as an appropriate address term so as to show respectfulness.

For example, S10 responded to the second task which involved a lower social power (–P) and uttered ‘Head teacher! I can’t do it, I know that it will take me hours and I have friends coming over my house tonight. I don’t want my friends to wait for me too long outside my house, sorry about this’. As the learners acted as a classroom teacher refusing a head teacher’s request, they were threatening this head teacher’s positive and negative face. Because a head teacher was a senior teacher and is professionally prestigious, the use of address term was considered to be used as the learners were in an inferior social position (–P).

In conclusion, the reasons regarding the learners’ poor performance have been considered to be influenced by Chinese tradition and the different use of the strategies by the learners while refusals in comparison to English speakers. Moreover, the learners also had a very different approach to express refusals with only a few learners stating their positive opinions to express their refusal.

**Conclusion and Implication**

It can be concluded that the findings of this research attempt to provide insights into the pragmatic competence of the learners through their performances on the tasks. The classroom activities will no longer drill the sentences from the textbooks. Language teachers need to improve their practical English instruction, and raise awareness of the educationists for the enhancement and development of language learners’ pragmatic competence in Macao. Furthermore, the design of the English curriculum should be more focused upon developing pragmatic competence in teaching and learning contexts. By doing so, it allows the learners to manipulate the language to
overcome their English deficiency and apply their pragmatic competence to communicate with native English speakers.

**The development of learners’ pragmatic competence**

It is reasonable to suggest that the learners did not perform as well on the speech acts, as the scores obtained by the learners were lower. A possible reason for this is that Chinese culture seemed to influence the learners’ performance in their responses to the tasks. Therefore, several expressions made by the learners were regarded as impolite in the English context, as they were made based on their Chinese-based pragmatics.

When examining the learners’ responses, concerns arose over the semantic formula on each situational task. The results suggested that the learners tended to transfer the Chinese pragmatic strategy into English contexts, which then resulted in negative pragmatic transfer. As a result, the native speaking assessors considered most learners’ responses to be inappropriate to the situations, which then resulted in lower scores.

Through further examination of each task involved in the different levels of social variables, the findings revealed that the Chinese social variables affected the learners’ choice of pragmatic strategy. Particular behaviours exist within the Chinese culture, by refusing others, Chinese people do not express their positive opinion, therefore, the statement of positive opinion was a particular feature that was used less by the Chinese, but employed mostly by English speaking people.

By comparing the social variables involved in the tasks to the learners’ performance, the findings showed that the learners performed better when the strategies used were not in a culturally specific situation. Due to the influence of Chinese traditions, the learners evaluated the power, the social distance and the rank of imposition differently in comparison to the English native speakers. Based on the examination of the learners’ responses, it could be assumed that Chinese social variables were the main reason for the learners’ inappropriate utterances within the social situations in the target language contexts.

**Raising Awareness of the Language Learners’ Pragmatic Knowledge**

Drawing on this finding, language teachers should raise learners’ awareness of the cross-cultural pragmatic differences that exist, and also teach the learners to understand why certain speech conventions are appropriate while others are not. As it stands, the language learners are able to teach their learners to employ the appropriate pragmatic strategies to the English speaking contexts. As different pragmatic strategies exist, the learners must appropriately apply them according to the different social variables (e.g. the power, the social distance and the rank of imposition). Language functions are also important to language learners so that they can respond to the English contexts in an appropriate way to avoid misunderstandings and offending their native English speaking listeners.

The issue of developing learners’ pragmatic awareness has been claimed as one of the main goals of instruction in pragmatics [1,17] since it is related to the concept of noticing [24]. Through explicit and implicit instruction, the learners’ awareness of their pragmatics could be raised. As well as awareness, it
is also important to develop activities that elicit learners’ production, namely output. In other words, creating opportunities for communicative practice are important in developing learners’ pragmatic ability in the FL classroom, as obtaining the knowledge of such language functions are not always useful unless the learners can appropriately make use of them in the different socially situational contexts.

With regards to relevant input and output opportunities, providing feedback to the learners is considered as another important tool to promote language learners’ pragmatic competence. By implementing either explicit or implicit feedback, learners may also be made aware of their pragmatic failures and, thus be provided with opportunities to notice the appropriate pragmatic aspects of the target language.

**Summary**

It can be concluded that the findings of this research attempt to provide insights into the pragmatic competence of the learners through their performances on the tasks. The classroom activities will no longer drill the sentences from the textbooks. Language teachers need to improve their practical English instruction, and raise awareness of the educationists for the enhancement and development of language learners’ pragmatic competence in Macao. Furthermore, the design of the English curriculum should be more focused upon developing pragmatic competence in teaching and learning contexts. By doing so, it allows the learners to manipulate the language to overcome their English deficiency and apply their pragmatic competence to communicate with native English speakers.

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