

Learning Motivation Influencing College Students' English Pragmatic Competence

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Abstract: Pragmatic competence is to the ability to use language appropriately and effectively, which is a significant component of communicative competence. As one of the important factors in individual differences, learning motivation has a certain impact on the cultivation of pragmatic competence. This research explores the relationship between English pragmatic competence and learning motivation, and finds the correlation between them. The research findings have important implications for pragmatic teaching, and suggestions were proposed based on the specific situation of students' English pragmatic competence.

Keywords: Learning Motivation; Pragmatic Competence; Development of Pragmatic Competence

1. Introduction

Since the late 1990s, scholars have focused on the development of pragmatic competence of foreign language learners, and one of the key issues is the relationship between their individual factors and the development of pragmatic competence. Among language learners' individual factors, one that closely relates to pragmatic acquisition is their learning motivation. Learning motivation, as one of the most important individual factors influencing learners' language proficiency, can be seen as a factor determining the success of language learning. Takahashi speculated that motivation could be one of the most influential individual differences variables to account for differences in learners' noticing of target request forms[1]. Therefore, studying the learning motivation that influences the cultivation of pragmatic competence, exploring the main types of learning motivation among college students, as well as the relationship between their pragmatic competence and learning motivation, is beneficial for language teachers to better

implement personalized teaching and for college students' long-term development, which is of great significance for foreign language teaching.

2. Categories of Learning Motivation and Pragmatic Competence

As two pivotal concepts within this study, the connotations of pragmatic competence and learning motivation are examined and discussed as follows.

2.1 Learning Motivation

Learning motivation refers to an internal process or mental state that motivates individuals to engage in learning activities or maintain established learning activities, and directs behavior towards a certain learning goal[2]. It is an internal motivation that drives students to learn spontaneously.

The factors that influence students' learning include learning interests, personal desires, learning attitudes, learning habits, learning needs, and learning motivation, etc. The learning motivation is the main factor that plays a major role. Foreign language learning motivation is the internal driving force which enables students to learn a foreign language and achieve the goal of language learning.

English learning motivation is the internal and external elements that drive English learning activities. There are various motivations for learning English, and different theories also have different classification methods. Gardner divides learning motivation into integrative motivation and instrumental motivation[3]. Brown divides learning motivation into three types: first is the general motivation, referring to the general attitude towards learning; Second is the situational motivation, which refers to the motivation that varies according to the environment; The third is task motivation, which refers to the motivation for specific learning tasks changing with different tasks[4].

Gao conducted an empirical analysis on the English learning motivation of Chinese college students, dividing English learning motivation into 7 types: intrinsic interest, achievement motivation, learning situation motivation, going abroad motivation, social responsibility motivation, personal development motivation, and information media motivation[5].

2.2 Pragmatic Competence

Scholars have been studying pragmatic competence of EFL learners for near forty years, although it is defined in various aspects, it still lacks a clear and widely accepted definition of the term. It is widely recognized that pragmatic competence is a significant parameter in the assessment of high-level language learners.

There exist various definitions of pragmatics initiated by scholars from different perspectives. Among which the one offered by David Crystal is particularly appealing to the present study. It says that pragmatics is the study of language from the perspective of language users, in particular the choices they make, the constraints they face when using language in social communications, and the effects that language use has on other communicators[2].

As a more elaborated illustration of pragmatics, Thomas proposes that pragmatics competence comprises two aspects: pragmalinguistic competence and sociopragmatic competence. Pragmalinguistic competence is more similar to grammatical competence. Sociolinguistic competence is linked to the ability to acquire the awareness on the compositions of proper linguistic behavior in a social context, which involve people's social values on many occasions[6].

Chinese scholar Chen gives the definition of pragmatic competence from the angle of communication process[7]. He proposes that pragmatic competence means the ability to use the language properly and tactfully in real-life situation, emphasizing two aspects: the production of proper utterances and the precise interpretation on speakers' utterances in specific speech context.

Based on the previous study on pragmatics and the requirements in EFL teaching in China, the survey of the participants' pragmatic competence in this study is mainly conducted from two aspects: pragmalinguistic competence and sociopragmatic competence.

3. Research Design

The aim of this study is to investigate the motivation that influences language learners' pragmatic competence. To realize this aim, quantitative research method is implied, and the questionnaire survey is used to gather the first hand data from the language learners.

3.1 Survey Subject

120 freshmen who are in their 2nd semester of college year were selected as the subjects of the survey. The college students are classified into three groups, they were 40 students majoring in art, who were weak in English proficiency; 40 majoring in engineering, whose English proficiency were in average level; and 40 majoring in humanities and finance, who were in good English proficiency. Selecting students from different majors and levels as respondents can make the results more objective.

3.2 Survey Instruments

The survey uses two sets of questionnaires. The pragmatic competence questionnaire is a questionnaire with 25 questions, which is based on the *English Pragmatic Competence Survey* by Professor He Ziran, a leading figure in the field of pragmatics in China. The motivation questionnaire for foreign language learners is based on Gardener's AMTB (Attention/Motivation Test Battery) and make necessary modifications to suit this study.

4. Analysis

A total of one hundred and twenty questionnaires were distributed and retrieved, including 111 valid questionnaires. The results the questionnaires were organized, computed, and analyzed using data statistics software.

4.1 Respondents' Overall Situation of Pragmatic Competence

The following table reveals the pragmatic competence of the respondents.

Table 1. Results of Students' Pragmatic Competence

N		M	Median	Mode	S. D.	Minimum	Maximum
Valid	Invalid						
111	9	11.532	11	12	2.8278	5	18

As evident from Table 1, the respondents' scores are not satisfactory. The questionnaire boasts a total of 25 points. Notably, the highest score achieved by the tested students stands at

18 points, while the lowest score registers at 5 points. The mean score averages out to 11.532 points. Conventionally, a student who secures 60% of the total score is deemed to have passed the test. Similarly, scoring above 85% or 90% qualifies a student for Grade A. However, based on the questionnaire results, no student has achieved Grade A. The average score of 11.532 represents merely 46.128% of the total score, falling well below the 60% passing threshold.

On the contrary, the standard deviation of the total score for college students' English pragmatic competence stands at 2.8278, indicating that the variance in students' English pragmatic skills is not significant. The median score is 11, and the mode is 12, suggesting a concentration of scores among the students. Table 2 illustrates the distribution of college students' scores in pragmatic competence. Out of the 111 students with valid questionnaires, 17 students who scored above 15 points have passed the test, representing only 15.3% of the total. Consequently, 94 students, accounting for 84.7%, failed the test. This underscores the relatively low level of general English pragmatic competence among college students.

Table 2. Distribution of Scores in Pragmatic Competence

Score	18-17	16-15	14-13	12-11	10-9	8-7	6-5	Total
N	6	11	18	30	26	3	3	111
%	5.4	9.9	16.2	34.2	23.4	5.4	5.4	100
Cumulative percentage	5.4	15.3	31.5	65.8	89.2	94.6	100	

4.2 Analysis of the Sub-dimensions of Pragmatic Competence

Table 3 presents the outcomes of the students' sub-dimensions of pragmatic competence, specifically Pragmalinguistic and Sociopragmatic competence. The questionnaire comprises 9 questions related to Pragmalinguistic competence and 16 questions pertaining to Sociopragmatic competence. As evident from the table, the average Pragmalinguistic score stands at 4.02, representing 44.6% of the total 9 points. Conversely, the average Sociopragmatic score is 7.51, accounting for 47.0% of its total score. Typically, a 60% benchmark is used to assess students' proficiency. However, neither the Pragmalinguistic nor the Sociopragmatic competence of the tested students meets this threshold in the Test Syllables. This indicates

that the students exhibit weaknesses in both Pragmalinguistic and Sociopragmatic competence. Furthermore, the standard deviation for Pragmalinguistic competence is 1.40118, which is narrower than the 2.264 standard deviation for Sociopragmatic competence. This suggests that the tested students display a narrower range of Pragmalinguistic competence scores compared to Sociopragmatic competence.

Table 3. Results of Sub-dimensions of Pragmatic Competence

	M	S. D.	Scoring percentage	N
Pragmalinguistic competence	4.02	1.40118	44.6%	111
Sociopragmatic competence	7.51	2.264	47.0%	111

4.3 Situation of Foreign Language Learning Motivation

According to Gardner et al.'s research, learning motivation includes two categories: integrative motivation and instrumental motivation.

Table 4. Basic Situation of Learning Motivation

Category	Mean	S. D.	N
Integrative motivation	3.257	0.831	111
Instrumental motivation	3.233	0.785	111

The results of the learning motivation questionnaire show that college students have achieved high scores for both integrative and instrumental motivation (Table 4). The score of integrative motivation (3.257) is slightly higher than that of instrumental motivation (3.233). That is to say, in this study, English learners have a strong interest in learning English and a tendency towards cultural integration. From the data, it can be figured out that college students learn English mainly out of the integrated motivation, such as their intrinsic interest in English learning, the functions of English language, and the English learning situation, but not for the instrumental motivation, such as getting immediate achievements in some English level examinations, getting a job, going abroad for further study or emigration. Generally speaking, the respondents reveals high level of interest in English itself.

4.4 Relationship Between Learning Motivation and Pragmatic Competence

In order to understand the relationship between

motivation and pragmatic competence, Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (r) was calculated in this study.

Table 5. Correlation of Learning Motivation and Pragmatic Competence

	Integrative motivation	instrumental motivation
Pearson Correlation	.543**	.205**
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.244
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).		

Table 5 reveals that both elements of learning motivation exhibit a positive correlation with pragmatic competence. Specifically, the correlation coefficient between learners' integrative motivation and their pragmatic competence stands at $r=0.543$, indicating a clear positive correlation trend and a statistically significant relationship ($p=.000$). Similarly, the correlation coefficient between learners' instrumental motivation and their pragmatic competence is $r=0.205$, further confirming the positive relationship between these variables but not significant relationship ($p=.244$).

(a) Relationship between integrative motivation and pragmatic competence. Table 5 shows a significant relationship between integrative motivation and learners' pragmatic competence. Integrative motivation is a beneficial factor in foreign language learning, which has a more promoting effect on language learning and is also a better predictor of language learning achievement. Students with integrative motivation enjoy and appreciate the language and culture they learn, eager to be accepted by the target language society and be able to integrate into the activities of the target language society. Such language learners will strive to find opportunities to practice their language and actively participate in various activities to promote language development. In this study, students' integrative motivation is relatively higher, but their pragmatic competence is not satisfactory. The researcher believes that this is to some extent influenced by students' instrumental motivation. The objective of students' English language acquisition transcends mere affection for the language and its culture; it also encompasses the fulfillment of specific practical requirements. Therefore, in future teaching, teachers should try their best to stimulate and

maintain students' integrative motivation, allowing their internal driving force to guide them to more actively invest time and energy in the learning of language and better develop their pragmatic competence.

(b) Relationship between instrumental motivation and pragmatic competence. Table 5 demonstrates the existence of a moderate correlation between pragmatic competence and instrumental motivation. However, it fails to indicate any statistically significant difference between the two variables. Instrumental motivation is related to learners' actual needs for language learning, such as successfully passing the English proficiency test or obtaining a good job upon graduation, and so forth. The instrumental motivation does not exhibit a significant relationship with pragmatic competence, implying that a heightened level of instrumental motivation does not automatically translate into superior pragmatic competence. This is due to the fact that students with instrumental motivation has endowed learning English with new meaning in this new era. They either study English for passing an examination, or for studying abroad, or for looking for a good job. It doesn't matter whether they like it or not, as the practicality and usefulness are the features of English study. Given the clarity of their objective, pragmatic competence ceases to be the primary focus, rendering the relationship between instrumental motivation and pragmatic competence insignificant. Although the previous researches have mentioned that instrumental motivation is the main type of motivation among Chinese students, it is not a good phenomenon as it cannot improve their pragmatic competence, which is very important in modern society. In the actual teaching process, teachers should pay attention to adopting various methods to effectively develop students' pragmatic competence.

5. Suggestions

Based on the major findings in the present studies, some suggestions and implications are made for the English learning and teaching.

5.1 Encouraging Learners' Learning Motivation

Motivation is a complex area involving so many interrelated factors that foreign language teachers should be aware of its complexity and

significance. First, English teachers should initiate learners' learning motivation by providing interesting group activities and encouraging students to take active part in activities. For instance, some interesting activities with specific pragmalinguistic and sociolinguistic knowledge should be carried out to make pragmatic learning more enjoyable. The activities can not only help students to find the learning interests in the pragmatics learning, but also make them feel safe and confident. Second, so as to sustain learners' learning motivation, English teachers should increase learners' self-confidence. Successful learning experiences can increase students' confidence, which can promote learners' motivation. For example, teachers should provide suitable and positive comments after activities to encourage them. Third, English teachers should promote learners' autonomy, because learners' autonomy with the character of intrinsic motivation can sustain students' learning motivation.

5.2 Improving Learners' Pragmatic Competence

How to cultivate and enhance students' English pragmatic competence has been repeatedly pondered by scholars. Firstly, teachers ought to endeavor to cultivate a conducive classroom environment and reinforce the teaching of pragmatic knowledge. Lack of pragmatic knowledge is another important factor that leads to serious pragmatic failures among students. Therefore, English teachers should also timely and appropriately impart students some pragmatic knowledge while conducting language teaching. Meanwhile, in English teaching, teachers should try their best to provide students with ample opportunities to use English, strengthen interaction between teachers and students, and encourage greater participation from students in the practical use of English. For example, teaching modes such as discussions, group presentations, or role-plays according to the situation could be adopted in English classroom, providing students with more realistic communication contexts and giving them more opportunities to express themselves. Secondly, teachers can cultivate students' pragmatic awareness and enhance their pragmatic competence in reading teaching. This requires teachers to make good use of and deeply interpret text materials, find

suitable pragmatic training entry points from the text, and supplement them with meticulous teaching design. For example, teachers can guide students to pay attention to important words and sentences, pay attention to special language phenomena, guide students to speculate and appreciate language and writing, cultivate students' pragmatic awareness, and improve their language interpretation ability. Thirdly, teachers should actively utilize and develop curriculum resources. In an era of highly developed information technology, teachers should be adept at using modern multimedia teaching methods and mass media tools, utilizing the rich network resources, and selecting appropriate teaching materials. If various radio, news, email, and movie and television contents can be selected, it is convenient to introduce students to the customs and cultures of English speaking countries, guide students to understand the differences in thinking, expression, and culture between China and foreign countries, remove some cultural barriers for students' intercultural communication, and create students a real language and communication situation, thus helping students better understand the text while improving their language abilities.

6. Conclusion

In short, it is hoped that college English teachers in the new era will not be limited to teaching language knowledge and have a sense of keeping up with the times. They will focus on cultivating students' ability to comprehensively use the language, enabling them to develop good pragmatic competence while mastering solid language knowledge. Concurrently, while nurturing students' pragmatic competence, various teaching activities can afford them the opportunity to experience the joy of success, thereby stimulating and maintaining their motivation for language learning.

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