

# A Literature Review of the Research Method in the Study of L2 Pragmatic Competence of Chinese Tertiary-Level Students

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This study combs through the frequently cited papers on L2 pragmatic competence of Chinese tertiary-level students from CNKI, and analyzes the research methods used in these studies. The findings are: Metapragmatic judgement item, discourse completion task, role play, and verbal reports are the most widely used instruments in the study of L2 pragmatic competence of Chinese tertiary-level students. Besides, other methods like natural comprehension and elicited conversation have received more attention in recent years.

*Keywords:* L2 pragmatics, interlanguage pragmatics, pragmatic competence, research method

## Research Background

The field of second language pragmatics (or interlanguage pragmatics, ILP) takes a closer look at a range of research issues on how L2 learners learn to use a target language in context-appropriate manners. It is an interdisciplinary research between second language acquisition and pragmatics. Researchers of second language pragmatics explore how L2 learners come to know what to say when and to whom, what characteristics impact their learning, and how we can research, teach, and assess their ability to use language in social settings. These issues are the domain of second language pragmatics (Taguchi & Roever, 2017).

Bachman (1990) put forward the Communicative Language Ability (CLA) Model in which language competence is one of the indispensable parts. According to Bachman, pragmatic competence is the knowledge of language that enables language users to achieve communicative goals in context with functional and sociolinguistic features such as knowledge of imaginative functions, ideational functions and knowledge of registers, genres and dialects.

The earliest domestic study on pragmatic competence dates to the 1990s in which He Ziran (1996) introduced the idea of interlanguage pragmatics in the article "What is interlanguage pragmatics?" Since then, ILP has established as an independent discipline after two decades' development. For instance, there are studies such as factors influencing the development of interlanguage pragmatics (Dai & Chen, 2005), study of pragmatic disfluency and its acquisition in Chinese EFL learners' L2 conversations (Lu & Chen, 2019). Research on pragmatic competence of Chinese tertiary-level students remains a hotspot in L2 pragmatics. Nevertheless, previous studies have not dealt with the systematic review of research methods of Chinese tertiary-level students' pragmatic competence, which has a pivotal role in facilitating their L2 pragmatic competence.

Hence, this article examines the research methods employed in the study of Chinese tertiary-level students' pragmatic competence, and compares it with the state-of-the-art research abroad, with aims to trigger the development of the study at home.

## Research Design

### Research Questions

This study set out to investigate the following questions:

1. What research methods are used in the domestic researches concerning the L2 pragmatics competence of the Chinese tertiary-level students?
2. What are the merits and demerits of these methods?
3. What insights can these studies bring to the future research?

### Research Objects

This review attempts to have a systematic study of the pragmatic competence of Chinese tertiary-level students. They have grasped enough grammatical knowledge and been trained with some pragmatic strategies in classroom. However, their pragmatic competence is not proportional to their academic performance. Hence it is necessary to review the study about their pragmatic development and suggest future directions.

### Research Method

In this article, quantitative method was used to conduct analysis of research designs in highly cited papers, and major data collection tools and analysis methods were reviewed. Compared with qualitative research method, the statistical information reliably reveals the relationship between different variables. For example, the frequency of various methods can show the tendency of a certain period.

### Data Collection

Based on the platform CNKI, the author searched the journal of SSCI and CSSCI with key words: second language pragmatic competence, interlanguage pragmatic competence, and L2 pragmatic competence. From 1996 to 2020, the total numbers of articles searching with each key word are respectively 90, 18, and 25. After manual screening, the total is 91 articles.

In 1996, He Ziran published the article "What Is Interlanguage Pragmatics" in the journal *Modern Foreign Languages*. After that, the study on L2 Pragmatics competence has seen a rising trend and the number of published articles reached the peak in 2010. Representatives include Li Min, Lu Jiawei, Ren Wei, and Liu Jianda, et al.

## Findings

In the retrieved results, the articles of empirical study are a relatively small part, accounting for less than 30%. In the searched results, the ratio of quantitative to qualitative research remains an uneven distribution. The quantitative studies outnumber the qualitative ones. Questionnaire is one of the most frequent research instruments. Besides, mixed analysis echoes the future trend of L2 pragmatic study.

According to the time span of data collection, it can be divided into cross-sectional study and longitudinal study. The major studies of Chinese tertiary-level students' pragmatic competence are cross-sectional study, because the research of pragmatic knowledge is much more popular than the study of development of pragmatic competence. Nevertheless, longitudinal research has gained more and more population in recent years.

The concrete research methods can be categorized according to the kind of data. From the perspective of this, resulting data can be classified along reception and production lines as receptive judgement data, non-interactive production data, and interactive production data.

### Receptive Data

Metapragmatic judgement item, or sometimes known as “acceptability judgements”, triggers respondents’ perceptions about a pragmatic feature, for instance, power, social distance, or imposition, and their understanding of implied meaning. By providing a rating scale, the researchers asked the test takers to judge a five or six Likert scale. Employing a slightly different approach, some researchers may use a multiple-choice approach. Given a scenario similar to their real life, test takers are required to choose one from several options, and judge whether it is grammatically accurate, pragmatically meaningful and appropriate, thus estimating their pragmatic competence and grammatical competence.

In Xiao Yan and Li Ming’s (2017) research, the authors adopt two questionnaires to examine the development of English pragmatic and grammatical competence of Chinese tertiary-level students and discuss the influence of such individual learner differences as age, gender, personality, and years of English learning on the development of these two competences. The questionnaire was designed by Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998). It tested language learners’ pragmatic and grammatical competence and the related consciousness. There are 20 items in this questionnaire, which includes items aim to test grammatical error (eight items), pragmatic error (eight items), and interruptions (four items). The item sample is cited as followed as below.

[The teacher asks Peter to help with the plans for the class trip.]

Teacher: OK, so we’ll go by bus. Who lives near the bus station? Peter, could you check the bus times for us on the way home tonight?

Peter: No, I can’t tonight. Sorry.

Question: Was the underlined part appropriate/correct?

Yes or No?

If there was a problem, how bad do you think it was?

No bad at all    0 1 2 3 4 5    Very bad

Second language learners’ judgement on the seriousness of error can demonstrate how strong their pragmatic and grammatical awareness are (Niezgoda & Röver, 2001).

Metapragmatic judgement can also be used to find out whether different groups of test takers have quite different comprehension of the scenario variables such as power, imposition, and social distance. For instance, in the study of the pragmatic differences and its possible reasons between second language learners and native speakers, Liu Si (2004) pointed that native speaker and non-native speaker may have different speech act choice with the help of metapragmatic judgement.

Receptive data have also been used for other relevant studies, for example, the study of relationship between Chinese English majors’ personality and their pragmatic and grammatical competence (Li, Chen, & Xiao, 2009).

Metapragmatic judgement tasks could investigate participants’ pragmatic comprehension, especially their sociopragmatic knowledge. Besides, it is convenient to conduct because it is not much affected by proficiency. However, metapragmatic judgement tasks also have drawbacks. This method overlooks the significance of pragmalinguistics for the emphasis on sociopragmatics.

### Non-interactive Production Data

DCT is the abbreviation of discourse completion tasks. It is a kind of non-interactive production method to collect data. It is one of the most popular and classic pragmatic production tasks (Taguchi & Roever, 2017). To

finish this task, test takers are asked to complete the discourse with certain sentences or utterances according to the given scenario. This task aims to elicit the participants' response concerning to their pragmatic competence, especially their master of speech act. A prompt part is necessary to serve as the element that elicits the pragmatically ideal answer. It can be presented by different forms such as pictures and videos. Normally, DCT refers to the written form. But there are other types evolved from this one. For instance, it can also be orally prompted and demand test takers to react with oral form. This type of DCT is called oral discourse completion task (ODCT). Another frequently used type of DCT is the multiple-choice discourse completion test (MDCT). In this task, participants should choose the most contextually appropriate one from numerous options, in which distracters are also placed.

DCT have been widely used in studies of second language pragmatics both in western countries and China. For example, in the study conducted by Yang Li and Yuan Zhouming (2019), the authors used the written discourse completion task (WDCT) of non-English-major graduate students and native Chinese speakers at different English levels as the corpus, combined with retrospective interviews, to investigate the differences in the development of complaining pragmatic competence of English learners. Dai Yuanfang and Zhang Shaojie (2018) adopted the oral discourse completion test as an elicitation instrument to investigate the relationship between the Chinese EFL learners' oral English pragmatic competence and pragmatic transfer in the perspective of the frequency of semantic formulas and discourse content. Li qinghua and Bin Ke (2014) examined the development of the ability to recognize and produce English routines of Chinese EFL learners. Their study administered MDCT and WDCT to measure recognition and production of routines respectively. In the study of Ying Jieqiong (2018), DCT questionnaire was used to collect the data of the change of the speech act of the international students. Meanwhile, interview data were combined to analyze how social activities affect the development of students' pragmatic competence.

However, DCT has its own limitations. Because of the non-interactiveness, it fails to reveal what these test takers would say in the real situation. Respondents usually have no time limits when they consider how to response, so it is quite different from the authentic interactions.

### **Interactive Production Data**

Three types of interactive production data are well developed and widely used; they are role-play, elicited conversation and natural interaction.

Role-playing requires participants to complete certain communicative tasks in simulated real situations. Unlike DCT, it not only independently sets the communicative scene and strictly controls the contextual variables, but also examines the pragmatic competence of the subjects in the communicative interaction, effectively making up for the deficiency of DCT. In Dai Weidong and Yang Xianju's study (2005), the researchers pointed that role play is an important part in explicating classroom instruction. For example, the new learner of Japanese can use "sumimasen" (sorry) more appropriately in a role play.

Elicited conversation is a rarely used method in L2 pragmatics research in China. If researchers want to get elicited data, they should put groups of participants together and give them some guides on what to do and give them a certain discussion topic. But this task is different from role play; in elicited conversation task, the interactants need not to play a fictitious role; they are entirely themselves. Instead, what they say and do are under the investigation of others, which may influence their reaction. Although this kind of data has not been frequently used until now, it is still a promising approach for future research.

Different from the elicited data, natural data are not elicited by prompt; it is naturally occurred in participants' daily life. Natural data are preferred by many researchers in that it reveals how interlocutors interact in the real-life context, and hence can draw more plausible conclusion. Lu Jiawei and Chen Xinren (2019) employed the Santa Barbara Corpus of American Spoken English as the reference corpus and 78 self-recorded Chinese English learners' natural conversations as the research corpus to compare and analyze the acquisition of pragmatic non-fluency in second language conversation.

### **Verbal Reports (in Assessment of Pragmatics)**

Verbal reports, also known as verbal protocols, are introspective ways that convert the thinking process of the subjects when they complete tasks into speech, whose purpose is to explore the reasoning process when learners is producing written or oral language. Direct access to the cognitive problem-solving steps a learner performs in working memory when dealing with the task is offered through this method. Since the early 1990s, the field of second language pragmatics began to explore the cognitive thinking process of second language learners in producing speech acts by means of verbal report.

Verbal reports have been used in second language pragmatics to investigate students' L2 pragmatic competence. In the case of interactive data collection, verbal report can only be retroactive, and thus reflects the participants' hypothesis about their performance than their cognitive processes. In high-stake test, test reliability should be taken priority, so multiple choice like MDCT is more appropriate. But in low-stake test in classroom, some production test methods like WDCT, role play, and verbal reports seem to be more efficient.

Based on data collected via role-plays, stimulated recalls and ethnographic interviews, Li Citing and Ren Wei (2018) explored the dynamic and multi-facet relationship between learners' L2 pragmatic performance and user subjectivity. In verbal reports, subjects can refer to their pragmatic output and recall why they chose the corresponding pragmatic strategy in the specific situation.

Diachronic research is the latest development of the application of verbal report in second language pragmatic research. At present, only Ren (2014) has applied retrospective oral report in diachronic research.

### **Conclusions**

Combing through the research methods used in the domestic researches concerning the L2 pragmatics competence of the Chinese tertiary-level students, the following conclusions can be drawn:

In the domestic study of interlanguage pragmatics, approaches such as metapragmatic judgement item, discourse completion task, role play, and verbal reports are the most widely used instruments. Besides, the trend of data collected through natural comprehension and elicited conversation are optimistic.

Compared with the international research, research at home focuses on learners' pragmatic use in classroom contexts, especially output of language behavior rather than the development of second language pragmatic competence. And most of them are horizontal and synchronic. The longitudinal research on the development of pragmatic competence in second language has long been at the edge of the field of second language acquisition research. Hence the research in this field can transfer the classroom context of second language acquisition to real life situations to strengthen the authenticity of context. This can help broaden the breadth of second language acquisition research.

Single research method has its own inevitable limitation; therefore future research should adopt more mixed approach, which is conducive to the progress of the research on the development of pragmatic competence.

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