IMPACT OF IMMERSION TEACHING ON ENGLISH SOCIOPRAGMATIC AWARENESS OF CHINESE KINDERGARTEN CHILDREN: A POLITE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to examine the impacts of an early partial immersion program as compared to a non-immersion program on English sociopragmatic awareness among Chinese kindergarten children six years of age. Of the 128 children who participated in the experiment involving the use of politeness perception tasks, half received three years of English immersion instruction and the other half were non-immersion children. The results indicate that compared with non-immersion teaching, the immersion instruction was found to be more effective in developing children's English sociopragmatic awareness in terms of tasks that involve request strategies as opposed to reply strategies. The above results suggest that, apart from immersion teaching, speech act is another important variable affecting second language sociopragmatic competence during early childhood.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching pragmatics in foreign language(FL) or second language(SL) settings has long been a great challenge to language instructors around the world. Although numerous studies in pragmatic interventions have been conducted over the past decades, most of them focus on adult learners (Kasper & Rose, 1999; Kasper, 2001; Rose & Ng, 2001; Rose, 2005; Koike & Pearson, 2005), with little

attention paid to the contextual factors affecting children's development of pragmatic competence. On the other hand, because the majority of these studies have been conducted in western social contexts, the results applicable to Chinese cultural, educational, and linguistic realities have been limited. The present article is intended to contribute to the body of research on FL/SL pragmatic pedagogy by examining the impact of early partial English immersion instruction on English sociopragmatic awareness of Chinese kindergarten children.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies on Interventional Instructions for Developing FL/SL Pragmatic Awareness

Pragmatic awareness refers to the conscious, reflective and explicit knowledge about pragmatics. It is involved with knowledge of those rules and conventions underlying appropriate language use in particular communicative situations and on the part of members of specific speech communities(Cenoz & Hornberger, 2008). Although pragmatic ability has been universally recognized as one of the essential components of communicative competence, it has been largely neglected in today's FL/SL education when compared to teaching other language skills, such as reading and writing. In an attempt to help FL/SL learners obtain a sense of appropriate language use, many scholars have argued for the necessity of raising and enhancing their pragmatic awareness during L2 instructions and consider it as the key to successful pragmatic teaching (Ellis, 1999; Sohn, 2001; Cook, 2001).

Based on the "noticing hypothesis" initiated by Schmidt (1990), a number of instructional interventions have been developed to help FL/SL language learners acquire pragmatic awareness (Bardovi-Harlig, Hartfold, Mahan-Taylor, Moorage, & Reynolds, 1991; Bardovi-Harlig, 1992; Rose, 1999; Byon, 2006; Ishihara, 2007). In general, they can be classified into two categories. First, the cognitive-awareness- raising approach, introduced by Bardovi-Harlig, et al. (1991), is characterized by an attempt to increase students' cognitive awareness of the differences between L1 and L2 speech acts. Teachers are required to provide explicit pragmatic instructions and explain to and discuss with the students the ways in which the speech acts of L1 manifest themselves in L2. The second approach involves an attempt to enhance students' pragmatic awareness through comprehensive training of both receptive and productive skills. Unlike the cognitive approach, the primary goal of this intervention is not to deliver explicit information on pragmatics. Instead, students are exposed to the pragmatic features of both L1 and L2 languages; this exposure is intended to encourage them to arrive at their own generalizations concerning contextually appropriate language use through productive activities, such as interview, role playing and oral presentations (Rose, 1999).

Other studies on classroom instruction in pragmatics compare the effect of implicit versus explicit teaching approaches to a specific learning objective. In ex-

plicit instruction, description, explanation, and/or discussion target the pragmatic feature. In implicit instruction, the pragmatic feature is included in contexts of use and practiced in various activities (Kasper, 2001). A large number of studies report that an explicit provision of metapragmatic information on different pragmatic features was more effective than an implicit or non awareness-raising approach (Rose & Ng, 2001; Takahashi, 2001; Kasper & Rose, 2001; 2002; Rose, 2005; Koike & Pearson, 2005).

Although researchers have reached a consensus on the importance of raising pragmatic awareness in FL/SL teaching contexts, the interventional studies cited above have been carried out with adult learners. These adult-oriented, classroom-based interventional techniques would probably not be appropriate in the teaching of younger children for several reasons. First, young children are less influenced by peer pressure and stereotypes of their own cultural identities (Preston, 1989) than older children and adults. Second, younger children demonstrate a greater language learning capacity due to their innate ability to acquire a second language, an ability related to the large areas of uncommitted cortex of the brain, where the structures of language are laid down(Chomsky, 1972).

Immersion Teaching and its Effect on the Early Development of Pragmatic Awareness of Foreign/ Second Languages

Among the varied reforms in early childhood FL/SL education, the immersion approach has been considered to be a successful attempt. In the immersion program, a second language is not only explicitly taught but also serves as the medium of curriculum instruction. Immersion programs can begin as soon as the child is ready for school (early immersion) or after a number of years of schooling in the mother tongue (late immersion). The quantity of teaching time in the second language may vary, namely total vs. partial immersion, with the latter consisting of less than 100% and a minimum of 50%.

A number of studies have examined the effectiveness of immersion instruction on French immersion students' awareness and appropriate use of specific sociolinguistic features of French (Mougeon, Nadasdi, & Rehner, 2010), including grammatical gender (Harley, 1998), sociolinguistically-appropriate use of *tu* and *vous* (Swain & Lapkin, 1990; Lyster, 1994; 2003) and other conditional forms to express politeness (Day & Shapson, 1991). Immersion instruction with an explicit focus on these features proved to have a more positive influence on students' sociopragmatic awareness of the target language than that with an implicit or incidental focus. Genesee (2004) conducted an analysis of the results from empirical studies conducted in immersion settings and argued for the potential benefits of instruction that explicitly teaches social pragmatic features relevant to students' communicative needs.

Although immersion instruction enjoys obvious advantages over pragmatic instruction, most of the previous studies have been related to French immersion or other immersion programs focusing on alphabetic languages, while very few find-

ings are concerned with logographic languages, such as Chinese. Zhao, Pei, Liu and Siegel (2006) once measured the pragmalinguistic competence of four-year-old Chinese children in an early partial English immersion context and had the participants' performance compared to the norm of American children of the same age. It was found that immersion children achieved as well as the native speakers in English in vocabulary size, the number of talk turns, and the number of morphemes and T-units for each talk turn. However, this study did not have a control group, so it is not convincing enough to attribute children's English pragmatic development merely to immersion teaching. Moreover, researchers examined only the immersion children's pragmalinguistic competence without considering their sociopragmatic ability.

According to Leech (1983) and Thomas (1983), pragmatic competence can be subdivided into pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic components. The former is a primarily linguistic concern in comprehending and expressing the intended illocutionary force, while the latter deals with sociocultural norms, values and beliefs of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behavior in a social setting. In Brown and Levinson's face theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), every sociopragmatic strategy conveying politeness or playing other social functions is chiefly motivated by concerns for managing face. Although face-saving is a universal social phenomenon, it must be considered in terms of its cross-cultural variability. Foremost in this regard are the cultural syndromes of individualism and collectivism, representing the basic themes of individual autonomy and group connectedness. A growing consensus indicates that collectivism entails a relatively greater concern for the face (Kyratzis & Guo, 2001; Yu, 2003). However, no research has explored the effects of immersion teaching on the sociopragmatic competence of Chinese kindergarten children; these students are immersed in an English language environment for most of their school days, yet they remain deeply rooted in a collectivist society that reinforces traditional Chinese conventions and customs.

Finally, most previous studies on the instruction of pragmatic features have been involved with students' comprehension and acquisition of imperative speech acts, such as request, without considering the possible influence of different types of speech acts to the growth of pragmatic awareness. However, some studies on adult EFL learners' perceptions of politeness have reported significant differences between the request and advice utterances (Kitao, 1990; Hinkel, 1997). Therefore, it remains unknown whether this difference will also occur in the group of young English learners.

The present research seeks to address two specific questions: First, for Chinese kindergarten children who expect to learn English as a foreign language, does an early partial immersion teaching program have a significantly more positive impact on their sociopragmatic awareness than non-immersion instruction? Second, do different types of speech act influence their sociopragmatic acquisition in the immersion context?

METHOD

Participants

A total of 128 Chinese kindergarten children (L1: standard Mandarin; L2: English) participated in the experiment, among whom half received three years of partial English immersion instruction and the other half received no immersion instruction. Their average age was 6.25 year. All of the immersion children had two years of partial English immersion during pre-school prior to kindergarten. For the three years of schooling, during half of the instructional day, they were taught in English in five main subjects including language, science, society, health and art. The same subject areas were taught in Chinese for another half of the day. Non-immersion children were taught the same five subjects every day in Chinese with four additional hours of English language instruction every week. Unlike immersion language teachers, non-immersion teachers were allowed to use Chinese to teach English in classes. In order to rule out the family influence, researchers excluded those children whose parents are fluent in English.

Instrument

This study adopted the politeness perception task as the basic instrument to measure the level of sociopragmatic awareness. This task was adapted from the instrument used by Bucciarelli, et al (2003) in their study on children's comprehension of speech act. The experimental materials are composed of four testing scenarios and four filler scenarios, featuring face-threatening interactions that children are familiar with and experience on a regular basis in a school context. Each testing scenario began with a short description of an interaction, followed by a dialogue between the two peers. The final remark (target remark) in the dialogue was the manifestation of the politeness strategy used by one of the speakers to save the other's face.

Two versions of each testing scenario were created to manipulate the type of speech act through which politeness strategy was carried out in the conversation. One half of the time the speaker was making a request; the remainder of the time the speaker was making a reply to a question raised by the other peer. For each version of request and reply scenarios, two different politeness strategies were used respectively. For example, the request was made more politely either in the form of "question"(e.g. "Could you pick up the teddy bear on the floor for me?"), or by adopting "politeness markers"(e.g. "Please pick up the teddy bear on the floor for me."). Similarly, the reply was made in a more polite way by using either "hedges" (e.g. "Maybe, it is not a nice-looking picture") or "comforting statements" (e.g. "It is not a nice-looking picture, but you have tried so hard.").

The filler scenarios, which do not contain politeness strategies, were designed in a similar way for the purpose of ruling out any learning effects between the testing scenarios. Therefore, the answers given by the participants in filler scenarios were not taken for data analysis. All the scenarios were arranged and presented to

the participants in a random sequence. (See Appendix).

Procedure

The experiment was conducted on an individual basis. For each testing scenario, only the dialogue portion was presented verbally to the participants in English, while the remaining material was read aloud in Chinese.

The participant, based on his or her understanding of the scenarios, was first asked to speak the intention of the target remark (e.g. What does Xiaogang expect his peer to do by saying, "Could you pick up the teddy bear on the floor for me?"). If the answer were correct, the participant was again required to compare the appropriateness of the target remark with that of an impolite utterance (e.g. The following are two different expressions with the same intention: "Would you please tell me which is a more appropriate one in this situation: 'Could you pick up the teddy bear on the floor?' Vs 'Pick up the teddy bear on the floor!'"). Finally, the participant was required to explain the reason for his or her choice in Chinese. Each participant required about twenty minutes to finish this perception task.

One point was scored if the participant were able to identify the intention of the target remark; two points were scored if the participant not only spoke out the intention, but also made a correct choice on the comparison task. Three points were scored if the participant could answer all three questions correctly. The interview was conducted in Chinese except for the presentation of the target and matching remarks. Statistical analysis of the collected data was made with SPSS 10.0.

Results

All effects reported as significant were reliable at less than $p<0.05$. Dependent measures (children's performance on politeness perception tasks) were analyzed with a 2×2 (Immersion instruction×Type of speech act) analysis of variance (ANOVA), with repeated measure on the type of speech act.

Table 1: Performance of Immersion vs Non-immersion Children on the Sociopragmatic Awareness Tasks in Request and Reply Scenarios

	Immersion Children(n=64)		Non-immersion Children(n=64)	
	M	SD	M	SD
Request Scenario	3.73	0.89	2.51	1.33
Reply Scenario	3.43	0.66	3.15	0.65

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviation of the scores achieved by both immersion and non-immersion children on sociopragmatic awareness tasks. As expected, the predicted main effect of immersion instruction was significant, $F(1, 126)=36.70$, $p<0.01$, suggesting that the overall level of sociopragmatic awareness of English immersion children was significantly higher than that of the non-immersion group. Moreover, the main effect of speech act was

not significant, F(1, 126)=2.56, p>0.05; nonetheless, significant differences were found in the interactions of immersion instruction with type of speech act, F(1, 126)=19.04, p<0.05.

In view of the existence of interaction, the participants' performances in both request and reply scenarios were analyzed separately through independent-samples T test with teaching approach as the independent variable.

Table 2: Comparison of Sociopragmaic Awareness between Immersion vs Non-immersion Children in Request and Reply Scenarios

	Immersion Children(n=64)		Non-immersion Children(n=64)	
	M	SD	M	SD
Request Scenario	3.73	0.89	2.51	1.33
Reply Scenario	3.43	0.66	3.15	0.65

According to the results presented in Table 2, the means of the scores achieved by immersion children on the tasks with both request and reply scenarios were higher than those by non-immersion children. Significant differences in sociopragmatic awareness between the two groups were only found in the request scenario, t=6.07, df= 126, p<0.01, but not in that of reply strategy, t=2.43, df= 126, p>0.05. In order to make a more detailed investigation into the perception of request strategy, Chi-square test was employed to further compare the distribution of the number of immersion vs non-immersion children who were able to give correct answers on all three levels of tasks.

Table 3: Number & Percentage of Immersion vs Non-immersion Children Making Correct Replies on Request Politeness Perception Task at Various Levels

	Intention Interpretation		Appropriateness Comparison		Reason Explanation	
	Pass	Fail	Pass	Fail	Pass	Fail
Immersion	47(73.4%)	17(26.6)	37(57.8%)	27(42.2%)	17(26.6%)	47(73.4%)
Non-immersion	43(67.2%)	21(32.8%)	20(31.3%)	44(68.8%)	7(10.9%)	57(89.1%)

As Table 3 illustrates, 73.4% of the immersion children gave the correct answers when being asked to speak the intention of the target remark. This percentage was not significantly different from that (67.2%) of non-immersion children, $\chi 2(1)=0.60$, p>0.05. However, the percentage (57.8%) of the immersion children who not only identified the intention of the target remark but also made the correct choice when comparing appropriateness of the target remark with that of impolite utterance was significantly higher than that (31.3%) of non-immersion children, $\chi 2(1)=9.14$, p<0.05. Additionally, the percentage (26.6%) of the immersion children who achieved success in all three levels of perception tasks was also

significantly higher than that (10.9%) of the latter, $\chi 2(1)=5.13$, $p<0.05$. Taken together, the above results suggest that the discrepancy in the perception of request politeness between the two groups does not lie in interpretation of the intention of the request utterance but rather in comprehension of the sociopragmatic norms required in a certain interpersonal context.

In summary, immersion children's overall level of sociopragmatic awareness was significantly higher than that of the non-immersion group. However, significant differences in sociopragmatic awareness between the two groups were found only in the request scenario rather than the reply context, which suggests that the type of speech act is another important variable affecting L2 sociopragmatic competence.

DISCUSSION

In spite of an increasing number of studies on the instruction of pragmatic competence in recent years, few of them focus on young FL/SL learners, and the empirical investigation into the classroom teaching approach affecting pragmatic competence of Chinese FL/SL learners in early childhood has been relatively rare. The objective of the present study is to explore how early partial immersion instructions affect the English sociopragmatic competence of Chinese kindergarten children. The results of the present study, as a supplement to that of previous immersion studies in China, provide additional evidence on the positive effectiveness of immersion instruction in developing early pragmatic competence in other languages.

One advantage inherent in immersion teaching is the time devoted directly to student exposure to English. In this study, non-immersion students received four hours of English instruction per week. Obviously, the immersion students had many more opportunities of exposure to English comprehension and the application of pragmatic features of the target language. Even though it was once argued by Schmidt (1993) that mere exposure to the target language did not necessarily result in FL/SL learners' grasp of general pragmatic knowledge, the results of the present study lead us to a different conclusion. For pragmatic learning of young children whose metalinguistic and other basic cognitive competence, such as "noticing," are not as fully developed as adults, exposure time still serves as an essential condition. More supporting evidence may also come from the findings reported by some contrasting studies among ESL and EFL learners and native speakers, which indicate that the length of stay in the target language environment is one of the important factors affecting the L2 pragmatic acquisition (Bouton, 1994; Matsumura, 2003; Schauer, 2006).

Another reason for immersion children's positive sociopragmatic performance is the communicative approach characterized by immersion teaching, the underlying assumption of which is to develop the language learners' ability to use the second language in a variety of authentic situations. As pointed out by Rose

(1999), large classes, limited contact hours and little opportunity for intercultural communication have become three significant contextual factors that hinder pragmatic learning. Apparently, language is the primary medium of interpersonal behavior and plays a critical role in achieving goals and making coordinated social action possible. In English immersion contexts, Chinese children were provided with a natural imitative social environment in English, which resembles their daily communication in Chinese, in which children were encouraged to use English for communicative purposes through various forms of activities such as games, drama, chants, etc. On the other hand, the immersion teachers were required to speak only in the English language to the children and to discourage them from using their mother tongue during the immersion teaching period. As a consequence, the learning of pragmatic norms in English immersion settings was more likely to take place as a by-product of children's interaction with meaningful contents. For both immersion teachers and children, the second language (English) is no longer a language to study, but a language to be used in everyday life.

Despite the positive effect of immersion teaching on the overall level of sociopragmatic awareness, we also need to be aware of the role played by different types of speech act in sociopragmatic learning. According to the results of this research, significant differences in sociopragmatic awareness between the two groups were only found in the request scenario rather than reply context. This result suggests that apart from immersion teaching, the type of speech act is another important variable affecting L2 sociopragmatic competence.

As a typical directive speech act, a request is made by the speaker with the intention of enabling the hearer to perform certain actions as expected. In Brown & Levinson's "face theory," it belongs to the category of acts that pose a threat to addressee's negative face, which is explicitly interpreted as the desire to act freely and remain free from imposition. By contrast, in reply scenarios, in which disagreement had to be expressed, the interlocutor was adopting a politeness strategy in hopes of protecting the addressee's positive face, or satisfying his/her desire to maintain a positive self-image that is appreciated and approved by others. However, the taxonomy between positive and negative FTA as claimed by Brown and Levinson has been criticized by many cross-cultural studies (Ide, 1989; Morisaki & Gudykunst, 1994; Chang & Holt, 1994). A major objection has been that the concept of negative politeness is derived from the value placed on individualism in Western society, but this approach cannot be successfully applied to collectivist cultures, such as Japan and China, where the emphasis is on group goals, which take precedence over individual wants (Gu, 1990; Chang & Holt, 1994).

The cultural difference in the notion of "negative face" as mentioned above may result in a totally different performance of FL/SL learners on their perceptions of polite strategies involved with different speech acts. For both immersion and non-immersion children in the present study, the social conventions and pragmatic norms related to maintaining addressee's positive face in the reply scenarios are consistent across Chinese and English languages and cultures, which is

more likely to produce positive pragmatic transfer from L1 to L2, thus reducing the group difference in sociopragmatic awareness. While on the request perception tasks, which require Chinese EFL learners overcoming the negative transfer caused by the contrast in "negative face," non-immersion children demonstrated significantly more difficulties in distinguishing the polite request forms from the impolite ones due to the limited exposure time and chance of communication in the target language.

As a small-scale pilot investigation, this study has evident limitations. A significant shortcoming is that we examined only the sociopragmatic awareness of six-year-old children without considering other age groups from a developmental perspective. Therefore, the developmental trajectory of both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence across different age groups needs to be explored in the future. Another limitation is related to the factor of gender: Due to the small number of female non-immersion children, gender was not taken as an independent variable in this study; however, significant gender differences may exist in both immersion and non-immersion children in their L2 pragmatic learning. In response to this issue, future studies need to be conducted with more female children involved. Finally, this study is chiefly conducted by adopting outcome-oriented approach, which makes it difficult for us to focus on the specific teaching and learning process. In future research, more observations with process-oriented assessments should be made between the two teaching models to scrutinize how immersion teaching works with Chinese kindergarten EFL learners on a daily basis.

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APPENDIX

1. Scenario with request strategy

Chinese Version

小刚（小红）和小强（小倩）是同一个班的小朋友（图片1）。一天，小刚（小红）在班里玩时，不小心将玩具空路掉在地上（图片2）。这时，小强（小倩）刚好从旁边走过（图片3）。小刚（小红）想让小强（小倩）帮他（她）把泰迪熊捡起来，便说道：(1)*"Could you pick up the teddy bear on the floor for me?"* (2) *"Please pick up the teddy bear on the floor for me.*（图片4）

English Version

Xiao Gang(Xiao Hong) and Xiao Qiang(Xiao Qian) are classmates(Picture 1). One day, Xiao Gang(Xiao Hong) dropped his (her) teddy bear toy on the floor when he(she) was playing in the classroom(Picture 2). At this moment, Xiao Qiang(Xiao Qian) happened to pass by(Picture 3). Xiao Gang(Xiao Hong) wanted Xiao Qiang(Xiao Qian) to help him(her) pick up the teddy bear, so he(she)

said: (1)“Could you pick up the teddy bear on the floor for me?” (2) “Please pick up the teddy bear on the floor for me”.(图片4）

Question 1 (Intention Interpretation)

What did Xiao Gang(Xiao Hong) expect Xiao Qiang(Xiao Qian) to do?

Question 2 (Appropriateness Comparison)

The following are two different expressions with the same intention(pick up the teddy bear). Would you please tell me which is a more appropriate one for Xiao Gang(Xiao Hong)in this situation:

(1) “Could you pick up the teddy bear on the floor?” Vs “Pick up the teddy bear on the floor!”.

(2) “Please pick up the teddy bear on the floor for me.” Vs “Pick up the teddy bear on the floor!”.

Question 3 (Reason Explanation)

Why do you think the former(latter) is a better choice for Xiao Gang(Xiao Hong)?

2. Scenario with reply strategy

Chinese Version

小强（小倩）平时很喜欢画画（图片1）。一天，小强（小倩）费了好大工夫才画好了一幅画，但他（她）画得并不好。（图片2）这时，小强（小倩）看到小刚（小红）一个人在教室里玩，便走过去问到：“你觉得我这幅画好看吗？”（图片3）小刚（小红）回答说：(1)*“Maybe, it is not a nice-looking picture.”* (2)*“It is not a nice-looking picture, but you have tried so hard.”* (图片4）

English Version

Xiao Qiang (Xiao Qian) likes drawing pictures very much. (Picture 1) One day, it took Xiao Qiang (Xiao Qian) quite a long time to finish one; however, he(she) did not do a good job. (Picture 2) At this moment, Xiao Qiang (Xiao Qian) found Xiao Gang (Xiao Hong) was playing alone in the classroom, so he(she) stepped up and asked, “What do you think of my picture?” (Picture 3) . After taking a close look at the picture, Xiao Gang (Xiao Hong) replied, (1) “Maybe, it is not a nice-looking picture.” (2)“It is not a nice-looking picture, but you have tried so hard.” (Picture 4)

Question 1 (Intention Interpretation)

What did Xiao Gang(Xiao Hong) mean about Xiao Qiang(Xiao Qian)’s picture?

Question 2 (Appropriateness Comparison)

The following are two different expressions with the same intention(the picture looks bad). Would you please tell me which is a more appropriate one for Xiao Gang(Xiao Hong)in this situation:

(1) “Maybe, it is not a nice-looking picture.”Vs “It looks so bad!”

(2) “It is not a nice-looking picture, but you have tried so hard.” Vs “It looks so bad!”

Question 3 (Reason Explanation)

Why do you think the former(latter) is a better choice for Xiao Gang(Xiao Hong)?