A Case Study of Chinese Students’ Second Language Pragmatic Development During Study Abroad in a UK University

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Abstract

With internationalization of higher education, increasing number of studies is paying attention to the effect of study abroad (SA) on international students’ academic or language achievements. This qualitative case study aims to examine how four international students from China applied the conversation routines they noticed during SA into communication practice during SA in the UK. Interview data were collected and analyzed. It was found that during SA the students developed different and new knowledge of L2 (English) conversation routines and revealed evidence of L2 pragmatic development in terms of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence. Several factors may have played facilitative role in their pragmatic development: attention to L2 input, positive L1 pragmatic transfer, positive attitude and strong motivation towards L2 language and culture, etc.

Keywords

Chinese Students; Interlanguage Pragmatics; L2 Pragmatic Development; Study Abroad; Case Study

Introduction

This case study examines how four Chinese learners of English acquired some target language/L2 conversation routines by observing and noticing the pragmatic norms during their study abroad in a UK University. It also aims to find out the factors which might play a role in these learners’ L2 pragmatic development.

There has been increasing attention to the effect of study abroad on L2 learners’ pragmatic development in the field of Interlanguage Pragmatics and has been of great interest among researchers (Kasper & Rose, 2002, Schauer, 2010, for review). Most empirical studies have examined L2 learners’ pragmatic development during study abroad in terms of sociocultural or sociopragmatic competence and pragmalinguistic competence by examining such pragmatic features as use of politeness strategies (Bella, 2011), speech acts (Yu, 2011), L2 address terms (Hassall, 2013), pragmatic comprehension (Bouton, 1994), conversation or pragmatic routines (Bardovi-Harlig, 2011; Taguchi, 2013) etc. and factors influencing L2 pragmatic development, such as L1 language transfer (Yu, 2011), the relationships between length of stay, proficiency and pragmatic competence (Bardovi-Harlig, 2011; Lundell & Erman, 2012) and so on.

For example, Schauer’s (2010) review of some studies (e.g., Matsumura, 2003, 2007; Kinginger, 2008; Halenko, 2009) shows encouraging findings that a sojourn in the study aboard context has a positive impact on L2 learners’ pragmatic performance, even though L2 learners may not become native-like in all aspects and may not make the same progress. However, based on relevant studies, Kasper and Rose concluded that “spending time in the target community is no panacea, length of residence is not a reliable predictor” rather, “the activities in which learners participate, and the occasions for engagements as listeners and speakers they offer, seem to be relevantly related to pragmatic learning” (2002: 230-234).

What’s more, the majority of non-longitudinal investigations employed a group-based analysis of the data based on instruments such as metapragmatic assessment, DCTs, role-plays or recognition tasks, which more or less ignored the individual learner features and process of development. As a result, little has been known what learners observed about the target language pragmatic norms and how they made use of the authentic L2 input they are exposed to to facilitate pragmatic development. An analysis of individual L2 learners’ speech act performance with qualitative methods is required in examining the effect of study abroad (Schauer, 2010).

Based on these considerations, the present study will conduct a case study by focusing on four Chinese
students’ learning experience of some English conversation routines. It was expected that the exploratory findings of this study would enrich the process-oriented studies in Interlanguage Pragmatics and would help understanding the factors influencing L2 learners’ pragmatic development in a study abroad context.

The present study will focus on some conversation routines or pragmatic routines which are easily accessible by international students, for example, greeting and order a drink/meal. Pragmatic routines are those recurrent phrases or words employed in particular contexts for the social purposes of thanking, apologizing, requesting, offering, greeting, insulting, and complimenting—the automatic responses deployed in recurring and predictable communication situations (Aijmer, 1996). These routines can be entirely fixed strings (How are you?) or sequences with open spaces where lexical insertions are possible (Can you [x]?) (Aijmer, 1996). Routines are interesting because they have specific sociolinguistic functions and the cultural associations in routinized language might be problematic for L2 learners (Davis, 2007: 613)

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1) What features did the Chinese students notice about English conversation routines during study abroad (for example, greetings, order a meal/drink)?
2) Did the routines features students noticed facilitate the development of their pragmatic competence?

**Methodology**

The study was a qualitative study. Semi-structured interviews data and documentary analysis are combined to answer the research questions.

**Participants**

The participants were four students from China who were enrolled in different master programmes in one UK University in autumn 2013. See Table 1 for background information of each participant. All of them were female aged between 20-30 and they were all from mainland China. Among the participants, only Beatrice had the exchange experience in a UK university for the length of half a year. At the time of data collection, they had been staying in the UK for at least three months and had one term’s learning experience. Due to the focus of this study and some practical reasons, their English proficiency was not tested. However, in order to access British higher education for a master’s program, they had passed the IELTS test with an average score of 7 before the entry and could be regarded as learners with overall high proficiency levels. But due to different prior English learning experience, their oral English and communication skills might differ.

**TABLE 1 INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Previous SA experience</th>
<th>Time of interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Social research</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>20th Nov, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beatrice</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Intercultural communication</td>
<td>Yes (half a year)</td>
<td>12th Dec, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gloria</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>International business</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>15th Dec, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>ELT</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>20th Dec, 2013</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Collection Procedures**

All data were collected by semi-structured interviews. Some open sub-questions were developed from the research questions. During the interviews, interviewees were encouraged to share true stories of their experience in the UK in addition to reply to the interview questions.

My sojourn in the same university for a couple of months made it possible to build rapport with some international students before interviews so as to seek close researcher-participant relationships (Pitts & Miller-Day 2007). After frequent informal contact, I chose four of them who agreed to take part in my study and who would like to share their experience during study abroad. Before interviewing them, I asked for their permission for audio-recording the interviews by giving each of them the informant sheet and consent form and also promised the confidentiality of data and anonymity.

The interviews were conducted by the author in the form of individual interview in quiet settings. The time of interviews ranged from November to December, 2013, depending on convenience of the participants as well. At the time of interviews, even those learners who had no experience studying abroad had been in the UK for at least three months, a period sufficient for them to have some amount of interaction with people from different language backgrounds, thus ensuring the validity of data. The interviews were conducted in Chinese, the mother tongue of both the interviewer and the interviewees.
Data Analysis

All the audio-recorded interview data were transcribed and then translated into English by the author. During data coding, I read the transcripts repeatedly, searching for patterns and themes relating to the research questions, then selected, labeled and grouped together data that were related to my research purpose and questions. After the transcriptions were translated into English, all the data were sent to the participants to confirm the objectivity of the transcription and translation. To improve research validity, triangulation was employed by involving other investigators interpretation of the data. Both the original transcriptions and the translated data with pseudonyms of interviewees were proofread by one colleague in the field of cross-cultural communication who was bilingually competent in both Chinese and English to help reexamine them and finalize the coding and categorizing.

Findings

International Students’ Observations of Target Language Conversation Routines

In order to address the first research question some sub-questions were asked during interviews: What characteristics did you find about conversation routines during your stay in the UK? Did you find any different linguistic features from what you have learned before in the everyday use of English? For example, greetings, buy food or drinks?

In order to explore the participants' pragmatic knowledge, the present study adopted the dichotomy of pragmatic competence into pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence proposed by Leech (1983). The former is related to the relationship between linguistic forms and their functions, concerning the use or comprehension of target language linguistic conventions and their function and the latter is concerned with the connections between linguistic conventions and social and contextual factors.

Firstly, the interviewees expressed their impression of English people being very polite in terms of the language they use in daily interaction. For example, what impressed them was the high frequency of the use of such expressions as "excuse me, thank you and please":

This is my first time in the UK. I found British people very polite and they speak English in a polite way. When I order water in the UK, I usually say 'Could you give me a cup of water please?' I tend to speak in long and complex sentence to make it polite. I think the use of 'please' made my language polite. (Anna)

Beatrice, who had had six months’ exchange experience in the UK in 2012, had similar observations:

I found I said a lot more times ‘excuse me, thank you and sorry’ here than in China. When I bought meal in café, I found some Chinese students did not use ‘please’, I think it was not polite enough.

Kate indicated her confusion about British English after her arrival in the UK:

When I first arrived in the UK, I did not get used to people saying ‘sorry, excuse me’ all the time. But now, I am not confused, for example, they like a larger space between strangers, so they say ‘excuse me’. I also use them. But I often forget using them and felt embarrassed. My housemates sometimes reminded me. I knew English language is polite, but I felt more deeply after arriving here.

From observation, the interviewees have noticed the gap of their pragmatic knowledge and the authentic input they were exposed to. The gap includes the high frequency of native speakers’ use of politeness markers, the politeness markers preferred by English speakers and some occasions where they are used.

Secondly, the interviewees have noticed some differences between native speakers’ use of conversation routines and their own use and recognized the functions of some conversation routines during interaction with different people. For example,

When I learned English, I was told ‘How do you do?’ was used between strangers’ greetings. But I never found people using it, they prefer ‘How are you?’ or just ‘Hello’. (Gloria)

The interviewees found the various responses to “How are you?” used by native speakers. Both Anna and Beatrice noticed “How are you?” had more than one reply. “People just say, good, I am ok, I am fine or I am very well, thank you. There are more varieties.”

In addition, interviewees commented how they realized the function of “How are you?”:

It has a very simple function of greetings. Sometimes I did not even finish my sentence (to respond ‘How are you?’), I found they had disappeared from the corridor (Laughter) (Anna).

I once asked a Hungarian girl “How are you?” she began to talk a lot, her stomachache, assignments, etc. I thought she misunderstood the function of
the sentence. (Beatrice)

Thirdly, in addition to the above-mentioned pragmalinguistic features, the interview data also revealed the interviewees’ observations of sociopragmatic knowledge during communication. For example, talking about social distance between people, they all found uncomfortable by addressing their teacher by surname no matter in oral or email greetings because they thought they should show more respect to teachers by using address term:

I know it is ok when I call my teacher by her first name, but I still feel uncomfortable doing so at the beginning. (Kate)

The other evidence showing their perception of the less hierarchical British culture is politeness. They found in the UK, people are linguistically polite no matter whether they are talking to a dean or to a waitress. For example,

I noticed all the passengers said ‘thank you’ to the bus driver when they got off the bus. You will never do it before you know the rule—it is a custom here.

When people buy a drink, most of the time, they use ‘Can I have xx please?’ or ‘Could I have xx please?’ I don’t think they talk differently to different waiters. (Anna)

Evidence of International Students’ Acquisition of Conversational Routines

Some sub-questions were asked during interviews in order to address the second research question: Do you find these differences you found and your own experience helpful? When you are in the UK, how do you greet and respond to greetings? How do you use English to order meal/drinks? Did you find any changes in your use of English in these contexts?

The interview data provided some evidence for students’ pragmatic development.

Firstly, attention to pragmatic input improved the interviewees’ pragmatic awareness especially politeness regarding greetings or ordering food. What’s more, they were also willing to learn the linguistic conventions in ordering food. Beatrice mentioned how she reminded herself of using “please” by avoiding the interference of mother tongue sentence structure:

When I heard some Chinese students saying ‘I want this, I want that’ in buying food, I knew it is not polite to say so. I tried to use ‘please’ as much as possible.

Similar experience happened to other interviewees—keeping in mind the necessity of using “please”:

I often forgot to say ‘please’. I remembered soon after I finished my words. (Kate)

Gloria shared her struggling experience in responding to an offer:

When I was offered some drinks, I used to say, ‘Yes, thank you.’ until I was told by my English friend that it was wrong, I now learn to say: ‘Yes, please’ or ‘No, thank you’ though sometimes I still forgot it.

Secondly, having access to authentic input expanded interviewees’ linguistic repertoire. Instead of following the only way of responding to “How are you?”—“I am fine, thank you. And you?” which was from textbooks, they learned various ways of responding to it by saying “I am very well; good, fine; I am ok” etc. Similarly, they learned to greet people by alternative way of greetings, e.g., “Are you all right? Are you OK? Hello! Hi, yo!” etc.

Thirdly, living in the target language country provided students with opportunities to be involved in activities with native speakers; as a result, they understood some social rules and contexts deeply. One interesting example is about the request of salt on dinner table:

When I learned English in China, I remembered clearly one sentence pattern I practiced, ‘Can you pass me the salt?’ I didn’t understand the context until I was in the UK. I found there is no salt when vegetables are cooked here, so there is always a box of salt on the dinner table. (Gloria)

Another interesting example is about weather as a way of greetings. Kate said she could not understand people’s preference over weather until she witnessed how changeable the weather is in the UK.

It seemed that during stay in the target culture, learners could make use of the pragmatic input or resources to improve their pragmatic competence. However, due to the limited time the interviewees stayed in the UK and the lack of measurement or assessment of their pragmatic competence, it is impossible to claim to what extent they are pragmatically competent or how much their pragmatic competence has developed.

Discussions

From findings in Section 3, it was found that the interviewees’ sociopragmatic competence and pragmalinguistic competence have developed in the
target country context. Their increased pragmatic knowledge and awareness echoed previous studies in Interlanguage Pragmatics literature supporting the effect of study abroad on L2 learners’ pragmatic development (Schauer, 2010).

Concerning pragmalinguistic competence, there is some evidence showing the interviewees’ development: a. the interviewees noticed the gap of their pragmatic knowledge and the authentic input they were exposed to; b. they developed the awareness of learning L2 linguistic conventions and functions of some conversation routines; c. their linguistic repertoire and variety of conversation routines also increased. These developmental features indicated the facilitative effect of factors such as the pragmatic input and interaction, learners’ “noticing” of L2 pragmatic features in context instead of being exposed to study abroad context alone.

Concerning sociolinguistic competence, the interviewees developed different perceptions of English politeness relating to power and social hierarchy and had access to closer observation of British culture, which again revealed the advantage of study abroad context—providing authentic input for sociopragmatic knowledge—over the input-poverty classroom learning environment, lack of instruction of sociopragmatic knowledge or other acquisition-poor contexts (see Kasper & Rose 2002, for review). Rose’s cross-sectional studies of primary school students in Hong Kong (2000, 2009) also indicated that there was ample evidence of pragmalinguistic development, but not much evidence of sociopragmatic development, indicating lack of sociopragmatic development in foreign language contexts.

Several factors might play a role in accounting for the interviewees’ development in pragmatic competence.

First of all, sensitivity to contextual factors and attention to authentic input. It has been widely acknowledged that exposure to L2 input alone does not guarantee pragmatic acquisition in SA context (Kasper & Rose, 2002 for review). Years of exposure can be misleading and is not adequate indication of actual social interaction, as problems found in Yu’s (2011) study of Chinese learners’ compliments during SA. According to Yu’s findings, “though having studies in the United States for several years, these learners do not appear to have had extensive contact with Americans…lack of socializing with native speakers of the target language” (2011: 1143). To cite Kasper & Rose again, what was helpful were, rather, “the activities in which learners participate, and the occasions for engagements as listeners and speakers they offer” (2002: 234) and “individual learners’ ability to build social networks that provide them with opportunities for naturalistic language learning in a wide range of situations and registers” (DuFon, 2010: 322).

In order to improve the quality and quantity of interaction, it could be seen from this study that the students’ effort to access authentic input, sensitivity and attention to different contextual factors all played a role. Beatrice, for example, benefited a lot from her international flatmates and local friends. She made full of opportunities to experience local culture; as a result, her sensitivity to conversation English was higher than academic English, as she mentioned, “Even in a pub, I observed the names for wines and the music. I listened to some local bands so that I had more conversations with my friends”. It is important that a learner knows how to speak or behave properly, or to be pragmatically competent, in a variety of situations including a pub. It is the similar case with Anna who took every opportunity to learn English, from her landlord, friends, even strangers on the train. What’s more, she could always get correct feedback from them.

Secondly, positive attitude and strong motivation towards target language and culture. Research found that motivation has a relationship with pragmatic awareness (Takahashi, 2005) and interlanguage pragmatic development. Although learners were aware of L2 pragmatic norms, they may consciously resist them. Davis (2007) found Korean ESL students’ preferences for North American English affected their willingness to use Australian-English routines while studying in Australia. Hassall found that Australian learners of Indonesian sometimes chose to flout L2 pragmatic norms by choosing address terms which contradicted their own knowledge about L2 pragmatic norms and showed “how their behaviors may reflect a perception shared by themselves and others that a salient identity for them is that of outsider” (2013: 15). While these studies showed how learners’ negative attitude or bias toward L2 norms affected interlanguage pragmatic development (Kasper & Rose, 1999; Davis, 2007; Hassall, 2013), it is not true in this study.

In this study, the findings suggested students’ positive attitude toward the target language and strong learning motivation facilitated their progress in pragmatic development. For some learners, convergence of L2 sociopragmatic norms can be a matter of personal choice based on a particular affective stance.
toward L2 usage (Thomas, 1983). The positive attitude prompted learners to make full use of input, get involved in interactions and become very sensitive to pragmatic input exposed to them. The students in this study were very positive toward English language and British culture; furthermore, they all indicated their strong motivation of learning English as a necessary tool of communication especially for the sake of academic achievement and probable benefit in future work. It is due to her strong motivation that Anna “took every opportunity to communicate with people though I found the British accent hard to understand”. Interestingly, Gloria said although she didn’t like British accent, she had very strong learning motivation of learning English well for her future goal. A recent study by Khorshidi & Nimchahi (2013) also revealed the impact of integrative and instrumental motivation on Iranian English learners’ development of interlanguage pragmatics and the more facilitative role of integrative motivation. However, the present study did not go deeper into how different motivations interacted with L2 learners’ interlanguage pragmatic development.

Thirdly, L1 pragmatic transfer. While most of the literature on L1 pragmatic transfer deals with the negative influence of one’s mother tongue on the pragmatic development (Takahashi, 1996), the conditions of transfer and especially those of positive L1 transfer is less understood. Olshtain (1983) and Robinson (1992) suggested that learners may be more prone to transfer their pragmatic L2 knowledge when they hold a universalist view as opposed to a relativist perspective on pragmatic norms (Kasper & Rose, 1999: 95). However, still little empirical studies explore how positive L1 pragmatic transfer would occur. In this study, Anna and Gloria obviously transferred the politeness principles they used in China to the new context and they did find them rewarding.

I am always very sensitive about politeness. Whenever I write an email to my lecturer (in the UK), I take it seriously and write carefully. I think what matters is not how accurate your expressions are, but how you express yourself to make others feel comfortable. (Anna)

My classmates are from different countries, so it is impossible to consider all the cultures and habits when I communicate with them. I found it almost the same in the UK and China in terms of politeness. Most of the time, I show the same politeness to everyone. For example, I get used to saying ‘thank you’ to people before I came here. (Gloria)

But it is still not sure whether learners’ transfer of L1 pragmatic norms in the present study, without any evidence of judgment from the perspective of their interlocutors, will guarantee successful communication even in ELF context. Rather, learners always need to be sensitive enough to observe the culture specificities and nuances, as Gloria recalled her own practice “I followed my politeness principle and meanwhile observed the minor differences”.

Conclusion

The present study explored what four Chinese students found out English conversation routines in a study abroad context in the UK and whether they benefited from their observations in terms of pragmatic development. In-depth interview data were collected and analyzed qualitatively. All students have revealed some evidence of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic development during stay in the UK.

The study findings provided an in-depth process-oriented understanding of individual non-native speakers’ target language use, rather than either production-oriented or norm-based investigation. It was hoped that the present qualitative study would provide methodological alternatives for doing Interlanguage Pragmatic research and would help educators to understand how international students made use of their learning opportunities in an international context. However, there are limitations as well. First of all, due to the small size and the homogeneity of sample, the findings are not supposed to be generalized to either wider contexts or larger sample. Second, the data were collected by interviews alone. Further studies should be better planned to provide richer and more valid data, by, for example, at the beginning of data collection encouraging participants to keep a diary or learning journal, or training participants to be an ethnographer or observer. Finally, the present study has not explored deeper into the effect of individual differences. Future studies may take into consideration more variables, for example, the effect of linguistic proficiency or participants of different gender and motivations.

REFERENCES


Bardovi-Harlig, K. and M.-T. Bastos. 'Proficiency, length of stay, and intensity of interaction and the acquisition of


Dr Xianju Yang was born in Shanxi Province, China. She got her PhD degree in Second Language Acquisition from Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, China in 2006. Her research interests include interlanguage pragmatics, intercultural communication, second language acquisition and internationalization of higher education.