



The Effect of Integrative Attitude on the Development of Pragmatic Comprehension

Vahid Rafieyan, Lin Siew Eng and Abdul Rashid Mohamed

School of Educational Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), 11800 Penang, Malaysia.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 10 February 2013;

Received in revised form:

17 March 2013;

Accepted: 2 April 2013;

Keywords

Cultural perspectives,

Individual differences,

Integrative attitude,

Pragmatic comprehension.

ABSTRACT

Individual differences, attitude toward cultural perspectives of the target language community being its most significant aspect, are assumed to play a crucial role in the development of pragmatic competence. To investigate this issue, this study attempted to assess the relationship between integrative attitude and pragmatic comprehension. A multiple choice pragmatic listening test and a Likert-scaled attitude questionnaire were used to collect data from 63 undergraduate students of Teaching English as a Foreign Language at three universities in Iran. The findings suggested that integrative attitude has a significant effect on pragmatic comprehension. Therefore, it was recommended to complement classroom instructions with popular cultural perspectives of the target language community.

© 2013 Elixir All rights reserved.

Introduction

In order to understand and comprehend any written or spoken syntactic structure of the target language, the semantic aspect of the target language structure (what is communicated) needs to be complemented with the pragmatic aspect of that target language structure (what is meant) (Holtgraves & Kashima, 2008). Linguistic competence is not the sole factor to contribute to pragmatic comprehension, but the social context in which an expression is uttered determines the pragmatic connotation of the expression. Lack of familiarity with the socio-cultural perspectives of the target language community may lead to breakdowns in communication and specifically in the appropriate comprehension of the conveyed message. Therefore, pragmatic competence is an integral part of linguistic competence. In this respect, individual differences such as level of familiarity with the cultural perspectives of the target language community and level of interest in learning and applying those cultural perspectives are the key factors to determine language learners' level of pragmatic comprehension (Ran, 2007). Among individual differences variables, motivation could be the most influential variable to derive learners' attention to notice the cultural perspectives of the target language features (Takahashi, 2001). Language learners who tend to acculturate and integrate with the target language community are more likely to pay close attention to pragmatic aspects of language input they receive during classroom instructions (Schmidt, 1993) and are more motivated to learn the target language than language learners who do not possess such tendency (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003).

Literature Review

Integrative Attitude and Pragmatic Competence

Since the realization of the significance of the role of integrative attitude, referred to as the tendency to integrate with the target culture community and to accept their cultural norms, in the development of pragmatic competence, a number of studies have been conducted to explore the issue. Salsbury and Bardovi-Harlig (2001) investigated the pragmatic competence of

two learners of English as a Second Language. They found that although both participants in their study had the same level of language proficiency, the participant with higher level of desire and intention to communicate with native English speakers experienced higher development in pragmatic competence. Takahashi (2001) conducted a study over the influence of integrative attitude and language proficiency on pragmatic awareness of a group of Japanese learners of English as a Foreign Language. She found that integrative attitude but not target language proficiency had a significant effect on pragmatic awareness. LoCastro (2001) explored the attitude of Japanese learners of English as a Foreign Language toward adopting target language pragmatic norms. The findings indicated that individual differences; specifically attitudes, motivation, and self-identity; may influence and constrain to adopt target language pragmatic norms. Most participants in the study favored to retain their own identities as Japanese, suggesting their unwillingness to accommodate to target language pragmatic norms. Tateyama (2001) investigated the pragmatic competence of a group of learners of Japanese as a Foreign Language in producing the Japanese routine formula 'sumimasen'. The findings suggested that learners with higher integrative attitude displayed better performance in their role plays to produce the routine formula. Cook (2001) explored the effect of integrative attitude on pragmatic competence of a group of learners of Japanese as a Foreign Language. The findings showed that language learners with higher integrative attitude are able to recognize the appropriateness of Japanese speech styles. Niezgodna and Rover (2001) investigated the ability of Czech learners of English to recognize pragmatic and grammatical mistakes. They found that language learners with higher integrative attitude were more sensitive to grammatical and pragmatic mistakes. Takahashi (2005) conducted another study over the effect of integrative attitude and language proficiency on pragmatic awareness of a group of Japanese learners of English as a Foreign Language. The findings suggested that integrative attitude but not target language

proficiency has a significant effect on pragmatic awareness. Ishihara (2009) explored the influence of integrative attitude on a group of language learners' pragmatic competence. The findings suggested that language learners who were interested in the cultural perspectives of the target language community had better gains in pragmatic competence. Tajeddin and Ebadi (2011) investigated the effect of integrative attitude and language proficiency on pragmatic awareness of a group of Iranian learners of English as a Foreign Language. They found that integrative attitude but not language proficiency is significantly correlated with pragmatic awareness.

Pragmatic Comprehension

Although the production and the perception aspects of pragmatic competence have received considerable attention and investigated immensely during the past few decades, only recently research on the comprehension aspect of pragmatic competence dominantly by Taguchi (2002; 2005; 2007; 2008a; 2008b; 2008c; 2011) has been paid attention to. Taguchi (ibid) conducted a series of studies to evaluate language learners' comprehension of conversational implicatures (implied meanings) in which the maxim of relation (be relevant) was violated. In one of her earliest studies, Taguchi (2002) investigated the influence of language proficiency over pragmatic comprehension of a group of Japanese learners of English at two proficiency levels at a college in the United States. She found that both high and low proficient learners successfully comprehended most implicatures, but high proficient learners were more successful in pragmatic comprehension than low proficient learners. In another study, Taguchi (2005) investigated the influence of language proficiency over accuracy and speed in pragmatic comprehension of a group of Japanese learners of English at a college in Japan. She found that target language proficiency has a significant effect on the accuracy but not on the speed of pragmatic comprehension. Taguchi (2007) investigated the influence of length of study, language proficiency, and cognitive processing speed over accuracy and speed in pragmatic comprehension of a group of Japanese learners of English at a University in Japan. She found that both accuracy and speed in pragmatic comprehension developed significantly over a 7-week period. However, comprehension accuracy had a more remarkable development than comprehension speed. Moreover, target language proficiency had a significant relationship with comprehension accuracy but not with comprehension speed while cognitive processing speed had a significant relationship with comprehension speed but not with comprehension accuracy. Taguchi (2008a) investigated the influence of study-abroad, target language contact, and cognitive processing ability over accuracy and speed in pragmatic comprehension of a group of Japanese language learners in a college in the United States. She found that pragmatic comprehension speed but not accuracy developed significantly over a 4-month semester study-abroad. Similarly, cognitive processing speed and level of target language contact were significantly correlated with pragmatic comprehension speed but not with pragmatic comprehension accuracy. Taguchi (2008b) investigated the role of learning environment over developing accuracy and speed in pragmatic comprehension of two groups of Japanese learners of English, one group studying at a college in Japan and the other at a college in the United States. The findings indicated that regardless of learning environment, accuracy and speed in pragmatic comprehension developed over time. However, EFL

group displayed greater gains in comprehension accuracy than speed while ESL group displayed greater gains in comprehension speed than accuracy. Taguchi (2008c) investigated the influence of language proficiency over accuracy and speed in pragmatic comprehension of a group of learners of Japanese at a university in the United States. The findings indicated that target language proficiency had a significant effect on pragmatic comprehension accuracy but not on pragmatic comprehension speed. Most recently, Taguchi (2011) investigated the influence of language proficiency and study-abroad experience over accuracy and speed in pragmatic comprehension of a group of Japanese learners of English at 3 proficiency levels in Japan. The findings suggested that target language proficiency and study-abroad experience had significant effects on target language proficiency but not pragmatic comprehension accuracy while target language proficiency but not study-abroad experience had significant effects on pragmatic comprehension speed.

Socio-Educational Model

The socio-educational model of second language acquisition was first developed by Gardner (1985) and then further adapted by Gardner (2001). The adapted version of the socio-educational model proposed by Gardner (2001) states that integrativeness and attitudes towards the learning situation are two distinct yet correlated supports for motivation toward learning the target language. However, motivation is the major variable which contributes to achievement in learning the target language (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003).

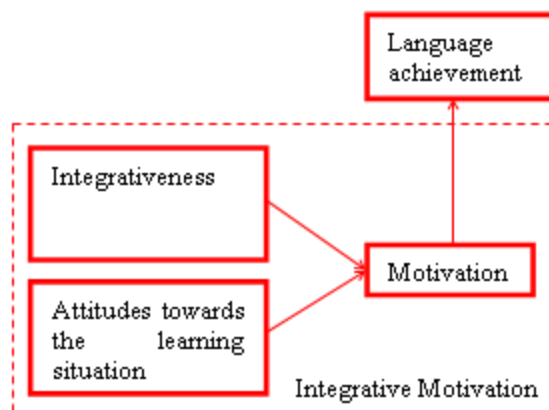


Figure 1. Model of the Role of Motivation in Language Learning

In this model, integrativeness refers to an openness to identify with the target language community. This concept influences the acquisition of the target language as learning a language requires the adoption of cultural perspectives of the target language community. Attitude towards the learning situation refers to reaction to anything associated with the immediate context in which the language is taught. Finally, motivation refers to the goal-directed behavior. The combination of these three components forms integrative motivation. In other words, an integratively motivated language learner is motivated to learn the target language, is open to identify with the target language community, and is interested in the learning situation (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). In this study only the integrativeness aspect of the model, referred to as integrative attitude, is considered.

The Present Study

So far, the impact of integrative attitude on the production and perception aspects of pragmatic competence on one hand

and the effects of other individual differences variables such as language proficiency, learning environment, and cognitive processing ability on pragmatic comprehension on the other hand have been addressed by some researchers in the past decade. However, there is a dearth of research over the effect of integrative attitude on the comprehension aspect of pragmatic competence. Therefore, the purpose of the current study is to explore the relationship between language learners' attitudes toward the cultural perspectives of the target language community and their gains in pragmatic comprehension.

Methodology

Participants

A total of 63 students at three universities in Iran participated in the study. Forty-one (65 percent) of the participants were female and the other 22 (35 percent) were male. Their age ranged from 25 to 37 with a mean of 28.4. Fifty-eight (92 percent) of them were working as an English teacher in schools or private institutes. They were all majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language at master level. Therefore, they were supposed to have a good command of English knowledge.

Instruments

Three different sets of instruments were used to collect data for the study: a demographic questionnaire to collect background information about participants, a pragmatic listening test to test participants' level of pragmatic comprehension, and an attitude questionnaire to reflect participants' attitudes toward cultural perspectives of the target language community.

Demographic Questionnaire

The demographic data required in the questionnaire consisted of participants' age, gender, level of education, and length of experience (if any) working as an English teacher. These data were collected in order to ensure that participants possess a high level of language proficiency and their errors will be merely attributed to their pragmatic failure and not their linguistic failure.

Pragmatic Listening Test

The pragmatic listening test was adopted from the tests used in earlier studies by Taguchi (2002; 2005; 2007; 2008a; 2008b; 2008c; 2011) to assess participants' level of pragmatic comprehension. It is a 24 item multiple-choice test in which participants need to listen to 24 dialogues between two native speakers of English containing some implied opinions. They are then asked to select one of the four expressions provided for each dialogue which refers to the appropriate meaning of the implied opinion in that dialogue. The reliability of the test assessed through Kuder-Richardson 21 reliability coefficient was 0.83.

Attitude Questionnaire

The attitude questionnaire was adopted from the items referring to integrativeness in Gardner (1985)'s Attitude and Motivation Test Battery (AMTB). Attitude and Motivation Test Battery consists of 12 scales measuring different aspects of motivation. However, only three scales which were used to measure integrativeness were adopted for the current study. These scales include attitude toward the target language group (8 items), integrative orientation (4 items), and interest in foreign languages (10 items). In general, the attitude questionnaire contains 22 items based on a 6-point Likert-scaled type with answers ranging from 1: strongly disagree, 2: moderately disagree, 3: slightly disagree, 4: slightly agree, 5: moderately agree, to 6: strongly agree. The reliability of the questionnaire assessed through Cronbach's alpha was 0.89.

Procedure

At the end of a regular class during fall semester in the academic year 2012-2013, participants in each university were asked to complete the tests prepared for the study. Prior to the application of the tests, participants were instructed on how to answer each test. The participants first completed the demographic questionnaire then took part in the pragmatic comprehension test. The researchers distributed the answer sheets containing 24 multiple-choice items among participants and played the audio-recorded conversations. In order to avoid linguistic errors, the recordings were played twice while the conversation transcripts were displayed using a projector on power point slides one at a time for the whole class. The attitude questionnaire was then administered to participants. After completing all tests, test slips were collected to be analyzed by the researchers. All the data collection procedure took approximately one hour.

Data Analysis

In order to find the level of correlation between participants' integrative attitude and pragmatic comprehension, the sum of marks for their answers to each test was calculated. In order to compute the sum of the marks for the pragmatic listening test, 1 mark was allocated to each correct answer whereas no mark was allocated to each incorrect answer. As the test contained 24 items, each participant could obtain a mark ranging from minimum 0 to maximum 24. In order to compute the sum of marks for the attitude questionnaire, the marks ranging from 1 to 6 were respectively allocated to the scales ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Of course polarity for items which were stated negatively was reversed. As the questionnaire contained 22 items on a 6-point Likert-scaled type, each participant could get a mark ranging from minimum 22 to maximum 132. The sums of both tests were then computed for all 63 participants of the study and were correlated through Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient. All the analysis was performed using version 20 of Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS).

Results and Discussion

Results

In order to assess the level of correlation between the results obtained through the pragmatic listening test and the attitude questionnaire, the sum of the marks for each test was computed. Table 1 presents the distribution of the sum of the marks in the pragmatic listening test for each of all 63 participants in the study. As the table shows, 89 percent (56) of the participants managed to present the appropriate answer for at least 50 percent of the items included in the test. Very few participants (11 percent) had a poor performance on the test.

Table 1: Performance on Pragmatic Test

Obtained Marks	Number of Participants
1-4	2
5-8	2
9-12	3
13-16	9
17-20	12
21-24	35

Table 2 presents the distribution of the sum of the marks in the attitude questionnaire for each of all 63 participants in the study. As the table shows, a corresponding 89 percent of the participants managed to obtain at least 50 percent of the total mark. Only a few participants (11 percent) expressed negative attitudes toward the cultural perspectives of the target language community.

Table 2: Performance on Attitude Questionnaire

Obtained Marks	Number of Participants
1-22	0
23-44	0
45-66	7
67-88	20
89-110	24
111-132	12

Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient was then used to assess the level of correlation between the sum of the marks obtained through the pragmatic listening test and the attitude questionnaire. The results obtained from computing Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient for the sums of the marks obtained through both tests was 0.896. Pearson r is normally a number between -1 to +1. Scores close to +1 indicate a significant positive correlation while scores close to -1 indicate a significant negative correlation between variables. However, scores close to 0 indicate an insignificant correlation between variables. Therefore, the findings derived from the current study imply a significant positive relationship between participants' integrative attitude and their level of pragmatic comprehension.

Discussion

The findings suggest that there is a significant correlation between integrative attitude and level of pragmatic comprehension. In other words, a high level of attitude toward the cultural perspectives of the target language community results in a high level of pragmatic comprehension whereas a low level of attitude or lack of attitude toward the cultural perspectives of the target language community results in a low level of pragmatic comprehension.

According to the results obtained from the attitude questionnaire, the majority of participants were interested in the cultural perspectives of the target language, tended to identify with native English speakers, and wished to live in an English speaking country. Furthermore, according to the results obtained from the pragmatic listening test, participants who had high level of attitude toward cultural perspectives of the target language community, who as mentioned constitute the majority of the participants, comprehended most implied meanings appropriately.

This clearly signifies the role of integrative attitude in developing language learners' attention to and noticing of the target language communicative features. The attitude toward cultural perspectives of the target language community certainly pushed participants to notice and follow every trivial cultural aspect of the target language community resulting in a high level of pragmatic competence. On the contrary, those few participants who were very prejudice about their own culture, the belief stemming from recognizing own culture superior to target culture, were unaware of and failed to notice the communicative and cultural features of the target language community. Consequently; despite having a high level of language proficiency, did not manage to comprehend pragmatically implied meanings of most test items appropriately.

This finding supports Schmidt (1990)'s noticing hypothesis which states only those target language input which is noticed by the language learner is turned into intake. In other words; in order for language acquisition to occur, language learners should notice the target language features.

Conclusion

The study found that there is a significant positive relationship between integrative attitude and pragmatic

comprehension. Participants with higher attitudes toward the cultural perspectives of the target language community performed much better on pragmatic comprehension test than participants with lower attitudes toward the cultural perspectives of the target language community. These findings imply the significant role of cultural familiarity and integrative attitude in developing pragmatic comprehension. Therefore, language teachers are advised to complement classroom instructions with popular cultural perspectives of the target language community in order to raise language learners' integrative attitude.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to associate professor Naoko Taguchi whose new ideas in the area of pragmatics opened a window to an unexplored world.

References

- Cook, H. M. (2001). Why can't learners of JFL distinguish polite from impolite speech styles? In K. R. Rose & G. Kasper (Eds.), *Pragmatics in language teaching* (pp. 80-102). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gardner, R. C. (1985). *Social psychology and second language learning: The role of attitudes and motivation*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Gardner, R. C. (2001). Integrative motivation and second language acquisition. In Z. Dornyei and R Schmidt (Eds.), *Motivation and second language acquisition* (pp. 1-19). Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii, Second Language Teaching & Curriculum Center.
- Holtgraves, T. M., & Kashima, Y. (2008). Language, meaning, and social cognition. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 12(1), 73-94.
- Ishihara, N. (2009). Teacher-based assessment for foreign language pragmatics. *TESOL Quarterly*, 43(3), 445-470.
- LoCastro, V. (2001). Individual differences in second language acquisition: Attitudes, learner subjectivity, and L2 pragmatic norms. *System*, 29(1), 69-89.
- Masgoret, A. -M. & Gardner, R. C. (2003). Attitude, motivation, and second language learning: A meta-analysis of studies conducted by Gardner and associates. *Language Learning*, 53(1), 123-163.
- Niezgoda, K., & Rover, C. (2001). Pragmatic and grammatical awareness: A function of the learning environment? In K. R. Rose & G. Kasper (Eds.), *Pragmatics in language teaching* (pp. 63-79). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ran, L. (2007). The relationship between linguistic proficiency and pragmatic ability. *US-China Foreign Language*, 5, 13-17.
- Schmidt, R. W. (1990). The role of consciousness in second language learning. *Applied Linguistics*, 11(2), 129-158.
- Schmidt, R. W. (1993). Consciousness, learning and interlanguage pragmatics. In G. Kasper & S. Blum-Kulka (Eds.), *Interlanguage pragmatics* (pp. 21-42). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Salsbury, T. & Bardovi-Harlig, K. (2001). "I know what you mean, but I don't think so": Disagreement in L2 English. In L. F. Bouton (Eds.), *Pragmatics and language learning* (Monograph series 10) (pp. 131-151). Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois, Division of English as an International Language.
- Taguchi, N. (2002). An application of relevance theory to the analysis of L2 interpretation processes: The comprehension of indirect replies. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 40(2), 151-176.

- Taguchi, N. (2005). Comprehending input meaning in English as a Foreign Language. *The Modern Language Journal*, 89(4), 543-562.
- Taguchi, N. (2007). Development of speed and accuracy in pragmatic comprehension in English as a Foreign Language. *TESOL Quarterly*, 41(2), 313-338.
- Taguchi, N. (2008a). Cognition, language contact, and the development of pragmatic comprehension in a study-abroad context. *Language Learning*, 58(1), 33-71.
- Taguchi, N. (2008b). The role of learning environment in the development of pragmatic comprehension. A comparison of gains between EFL and ESL learners. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 30(4), 423-452.
- Taguchi, N. (2008c). Pragmatic comprehension in Japanese as a Foreign Language. *The Modern Language Journal*, 92(4), 558-576.
- Taguchi, N. (2011). The effect of L2 proficiency and study-abroad experience on pragmatic comprehension. *Language Learning*, 61(3), 904-939.
- Tajeddin, Z., & Ebadi, S. (2011). Noticing request-realization forms in implicit pragmatic input: Impacts of motivation and language proficiency. *Iranian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 14(2), 145-171.
- Takahashi, S. (2001). The role of input enhancement in developing pragmatic competence. In K. R. Rose & G. Kasper (Eds.), *Pragmatics in language teaching* (pp. 171-199). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Takahashi, S. (2005). Pragmalinguistic awareness: Is it related to motivation and proficiency? *Applied Linguistics*. 26(1), 90-120.
- Tateyama, Y. (2001). Explicit and implicit teaching of pragmatic routines: Japanese sumimasen. In K. R. Rose & G. Kasper (Eds.), *Pragmatics in language teaching* (pp. 200-222). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.