

Investigating Interlanguage Pragmatic Competence in a Chinese EFL Context

การศึกษาสัมถิตยะด้านวัจนปฏิบัติศาสตร์ระหว่างภาษาในบริบทการเรียน ภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศของประเทศไทย

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ABSTRACT

Interlanguage pragmatic (ILP) competence is vitally important for EFL learners to avoid embarrassment which could happen in an interaction between speakers from different cultural backgrounds. The present research aimed to investigate the EFL learners' ILP competence and its variations by gender while conducting speech acts, understanding conversational implicature and performing routines. The participants were 390 Chinese English majors. The data was collected with the ILP competence test and semi-structured interviews. The ILP competence test was developed for the Chinese context by the present researchers. The quantitative data were analyzed by using descriptive statistics and independent T-test. The qualitative data were analyzed with content analysis. The results indicated that the EFL learners' ILP competence was at the medium level. Significant differences existed at the overall level and in conducting speech acts and performing routines at the category level according to gender. Significant differences were also found in the four aspects of conducting speech acts: 1) correct speech acts, 2) typical expressions, 3) amount of speech and information, and 4) levels of formality, directness and politeness. In addition, in some individual items in understanding conversational implicature and performing routines, significant differences were found. Overall, the females performed better than their male counterparts.

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บทคัดย่อ

สามัคติยะด้านวัจนปฏิบัติศาสตร์ระหว่างภาษามีความสำคัญต่อผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศเป็นอย่างมาก สามัคติยะประเภทนี้จะช่วยให้ผู้เรียนสามารถหลีกเลี่ยงความอับอายที่อาจเกิดขึ้นจากการปฏิบัติสัมพันธ์กับผู้พูดที่มีภูมิหลังทางวัฒนธรรมต่างกัน งานวิจัยเรื่องนี้มีจุดมุ่งหมายที่จะศึกษาสามัคติยะด้านวัจนปฏิบัติศาสตร์ระหว่างภาษาของผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศ และการผันแปรไปตามปัจจัยด้านเพศในการแสดงวัจนกรรม ความเข้าใจความหมายซึ่งบ่งเป็นนัยและพจนวัตร ผู้เข้าร่วมงานวิจัยคือนักศึกษาวิชาเอกภาษาอังกฤษชาวเงินจำนวน 390 คน มีการเก็บข้อมูลโดยใช้แบบวัดสามัคติยะด้านวัจนปฏิบัติศาสตร์ระหว่างภาษาและการสัมภาษณ์แบบกึ่งมีโครงสร้าง ผู้วิจัยได้พัฒนาแบบวัดสามัคติยะด้านวัจนปฏิบัติศาสตร์ระหว่างภาษาขึ้นมาสำหรับบริบทประเทศจีน ข้อมูลที่ได้จากงานวิจัยนี้ถูกนำมาวิเคราะห์ทั้งในเชิงปริมาณและคุณภาพโดยใช้สถิติเชิงพรรณนา independent t-test และการวิเคราะห์เนื้อหา ผลการศึกษาพบว่าสามัคติยะด้านวัจนปฏิบัติศาสตร์ระหว่างภาษาของผู้เรียนอยู่ในระดับปานกลาง เมื่อแยกศึกษาตามปัจจัยด้านเพศพบความแตกต่างอย่างมีนัยสำคัญในระดับสามัคติยะโดยรวม และในการแสดงวัจนกรรมและพจนวัตรนอกจากนี้ยังพบความแตกต่างอย่างมีนัยสำคัญในการแสดงวัจนกรรม 4 ด้าน ได้แก่ 1) วัจนกรรมที่ถูกต้อง 2) สำนวนที่ใช้บ่อย 3) ปริมาณคำพูดและข้อมูล และ 4) ระดับความเป็นทางการ ความตรงไปตรงมา และความสุภาพ นอกจากนี้ยังพบความแตกต่างอย่างมีนัยสำคัญในการแสดงความเข้าใจความหมายซึ่งบ่งเป็นนัยและการแสดงพจนวัตรบางประเภท ในภาพรวมผู้เข้าร่วมงานวิจัยเพศหญิงสามารถแสดงวัจนกรรมได้ดีกว่าเพศชาย

Introduction

Interlanguage pragmatics is the study of how language learners comprehend, produce and acquire the linguistic patterns (or speech acts) in a second language. It investigates L2 learners' developing knowledge and ability in using the pragmatic rules and conventions of the target language (Kasper and Blum-Kulka, 1993). Pragmatic standards for a culture or a country are not universal. Communication breakdowns may occur in cross-cultural communication because of different perceptions and interpretations of appropriateness and politeness (Wannaruk, 2008). According to Kasper and Rose (2001), the central concern of ILP is appropriate language use in social contexts. L1 culture has been considered as one of the major defining factors which may affect the L2 production (Weerachairattana and Wannaruk, 2016). Misunderstanding, as a central issue in interlanguage pragmatics, may easily occur between people from different cultural backgrounds (Xu and Wannaruk, 2015). EFL learners are easily influenced by their mother tongue, and pragmatic failure can naturally occur due to the learners' weak understanding of the target culture's pragmatics. Pragmatic transfer, the transfer of first language socio-cultural communicative habits when performing L2 pragmatic activities (Takahashi and Beebe, 1987), happens quite frequently for language learners. Although positive transfer can facilitate the language acquiring process due to the cross-cultural similarities, negative transfer will create a divergence between native and non-native speakers and result in communication failures. Pragmatic transfer and communication failures are seen frequently in cross cultural communication.

For Chinese students, they primarily learn English to pass examinations. Grammar, vocabulary, listening, reading, and writing are emphasized on Chinese national examinations, including College English Test Band 4 and Band 6 (CET 4, CET 6), Test for English majors Band 4 and Band 8 (TEM 4, TEM 8). As a result, the students' ability to communicate in English is very weak (Yue, 2015) since communicative English is not emphasized by EFL learners or teachers (Yue, 2015). Some EFL learners maintain a non-habitual and non-standard use of English for many years. Thus, it is common for Chinese students to achieve high scores on the Chinese national English examinations, but not be able to make a simple request in English (Liu, 2004).

Among all the factors which may influence ILP competence, Penelope and Sally (2003) state that gender shapes language learners' participation in situations, activities and events, hence affecting their performance on particular speech acts. They also indicate that gendered division means that one gender performs certain pragmatic behaviors differently from the other. They also find that females are apt to be more polite because they are more collaborative, affective and other-oriented than males. Thus, there is value in exploring variations in ILP competence by gender.

Generally speaking, studies are still at the beginning stage on ILP competence, and China is no exception (Li and Zou, 2015). Up to the present, no comprehensive research of ILP competence in a broad domain of ILP knowledge has been found. Gender has not been analyzed as a variable which affects the ILP competence in conducting speech acts, understanding conversational implicature or performing routines. The present study aimed to fill in this gap. It is hoped that this study will enrich the literature in the ILP research and make contributions in developing EFL learners' ILP competence. Two research questions were to be answered:

- 1) What is the Chinese EFL learners' ILP competence in conducting speech acts, understanding conversational implicature and performing routine?
- 2) Does the Chinese EFL learners' ILP competence vary significantly according to gender?

Literature Review

The present research involves three major fields of ILP competence: speech acts, implicature and routines. In ILP research, the major concern is on speech acts, the minimal or basic unit of linguistic communication. The central tenet of the speech act theory is that uttering a sentence is, wholly or part of, an action in the framework of social conventions and institutions (Searle, 1969). The pragmatists' interests lie in how speakers express their intentions and how listeners identify those intentions. ILP researchers are concerned about whether EFL learners can interpret utterances

appropriately and whether they can conduct speech acts appropriately (Liu, 2004).

Besides speech acts, conversational implicature is another concern of the ILP researchers. Conversational implicature is typically regarded as one of the most important ideas in pragmatics (Levinson, 1983). Bouton (1994) distinguishes idiosyncratic implicature and formulaic implicature. In idiosyncratic implicature, a Grice's maxim is violated and the hearer is forced to infer meaning beyond the literal meaning of the utterance. Formulaic implicature is more patterned, including indirect criticism with a focus on a minor or irrelevant aspect, and sequences of events. "Pope Question" also belongs to this type. Misunderstandings of utterances frequently occur between people from different cultures because they interpret the utterances differently according to their own culture.

In recent years, routines have aroused the attention of pragmatists. Routines can be either tightly or loosely bound to situations, as Roever (2014) differentiates situational routines and functional routines. Situational routines are limited in their appropriate occurrence to particular situational conditions (Roever, 2014), whereas the central function of functional routines is to serve as part of speech acts where users can manage discourse and conversations. From a sociolinguistic point of view, routines are extremely important in the verbal handling of everyday life. Thus, it is essential to learn routines at all learning stages for they embody the societal knowledge that people of a certain community share (House, 1996). However, inappropriate use or non-use of routines is common for language learners (Kasper, 2010).

In previous ILP competence studies, researchers tended to focus on limited types of speech acts. Thus, it is inspired that more speech acts need to be investigated for the purpose of better understanding EFL learners' ILP competence. A few researchers studied ILP competence with implicature or routines, including Yamanaka (2003) and Naoko (2013), but both of studies involved a small sample, and a bigger sample is needed for a more representative conclusion. Some researchers were interested in integrating ESL learners' ILP competence with knowledge of more than one field. For instance, Garcia (2004) investigated speech acts and implicature, Liu (2012) investigated speech acts and routines, and Roever (2014) investigated speech acts, implicature and routines. Comparatively speaking, Roever's (2014) study might be thought as the most advanced in the ILP competence up to now since it included the most ILP fields of knowledge and a large enough sample size, and the data collection methods were diverse, but with a limitation in that only three speech acts were covered.

Previous studies on the relationship between ILP competence and gender were nor abundant. Wang (2006) investigated the relationship between gender and ILP competence in a Chinese EFL context with 107 college students. He found that females' overall ILP competence was significantly

higher than males'. Li (2012) studied the relationship between gender and ILP competence in a Chinese EFL context with 120 college students. He found that females' ILP competence was significantly higher at the overall level. In these studies, the limitations were ILP competence was examined within only two categories, pragmalinguistic competence and sociolinguistic competence. In addition, only one research method was included, Multiple-choice discourse completion task (MDCT). These studies with only two categories were too general and researchers could not differentiate how well EFL learners perform in various fields of ILP knowledge. Furthermore, with only MDCT used to collect data, no qualitative data were collected, and the EFL learners might get high or low scores just by chance. The different aspects in ILP performance, such as appropriateness, could not be evaluated.

Research Methodology

1. Participants

Three hundred and ninety English majors were selected from four universities in the Guizhou Province of China to participate in this study, 155 males and 235 females. Third-year students were selected since they had acquired basic skills in using English and had taken courses such as applied linguistics and western cultures. Twenty-four students, 12 males and 12 females, were selected to participate in the interviews.

2. Research Instrument

The present study included two research instruments: the ILP competence test and semi-structured interviews. The ILP competence test included a written discourse completion task (WDCT) for testing the EFL learners' ILP competence in conducting speech acts, and a Multiple choice discourse completion task (MDCT) for testing their ILP competence in understanding conversational implicature and in performing routines. The test was composed of 70 items, 30 on conducting speech acts, 20 on understanding conversational implicature and 20 on performing routines. For the semi-structured interview, ten interview questions were prepared to understand the EFL learners' opinions on interlanguage pragmatics.

The ILP competence test was developed for the Chinese context by the researchers. The WDCT development experienced four stages: selecting the speech acts to be tested, generating exemplar, investigating likelihood, and checking for content validity. The MDCT items were developed through two methods, adapting items from previous studies and developing items by the teachers group (four Chinese university teachers for English and three American university teachers for English). MDCT

Item development experienced the following three stages: adapting from the previous studies, developing new items and checking for content validity.

In the present study, the reliability and validity of WDCT were ensured by using the Many Facets Rasch Model (MFRM) with FACETS (3.17.1) software in four aspects, i.e. examinee ability, rater leniency/severity, item difficulty and rating scale statistics. For MDCT, after a few trials and revisions during the pilot study, the reliabilities were .88 for conversational implicature and .89 for routines with the calculation of the split-half method. The split-half method can be applied in a test in which the items are not of equal difficulty or the items are scored right versus wrong (Fraenkel, Wallen and Hyun, 1993). All items and their distractors in MDCT were with an acceptable difficulty level and discrimination power after calculation with the item analysis theory by Delta Sigma software. The construct validity of all 70 items among the three categories was calculated by Pearson correlation coefficient, and the correlations among the three categories were high with $p < .01$. The largest degree of overlap occurred between speech acts and routines sections ($r = .96$), with speech acts and implicature overlapping the least ($r = .76$).

3. Data collection

The data were collected with two steps. First, the ILP competence test was administered. After that, the semi-structured interviews were conducted. The time given for the ILP competence test was 120 minutes. The interview was held on a one-to-one and face-to-face basis, and the length of time for each interviewee was around 20 minutes. In the present study, the interviewees were given the right to choose the language used in the interview, only one interviewee decided to use English, while the other 23 interviewees used Chinese. Each interviewee was given ten minutes to read the prepared questions. All the interviews were recorded verbally.

4. Data analysis

The WDCT was rated by two American teachers based on the rubrics adapted from Hudson, Detmer, and Brown (1995). The EFL learners' performance was evaluated according to the degree of appropriateness in four aspects: correct speech acts, typical expressions, amount of speech and information, and levels of formality, directness and politeness. Both American teachers had Master of Arts degrees and working experience as university English teachers in non-English speaking countries for more than five years. The items on MDCT were rated as right (one point for each item) or wrong (zero point for each item) by the present researchers. The scores for each category were converted into 100 points before calculations. As Roever (2014) suggests, it is a good way to convert the total score of each part into 100 when comparing different testing methods. The WDCT data were

calculated both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative data analysis methods included descriptive statistics and Independent T-test. Qualitative analysis was applied to analyze the EFL learners' responses in conducting speech acts, using content analysis. The interview data were transcribed by the researchers and two other Chinese teachers for English in Guizhou University first, and then the Chinese transcription was translated into English for content analysis. The two Chinese teachers for English have Doctor of Philosophy degrees and have had working experience as university English teachers for over ten years.

Results

The EFL Learners' ILP Competence

The ILP competence level of the EFL learners has been classified as "high", "medium", and "low" according to their test scores. The total score was 100.00. Based on the trichotomy method, scores ranging from 0.00 to 33.33 were in the "low level" category, from 33.34 to 66.67 were in the "medium level" category, and from 66.68 to 100.00 were in the "high level" category. Table 1 illustrates that the students' ILP competence was at the medium level in each category and the overall level.

Table 1. EFL Learners' ILP Competence in Each Category and at the Overall Level

Category	ILP Competence		ILP Competence Level
	Mean Score	Std. Deviation	
Speech acts	61.33	4.83	Medium
Conversational implicature	53.96	28.48	Medium
Routines	51.15	24.76	Medium
Overall	55.48	17.84	Medium

Note: Low level: 0.00-33.33, Medium level: 33.34-66.67, High level: 66.68-100.00

Variations of the ILP Competence According to Gender

To compare the variations of the EFL learners' ILP competence according to gender, independent t-test was applied. Table 2 presents the variations between the different gender groups. The students' ILP competence varied significantly by gender at the overall level as well as in conducting speech acts and performing routines at the category level. The females' ILP competence was higher than their male counterparts ($p < .01$). However, no significant difference was found in understanding conversational implicature at the category level.

Table 2. Variations of EFL Learners' ILP Competence in Each Category and at the Overall Level According to Gender

	Male (n=155)		Female (n=235)		t	Sig. Level	Variation Pattern
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.			
Speech acts	59.80	5.75	62.37	3.76	5.51	P<.01	Female>Male
Conversational implicature	52.10	29.38	55.19	24.37	1.13	N.S.	N.S.
Routines	45.32	27.98	55.00	21.60	3.84	P<.01	Female>Male
Overall	52.40	20.18	57.52	15.83	2.81	P<.01	Female>Male

Note: "N.S." means "No significant difference"

From Table 1 and Table 2, the standard deviations for the speech acts category were much smaller than those of the conversational implicature and routines categories. Thus, the difference in mean scores might be different in deciding the significance for each category. The reason is that the number of items in each category was not balanced, 30 for speech acts, 20 for conversational implicature and 20 for routines. The score for each speech act item was lower than the score for each item in the other two categories after the total score was converted into 100 for each category. Furthermore, the WDCT for conducting speech acts was a production test in which the EFL learners could achieve scores not only on the extremes but also in the middle of the rating scale. In contrast, the MDCT of the other two categories was an acceptance test in which the EFL learners' could only get scores on the two extremes.

More specifically, the differences of the EFL learners' ILP competence in the four aspects in conducting speech acts: correct speech acts, typical expressions, amount of speech and information, and levels of formality, directness and politeness, according to gender were found. The females' performance was better than the males' in each aspect with $p < .01$. Both gender groups achieved the highest scores in correct speech acts, but the males got the lowest score in typical expressions and the females got the lowest score in levels of formality, directness and politeness. More details can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Variation of EFL Learners' ILP Competence in Each Aspect of Conducting Speech Acts According to Gender

Aspect	Male (n=155)		Female (n=235)		t	Sig. Level	Variation Pattern
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.			
Correct speech act	64.98	5.82	67.97	3.91	P<.01	Female>Male	Female>Male
Typical expressions	57.67	5.76	60.44	3.77	P<.01	Female>Male	N.S.
Amount of speech and information	58.27	5.76	60.91	3.86	P<.01	Female>Male	Female>Male
Levels of formality, directness and politeness	58.26	5.77	60.17	3.74	P<.01	Female>Male	Female>Male

To illustrate the difference between the male and the female students' performances, an example in conducting speech acts is presented:

Situation: You lose your temper with your friend, but later you feel very sorry. You apologize.

This situation expected for the speech act "apology" to be elicited. Almost all the students in both gender groups used sentence structures as "I'm sorry", "I apologize.....", "..... express my apologies....." to show the correct speech act. Nevertheless, the problem in the aspect of correct speech act lied in the fact that more than one speech act was conducted. This problem existed in both groups. For the males, 51.25% conducted more than one speech act. While the percentage of the females who conducted more than one speech act was 43.67%. For example, S (Student) 81 (male) responded as "Dear my friend, I apologize to you for my bad temper. I know you must be sad. I lost my identity that day. It is very important for me because I will travel in five days". For this response, both of the American raters thought that the part "Dear my friend, I apologize to you for my bad temper. I know you must be sad. I lost my identity that day" could serve as "apology", but all the rest of the expressions were unrelated to this speech act.

In typical expressions, the accepted patterns found in the students' responses were "apology + explanation + asking for forgiveness", "apology + explanation", "apology + future expectation" and "apology". The pattern "apology + explanation + asking for forgiveness" was considered as completely appropriate, the patterns "apology + explanation" and "apology + future expectation" were considered as almost appropriate. The pattern "apology" was generally appropriate. The

patterns using other strategies were regarded as not very appropriate or not appropriate at all. The pattern “apology + explanation + asking for forgiveness” was used by 22.89% of the males and 29.16% of the females. The patterns “apology + explanation” and “apology + future expectation” were used by 53.67% of the males and 57.54% of the females. The pattern “apology” was used by 14.21% of the males and 6.55% of the females.

The first pattern “apology + explanation + asking for forgiveness” can be seen in S43’s (female) response *“I am terribly sorry that I lost my temper that day. At that time I was really in a bad situation. I hope you can forgive me”*. The pattern “apology + explanation” was used the most frequently and an example can be seen in S15’s (male) response *“I do apologize for my losing temper. I was criticized by my teacher that day and I was in a very bad mood”*. The pattern “apology + future expectation” was also frequently used by the students. For instance, S64 (female) wrote *“I am extremely sorry for losing my temper with you. I hope we are still good friends in the future”*. The pattern “apology” can be seen as in the example *“I am sorry for my bad temper that day”* (S92, female) shows. There were some students who responded irrelevantly. For instance, S109 (female) wrote *“I am really sorry, and I beg your pardon”*. The second half of sentence was unrelated and the response was considered as not very appropriate. S132 (male) wrote *“I won’t do like this next time”*, and his response was a promise instead of an apology and is not appropriate at all.

For the amount of speech and information, either too much or too little information was considered inappropriate. The amount of speech and information was closely related to the typical expressions patterns. Take the above situation for example, the pattern “apology + explanation + asking for forgiveness” contained a completely appropriate amount of speech and information. The patterns “apology + explanation” and “apology + future expectation” contained an almost appropriate amount of speech and information. The above three patterns were applied more frequently by the females than the males. However, it does not mean that a higher score would be obtained from the more speech and information contained in the response. For example, S148’s (male) response *“my dear, I am apologize to that lose your temper. I am honestly. You can forgive me. I hope you can attach me as soon as possible”* was not very appropriate in typical expressions. Despite the long response, the appropriate speech and information was very limited, and most of the expressions were unclear or unrelated.

The last aspect was levels of formality, directness and politeness. The three parts of this aspect are closely related and cannot be discussed separately. For formality, the females were more careful about word choices, phrasing and verb forms. Also, the female students were generally more

indirect and polite than the male students. For example, female students used a number of intensifiers to increase the degree of apology, such as “really”, “terribly”, “extremely”, “very” and so on. These intensifiers happened 178 times (75.74%) in the responses of the females and 98 times (63.23%) in those of the males in this situation. Furthermore, the females (57.67%) more frequently used the syntactic structures such as “I hope.....”, “I think.....”, “I suppose.....” than the males (34.24%), to soften the degree of imposition. Politeness markers such as “please” can also be found with a higher frequency (57.77%) in females’ responses versus a lower frequency (36.12%) in males’ responses. Modals such as “could”, “maybe” were also used more frequently by the females (57.56%) than the males (32.33%) to mitigate the imposition.

An example of the females’ responses in this situation can be seen with S70’s (female), “I am terribly sorry for losing my temper with you. I was really in a bad mood that day. Please don’t be angry with me. I hope you could forgive me”. The formality was very appropriate, and the speech was very indirect and polite. Comparatively, an example of the males’ typical responses can be shown by S153’s (male) response “sorry. I couldn’t control my temper at that time”. The males’ responses were normally shorter, more direct and less polite. This response in the aspect of levels of formality, directness and politeness was generally appropriate.

The differences of EFL learners’ ILP competence according to gender did not only exist in their ability to conduct speech acts, but also in their abilities in understanding implicature and performing routines.

In the aspect of understanding implicature, the male and the female students showed their different abilities with four items. The females performed better than the males in all the four items. Furthermore, their choices in the distractors also showed the characteristics in understanding implicature of each gender. In order to provide a better picture of the difference between the male and the female students in understanding implicature, the following item is taken as an example.

Mary: “I really dislike the man you introduced to me.”

Lisa: “Still, he’s your new boss.”

By this Lisa means _____

- a) You should be obedient to your boss.
- b) You should change your job.
- c) You shouldn’t like your new boss.
- d) You should get along well with your new boss.

This item is idiosyncratic implicature, and such implicature violates a Grice's maxim. In this item, the quantity maxim is violated, in which there is a mention of the identity of the person in Lisa's response, but Mary's utterance was not responded directly. The students needed to infer the implicature based on the context as well as their background knowledge. The correct answer d) was chosen by 39.35% of the male students and 60.85% of the female students. For the distractors, 35.48% of the males chose answer b) and 21.70% of the females chose answer a), and the two choices took the highest percentages of the distractors for the males and the females, respectively. The correct answer for this item "*You should get along well with your new boss*" was to persuade "Mary" to accept her boss and get on with him in a harmonious way. The distractor a) could also show this purpose but the word "obedient" is too strong for this situation. It was not hard to understand the female students' choices, since they were more polite (Lakoff, 1975) and emphasized the importance of social rapport (Hudson, 2000). The females would pay more attention to politeness and *face*, and they would be more considerate. The males were less tolerant compared with the females, and they thought if the boss was not good, they could change jobs as what the distractor b) showed.

In understanding implicature, the two gender groups did well in some items, and more than 50% of the students in each group chose the correct answer. In the following item, the percentages of the male and the female students who got the correct answer were 69.68% and 65.11%, respectively, and no significant difference was found between them.

Andy: "Where is my fish?"

Emma: "The cat looks happy."

By this Emma means _____

- a) The cat has eaten the fish.
- b) She just concentrates on the cat.
- c) The cat is playing with the fish.
- d) She doesn't know where the fish is.

This item is idiosyncratic implicature, in which the relation maxim of Grice's principles is violated. The first speaker "Andy" asks about "*fish*", but the second speaker "Emma" answers with "*cat*". On the surface, it seems that there is no relation between "*fish*" and "*cat*", however, there exists a common knowledge that cats and fish are natural enemies and cats eat fish. The knowledge is shared not only by the native English speakers and Chinese speakers but also among the students with different genders. Thus, it is not hard for both of the males and the females to find the correct choice a). In addition, 28.94% female students were distracted by choice c). Possibly some female

students also thought cats and fish could be friends, because females tend to strive for rapport in social relationships. The male students were distracted similarly by the three distractors.

However, for some items, less than half of both the male and the female students made the correct choice. For instance, only 29.68% male students and 35.32% female students selected the correct answer for the following item, and no significant difference was found.

Jose: "How do you like Derek's essay?"

Tanya: "I think it is well-typed."

By this Tanya means _____

- a) She likes Derek's essay.
- b) She doesn't like Derek's essay.
- c) She doesn't really remember Derek's essay.
- d) She likes it if students hand in their work type-written.

The above item was formulaic implicature and it broke the quantity maxim in Grice's principles. The speaker "Jose" wanted to know the quality of "Derek's" essay, but "Tanya" responded with the typing of this essay. In this item, "Tanya" expressed her criticism in an indirect way. The correct answer was b) *She doesn't like Derek's essay*. However, 35.48% of the male students chose answer d) *She likes it if students hand in their work type-written*, which was the most common selection for the male students. Distractor d) explained the meaning of the response "*I think it is well-typed*" on the surface. This kind of understanding is quite in accordance with the way that males express themselves, which is more straightforward. Thus, the wrong choice of the male students might be influenced by a pragmatic transfer from their own culture. However, females tend to be more indirect. They seldom express their dislikes directly, and usually hold the idea of keeping harmony in mind, so it can be understood why the females were most often distracted by distractors a) and c).

In performing routines, ten items were found to be significantly different between the males and the females, and the females' performance was better than their male counterparts. To illustrate the differences between the two gender groups more clearly, the following item is provided as an example. In this item, two classmates are talking about an exam.

Tom is talking to his classmate, David.

Tom: "How did you do in the exam, David?"

David: "I barely passed. I made a hopeless mess of it. I don't know why I did so badly."

Tom would probably say: _____

- a) I am sure you can do it.
- b) Just try to forget about it.
- c) Oh, no.
- d) Hey, how about having a big dinner together?

This item was a functional routine, and 37.42% of the males and 58.30% of the females chose the correct answer b). For functional routines, there was no definite response. In this situation, the students were required to select a suitable one among the four choices to comfort “David” about his exam. All the four choices aim to respond to bad news, but answer b) was considered the best because it follows the habits of native speakers of English and it provides comfort to “David”. The male students were most troubled by answer d) “*Hey, how about having a big dinner together?*” with 31.61% selecting this answer. The response indicates how the males treat unhappy situations, which is in accordance with the Chinese culture for males. While the female students were distracted by answers a) and c), for answer a), although comfort is shown, it is not very appropriate and it is more like an encouragement. The female students chose distractor c) more often than the male students because females prefer showing surprise or disappointment with interjections, such as ‘*oh*’. Males seldom express feelings in this way.

Both gender groups did well in the following item with 62.58 % of the males and 67.66% of the females getting the correct answer. There was no significant difference between the male and the female students.

At a bus stop

Man: “Excuse me, do you know which bus to catch for London Road, please?”

Woman: “Sorry, I’ve no idea.”

The man would probably say: “ _____ ”

- a) No.
- b) Really?
- c) Forget it.
- d) Thank you.

This item is a functional routine, and the speech act “gratitude” should be conducted after “inquiry”. Most students knew the correct speech act and chose the correct answer d). However, what disturbed the students was that the “woman” had “*no idea*” about which bus to catch for London Road, so some students got confused with whether they should show gratitude or conduct other speech acts. It is interesting that the males were most distracted by distractor a), while the females struggled

with distractor b). Distractor a) is not very relevant to the situation or polite enough, and because females tend to pay more attention to politeness, and the female students were not often distracted by this distractor. However, they were most distracted by answer b), maybe because of their habit of using interjection to show their feelings. In contrast, the students of both genders could not perform the routines well for some items. For the next item, the percentage of the male students who got the correct answer was 36.61% while 40.43% of the female students chose the correct answer. No significant difference could be found.

On the way to the school cinema, Lisa saw Professor Blake walking to the cinema, too.

Lisa would probably say: “_____”

- a) Where are you going?
- b) Are you going to the film?
- c) Nice to meet you, Professor Blake.
- d) Good afternoon, Professor Blake.

This item is a situational routine and the response is not flexible. It troubled both the male and the female students greatly. Although all the four choices aimed to elicit the correct speech act “greeting”, the only correct answer should be d). Distractor c) should be easily excluded since it is a greeting for the people who meet each other for the first time. However, 31.91% of the female students chose this answer, and it means that the females could not differentiate between choices c) and d). In addition, many male students chose distractors a) and b), which could be understood as the males are more direct, and they might be influenced by Chinese culture since the two greetings are frequently used in Chinese.

Discussion

The results of the present study revealed that the Chinese EFL learners’ ILP competence was at the medium level. The results were in accordance with Yang (2006) and Roever (2014), but different from Liu (2004) who found that EFL learners’ ILP competence was low in conducting speech acts when evaluated by WDCT and MDCT. The different findings between Liu’s (2004) study and the present study might be explained by the different participants. The participants in Liu’s (2004) study were the first and second year non-English majors, while the participants in the present study were the third year English majors, whose English language competence was generally higher than that of the participants in Liu’s study.

The explanation of the medium level of the EFL learners’ ILP competence might be the cultural differences. According to Hinkel (1997), cultural differences are one of the major reasons causing

pragmatic failures. Cultural differences are illustrated with the habits and rules in communication with people from different cultural backgrounds (Yin, 2009). Customs in speaking a language are influenced and shaped by the values and beliefs of participants from particular communities. It is hard for people to accept actions that deviate from their way of doing things since they grow up with specialized customs in their own communities. To say that language is embedded in culture and culture is the blood of language is no exaggeration. However, between English and Chinese, differences in culture can be seen in many aspects, including speech acts, taboos and so on (Yin, 2009). Cultural differences can result from religion, history, environment and mode of cognitive thinking (He, 2011). Thus, the Chinese EFL learners' ILP competence was not high in general.

In the interview, the interviewees (Is) mentioned that appropriateness was the problem that most of them met. They felt that they do not know *“what the acceptable degree of politeness and directness is”*(I3, I8, I9, I19, I20) and *“how to use correct expressions to describe emotions”*(I1, I2, I5, I17). They also thought that it was not easy for them to *“follow the habits and customs in the western countries”* (I15, I18, I21). Many students (I3, I4, I10, I11, I15, I17, I18, I20, I23, I24) reported that cultural barriers stopped them from understanding implicature in English because *“speakers of different languages had their own habit in using the language”*. Some interviewees (I2, I9, I14, I17, I19) also reported that they could only understand the surface meanings of utterances, and it was related to their *“thinking habit”* (I2) or they could not *“find any relationship between the surface meaning and what the speaker really wanted to express”*(I9, I14, I17, I19). In the section of performing routines, some students reported that *“English was not their mother tongue”* and they were just familiar with the routines that they *“learnt in their textbooks”* or *“met in their daily life”*(I10, I16, I19, I24). They worried that they would cause embarrassment when they performed routines (I2, I3, I14, I15, I22).

In the present study, ILP competence was significantly higher for the female students than for their male counterparts at the overall level and in two categories: speech acts and routines. Significant differences also existed in the four aspects of appropriateness in conducting speech acts as well as in some individual items in understanding conversational implicature and performing routines. The results were in line with Wang (2006) and Li (2012) but different from the previous studies in that no significant difference was found at the category level in understanding conversational implicature between the two gender groups.

Interpreting the difference in ILP competence between male and female EFL learners is not easy. For the present study, gender differences in ILP competence can be explained from three aspects: perception and attitude, sociolinguistics, and level of language proficiency. First, male and female

students have different perceptions and attitudes toward language learning. Mori and Gobel (2006) state that male learners show high self-perception in math and sports while female learners show high self-perception in language. Females also tend to hold a more positive attitude in learning a foreign language than males. The interview data revealed that the females were more active in communicating with English and more motivated in improving their ILP competence for more effective communication. For example, I15 (female) mentioned *“I worked very hard in my study. I listen to BBC or VOA news every day, and I love to watch English movies”*. I20 (female) said *“I am very fond of English, and I cherish all the chances that I can communicate with the native speakers. I really think I have made rapid progress in my speaking of English after I entered into university”*. However, the male students showed a lower self-perception and less positive attitude towards learning English. As I11 (male) reported in the interview *“I do not like English. I try to finish the assignments of my teachers and pass the examinations”*. I18 (male) thought *“English is a tool, and I don’t want to spend a lot of time on it”*.

The differences between the males and the females in ILP competence might be explained from a sociolinguistic point of view. Early research (Boyle, 1987) has proved that females are more sensitive than males in seeking appropriate forms in language use. Two apparently contradictory principles are provided: male learners use more non-standard forms in sociolinguistic stratification and female learners use more of the incoming forms in the linguistic changes (Labov, 1991). Therefore, females tend to adapt to the linguistic change and use in the prestige forms more easily than males, and (it will be more possible for them to get rid of the interlanguage forms that deviate from the norms of the target language (Ellis, 2008). In addition, female learners usually emphasize the normalization of using a language (Wang, 1995). Females tend to be more polite and other-oriented since they hope to build rapport in social relationships and improve their social position through appropriate language use (Wardhaugh and Fulle, 2014). This may explain why females tend to pay more attention to politeness and *face* in communication, and why it is easier for females to build pragmatic awareness and improve their ILP competence more consciously than males.

In the interview, the male students said *“I think it is enough for me to express the main idea to others in English”* (I3, I11, I18) and *“I seldom pay attention to the forms of the language, it’s too difficult for me”* (I12, I18, I20, I22). However, it seems that the females emphasized standard language use when they communicated with others as they said *“when I communicate in English, I try to use the correct forms of the language”* (I1, I6, I13, I17) and *“when I realize I use the wrong form, I will correct it immediately”* (I5, I7). Furthermore, the females also mentioned that they usually put themselves in others’ shoes in communication, so they were *“very careful when they conduct the face*

threatening speech acts" (I9, I18).

Another possible explanation in the lower ILP competence of the males could be the difference in language ability between the males and the females. Females are seen as better language learners in the gender-based literature (Lee, 2012), and they are more active in seeking the opportunities to engage in L2 practice (Salahshour, Sharifi and NedaSalahshour, 2012). In the present study, the TEM 4 mean score for the female students was apparently higher than that of the male students. TEM 4 is an evaluation tool for the comprehensive English ability of English majors in China. The mean score was 51.52 for the female students and 46.29 for the males (100 in total) with $p < .01$. As proved by some previous researchers (Liu, 2012; Naoko, 2013), language proficiency is positively related to ILP competence, especially when the EFL learners' language proficiency has not reached a level at which vocabulary, grammar and syntax are no longer obstacles in understanding. In the interviews, some students (I5, I8, I12, I17) mentioned that they had difficulties in communicating with native speakers of English because of their limited vocabulary and poor grammar. Thus, the students could not understand or make themselves understood with native speakers. The significantly higher English language level of the females over the males could help to explain why the females were better in ILP competence.

Conclusion

The present study investigated the Chinese university EFL learners' ILP competence in conducting speech acts, understanding implicature and performing routines. The EFL learners' ILP competence was found to be at the medium level. Significant differences existed at the overall level as well as in conducting speech acts and performing routines at the category level. In addition, in the four aspects of conducting speech acts: 1) correct speech acts, 2) typical expressions, 3) amount of speech and information, and 4) levels of formality, directness and politeness, significant differences were found. Significant differences were also found in some individual items in understanding implicature and performing routines. The females' performance was significantly better than their male counterparts.

The investigation using the interviews revealed that most EFL teachers in China seldom teach pragmatic knowledge in class. In fact, the EFL learners' ILP competence could be improved by raising their awareness for learning pragmatics. More opportunities should be created by teachers in practicing English. More examples demonstrating appropriate language use should be provided. Error correction should be provided immediately to the students after communication practice in the target language.

More specifically, when teaching speech acts, teachers should emphasize typical expressions and the amount of speech and information due to the complexity of the patterns or strategies. While

teaching, situations should be made as authentic as possible to aid the students in noticing the patterns and deepening their impressions. In teaching implicature, English culture and the learners' native culture need to be included in the instruction so as to give the learners a clearer picture of the differences between the two cultures. In teaching routines, it is suggested to build up a corpus with English routines. Practice is also necessary, and role plays or short dialogues could be included in practice.

In addition, significant differences can be found between the male and the female students in their ILP competence. Female learners are more cooperative and find it easier to accept the forms or abide by the norms in learning language. The best way to improve ILP competence of the males is to train them. Conscious training is necessary for the males since pragmatics has been proved to be teachable (Bouton, 1994; Silva, 2003; Takahashi, 2010; Derakhshan and Eslami, 2015) and males tend not to be as sensitive as females in acquiring a new language.

Despite all the endeavors of the present study, limitations are still present and suggestions for future research can be made. First, although the scope of the present research was wide compared with the previous research on ILP knowledge, it was not wide enough to cover all fields of ILP knowledge. In addition, only two testing methods were included in the present study: WDCT and MDCT, no testing methods requiring oral production were investigated, so the EFL learners' gestures, intonations and tones cannot be captured. For the future research, it will be necessary to investigate other speech acts and other situations in conversational implicature and routines as well as other fields of interlanguage pragmatics before a general test of ILP knowledge can be stated. Furthermore, more testing methods, especially oral testing methods should be included.

Second, the participants in the present study were all Chinese EFL learners from the same grade in the same province. The participants may share a similar background in English learning and may have taken similar courses, and thus influencing the results. Furthermore, the study was limited by the objective conditions in the Guizhou Province in which most English majors were female, so it was hard to reach a balance of the male and female participants. The gender imbalance may also influence the results. In future studies, it would be ideal to include students from a wider range. For example, students could be selected from different education levels, different majors, different provinces, or even different countries. There are many possibilities in choosing participants which are worth further investigation.

Last but not least, it can be concluded from the present study and the previous studies that gender could be a variable which influences EFL learners' ILP competence. The potential for gender to affect foreign language learners' ILP competence cannot be ignored. However, the results showing that

the EFL learners' ILP competence varied by gender in the present study are not conclusive. Further research is necessary for different EFL contexts.

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