

A Study on Language Competence of Chinese College English Teachers

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Abstract: This paper aims to assess the language competence of Chinese college English teachers of three hundred and twenty three (323) Chinese college English teachers that are employed at 2 different types of University in the Anhui Province of China, including comprehensive and application-oriented universities. More specifically, the paper seeks to assess the level of the respondent's language competence from four aspects: linguistic competence, intercultural competence, sociolinguistic competence and pragmatic competence based on the results of the study.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, economic globalization and social informatization have brought countries closer together. China has put forward the "Belt and Road" initiative, which conforms to the trend of international development. Colleges and universities have become the main positions to train complex international talents to satisfy the needs of economic and social development. Under this background, college English teaching should not only meet the vocational needs of college students, but more importantly, satisfy the needs of national development. In order to cultivate international English talents, the competence of college English teachers also needs to be improved accordingly.

College English teachers must have excellent basic language competence, master English language and cultural knowledge, and have strong language skills. This is the most basic ability requirement for college English teachers, only in this way, teachers can be more flexible in teaching, concentrate on reflecting on teaching, and guide students to learn effectively.

Language competence is a broad term which includes linguistic competence, intercultural competence, sociolinguistic competence and pragmatic competence.

First, linguistic competence. According to Chomsky, Linguistic competence is a Linguistic counterpart to Linguistic performance. It is the ability to master all the speech codes of a language, such as the ability to recognize, understand, remember and organize logical speech [1]. Language ability refers to the ability to understand meaning, express meaning, express intention and reflect emotional attitude through listening, speaking, reading and writing in a certain social context [2]. English language competence is the basis of reflecting cultural character, thinking quality and

learning ability, and serves the latter three.

Second, intercultural competence. Most theoretical researches on intercultural competence focus on conceptual connotation and produce various intercultural competence models [3-5] is helpful for teachers to understand intercultural competence, but the research on intercultural competence development in foreign language teaching is not mature. In the past two decades, Moran [6]'s Culture Knowings Framework, Liddicoat & Scarino elaborated on the interactive process of cross-cultural learning and the basic principles of cross-cultural language learning [7]. The Developmental Model of Linguaculture Learning (DMLL) constructed by Shaules promotes teachers' intercultural foreign language teaching practice [8].

Third, sociolinguistic competence. Sociolinguistics is not only a scientific system, but also a social activity, so the communicative function is its most essential feature. The communicative competence of language includes two aspects: language competence and language application. Language ability, in turn, consists of two components: the ability to make grammatical sentences and the ability to use language appropriately.

Fourth, pragmatic competence. Pragmatic competence refers to the knowledge of the conditions and ways in which language is used appropriately. Pragmatics is the study of the contextualized understanding of discourse, that is, how to understand certain words in daily life with the help of context - only by placing them in a specific context can they get a reasonable explanation. From another point of view, pragmatics is a discipline that deeply explores the pragmatic psychology of a certain cultural community represented by the speaker through discourse.

2. Methods

This paper is mainly conducted by Language Competence Questionnaire survey and aims to assess the level of the respondents language competence from four aspects: linguistic competence, intercultural competence, sociolinguistic competence and pragmatic competence based on the results of the study. The respondents of the study will be comprised of 323 Chinese college English teachers who are employed at 2 different types of universities in Anhui Province of China which include comprehensive and application-oriented universities.

Chinese College English Teachers' Language Competence Questionnaire evaluates language competence of Chinese college English teachers with 26 items that measure four aspects-linguistic competence, intercultural competence, sociolinguistic competence, and pragmatic competence. Each of the 26 items has a 4-point Likert response scale ranging from 1 to 4 consisting of Not Competent, Slightly Competent, Moderately Competent, and Highly Competent.

The design of this questionnaire in such present study is based on A Survey on Preservice English Teachers' Intercultural Communicative Competence in China, which is a 26-item instrument designed for evaluating language competence of Chinese college English teachers. This questionnaire was found to measure four dimensions of Chinese college English teachers' language competence: a) linguistic competence, 5 items that represented Chinese college English teachers' linguistic competence, b) intercultural competence, 11 items that measured the level of Chinese college English teachers' intercultural competence when communicating with people from different cultures , c) sociolinguistic competence, 5 items that evaluated college English teachers' the effectiveness and appropriateness of communication, and d) pragmatic competence, 5 items that evaluate college English teachers' complete communicative intention and understand corresponding communication.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 1: Chinese College English Teachers' Language Competence in Terms of Linguistic Competence

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
1. I can read, write, speak, and understand spoken English well.	3.35	Competent	2
2. I have a rich knowledge of English vocabulary and translating.	3.13	Competent	5
3. I have correct English accent and pronunciation.	3.23	Competent	4
4. I have good knowledge of English grammar.	3.37	Competent	1
5. I understand the basic knowledge and rules of English.	3.34	Competent	3
Composite Mean	3.29	Competent	

Legend: 3.50 – 4.00 = Highly Competent; 2.50 – 3.49 = Moderately Competent; 1.50 – 2.49 = Slightly Competent; 1.00 - 1.49 = Not Competent

Table 1 presents the assessment of the respondents on language competence in terms of linguistics. The composite mean of 3.29 indicates that the respondents are competent in general. Among the items cited, “have good knowledge of English grammar” ranked first with mean score of 3.37, followed by “can read, write, speak, and understand spoken English well and understand the basic knowledge and rules of English” with mean score of 3.35 and 3.34 respectively. A theory of grammar is seen as a theory about the form of linguistic competence in general. Grammar comes along with language. It is a refinement of the regularity of the English language. The mother tongue does not need to learn grammar deliberately, because the mother tongue is inherited, and the mother tongue thinking is finally acquired through long-term and large amounts of perception, interaction and practice in the mother tongue environment. However, English is not the mother tongue for Chinese people, so it is naturally impossible to inherit. Although English teachers try to play the role of inheritance, it is very different from the real mother tongue inheritance. So how to learn the correct use of English in the shortest time, the most efficient way is to learn the law of English - grammar. A thorough and systematic grasp of grammar is the basis for the establishment of an individual's complete English self-study ability, the premise of establishing an individual's English thinking, and the only way to learn English effectively.

Meanwhile, items such as “have correct English accent and pronunciation” (3.23) and “have a rich knowledge of English vocabulary and translating” (3.13) rated the least. English accents and pronunciation ‘still’ matter to learners to various extent [9]. The pronunciation and accents of English are relatively irregular, and there are many phonetic symbols and pronunciation rules to learn. The accents factor is the most important factor in English, but it happens that the accents position of English changes so much that it is difficult to grasp accurately, which causes great difficulties in the application of pronunciation rules.

There are several reasons for the difficulty of mastering English vocabularies. First, grammar is different. English is different from native language and grammar structure and word spelling are different, which makes it more difficult to remember. Second, many words have a variety of pronunciation. In different contexts, the same word is different, which makes it difficult to remember. Third, vocabulary is large. English vocabulary is huge, and many words are subtle, which makes it difficult to remember. Fourth, lack of practical use. If you don't use English

frequently, vocabularies are difficult to remember.

Translation is a language art and the highest realm of language. However, many English learners find it more difficult to translate, for three main reasons: knowledge, understanding and expression. First, difficulty in understanding English. This refers to the “obstacles” in understanding different linguistic phenomena, grammatical and logical relations, and the things involved in the original text. China and English-speaking countries are thousands of miles apart, with different history, culture and customs. In addition, Chinese and English belong to different language families, and they have their own origin and development process, as well as their own word order. It can be said that there is no kinship between them. Second, Chinese expression is difficult. The expression of Chinese expression is the lack of the language of the translation and the expression of the original text is “blocked or restricted”. The Chinese expression is difficult to find the right words in Chinese, sometimes when they find the right words, there is no place for the word in Chinese sentences, and the sentences should be made smooth and more words will be reduced. Third, it is difficult to master knowledge. The so-called difficulty in mastering knowledge refers to the translator’s lack of knowledge or ignorance of the original text. Therefore, if you want to translate accurately, you must have a wealth of knowledge, but the difficulty of translation is insurmountable. As long as you master effective methods, you can meet the objective standards and achieve an ideal level of translation.

Table 2 shows the assessment of the respondents on language competence in the aspect of intercultural competence. The composite mean of 2.68 indicates that the respondents are moderately competent in general. Item 1 ranked first with mean score of 2.78, followed by item 10, item 6, item 9 with mean score of 2.77, 2.76 and 2.75 respectively. Meanwhile, item 3, item 11, item 7, item 2 and item 8 ranked 5-9 with mean score of 2.69, 2.67, 2.66, 2.64 and 2.63 respectively. At last, item 5 and item 4 ranked 10 and 11 with mean score of 2.57 and 2.51 respectively and rated the least.

Table 2: Chinese College English Teachers’ Language Competence in Terms of Intercultural Competence

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
1. I know the lifestyle of the other culture.	2.78	Competent	1
2. I know the historical events and historical figures of the other culture.	2.64	Competent	8
3. I know the literature and important writers of the other culture.	2.69	Competent	5
4. I know the politics of the other’s culture.	2.51	Competent	11
5. I understand the taboos of the other culture.	2.57	Competent	10
6. I understand non-verbal communication including gestures and posture.	2.76	Competent	3
7. I understand the customs and habits of the other culture.	2.66	Competent	7
8. I understand the current important events and hot events in the other culture.	2.63	Competent	9
9. I understand the appropriate body distance in each other’s culture.	2.75	Competent	4
10. I understand the time concept of the other culture.	2.77	Competent	2
11. I understand the geography of their culture.	2.67	Competent	6
Composite Mean	2.68	Competent	

Legend: 3.50 – 4.00 = Highly Competent; 2.50 – 3.49 = Moderately Competent; 1.50 – 2.49 = Slightly Competent; 1.00 - 1.49 = Not Competent

As for the items ranked 1st-Ranked 4th, people not only use language, but also non-verbal communication including gestures, postures, body distance, as well as the use of time in intercultural communication.

Ranked 5th-Ranked 9th are mainly about the literature, geography, customs and habits, historical events and historical figures, current important events and hot events of the other culture in the intercultural communication. Support strategies can be seen as be familiar with the history, literature, geography, customs and habits, historical events and historical figures. This kind of intercultural comparative study is particularly important for today's foreign language majors, because only through in-depth intercultural comparative study can students truly develop their intercultural critical consciousness.

Ranked 10th and Ranked 11th are mainly about the taboos and politics of the other culture in the intercultural communication. Support strategies can be seen as interpreting and evaluating different cultural phenomena, texts and products. In English intercultural communication teaching, cultural adaptability should be embodied in the whole process and in all aspects. English classroom should balance local culture and target culture in a reasonable way. Through the acquisition of English language and skills, the classroom should understand and absorb the cultures of different English-speaking countries and understand the ways and styles of expression and communication in various languages. The process of exporting and exchanging different cultures and views through English should become a process of understanding the taboos and politics of the other culture. It is the process of cognition and thinking expansion.

Table 3: Chinese College English Teachers' Language Competence in Terms of Sociolinguistic Competence

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
1. I can adjust my ways of speaking according to different communication situations.	2.99	Competent	3.5
2. I can adjust my ways of speaking based on the identity and status of the other party.	2.94	Competent	5
3. I can adjust my ways of speaking based on the age of the other party.	3.04	Competent	2
4. I can adjust my ways of speaking according to the gender of the other party.	2.99	Competent	3.5
5. I can adjust my ways of speaking based on how close I am to the other party.	3.07	Competent	1
Composite Mean	3.01	Competent	

Legend: 3.50 – 4.00 = Highly Competent; 2.50 – 3.49 = Moderately Competent; 1.50 – 2.49 = Slightly Competent; 1.00 - 1.49 = Not Competent

Table 3 presents the assessment of the respondents on language competence in terms of sociolinguistics. The composite mean of 3.01 indicates that the respondents are moderately competent in general. Among the items cited, item 5 ranked first with mean score of 3.07, followed by item 3 ranked second with mean score of 3.04. Next, item 1 and item 4 ranked 3.5 with mean score of 2.99. At last, item 2 ranked 5 with mean score of 2.94 and rated the least.

Item 5 is due to the reason of speaking according to the body distance and conversation distance. Hall once divided North American conversation distance into four categories: 1. Intimate distance: (within 1.5 feet, 1 foot is about 0.3 meters) indicates intimate relationship, suitable for family, lovers and close friends. At this distance, people often have physical contact. 2. Personal distance: (1.5~4 feet) indicates friendly relations, suitable for acquaintances or general friends to talk. At this distance, people speak in their usual volume, with little physical contact. 3. Social distance: (4 ~ 12

feet) indicates social relationship, suitable for business or general social interaction occasions, is the distance between people who are not familiar with. 4. Public distance: (above 12 feet) indicates estrangement and is suitable for activities in public places such as lectures, speeches, performances, or formal occasions such as meeting people with high social status [10].

Speaking of the terms of “age, gender, communication situations and identity and status”, they all belong to the social settings. Specifically, gender and age are important factors affecting language use. Men and women show differences when they use the same variety of language. This gender difference is reflected in the three planes of pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. At the lexical level, every language has some words that are specific to women. There are also gender differences when it comes to grammar. In English, women often use patterns or expressions that indicate uncertainty. Generally speaking, women speak more politely and gracefully. There are significant differences in the way people speak at different ages, and there are no exceptions for all languages. This is an obvious fact. There are two kinds of age-induced language variation: one is generation difference; The second is age grading. The former refers to the difference between one generation and another; the latter refers to the difference between the same generation. The use of language is also different in different occasions and users, the so-called functional variants of language - register and style. Register is a term widely used in sociolinguistics to refer to variations in language use, that is, to express the same idea in different ways depending on the situation. Style is formed according to different communication environment, such as “conversation style”, “political discourse style”, “scientific style” and so on [11].

Table 4: Chinese College English Teachers’ Language Competence in Terms of Pragmatic Competence

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
1. I am able to use language for different purposes.	3.04	Competent	2
2. I am able to get past the language and understand the speaker’s real intentions.	2.90	Competent	5
3. I am proficient in English for communication and teaching and can translate into Chinese naturally according to the teaching practice.	3.03	Competent	3
4. I am well aware of the similarities and differences between English and Chinese.	3.16	Competent	1
5. I am familiar with the varieties of English (including the changes of English with time, place, person, etc.).	2.93	Competent	4
Composite Mean	3.01	Competent	

Legend: 3.50 – 4.00 = Highly Competent; 2.50 – 3.49 = Moderately Competent; 1.50 – 2.49 = Slightly Competent; 1.00 - 1.49 = Not Competent

Table 4 indicates the assessment of the respondents on language competence in terms of pragmatics. The composite mean of 3.01 indicates that the respondents are moderately competent in general. Among the items cited, item 4 ranked first with mean score of 3.16, followed by item 1 and item 3 ranked second and third with mean score of 3.04 and 3.03 respectively. Next, item 5 and item 2 ranked 4 and 5 with mean score of 2.93 and 2.90 respectively.

The results of the fourth item show that “most respondents are well aware of the similarities and differences between English and Chinese”, which means that most respondents have developed the pragmatic awareness. It’s a very important aspect in terms of pragmatic competences. Pragmatic awareness is not only an important factor in determining the pragmatic ability of foreign language learners, but also an important variable in determining their language level. A high degree of

pragmatic awareness means a high degree of pragmatic ability and foreign language level. In teaching, teachers can use explicit or implicit teaching modes to penetrate learners' pragmatic awareness according to their learning stage, language level, gender and other differences. For example, for learners with low language level at the learning stage, teachers may prefer to use pragmatic practice, pragmatic feedback and pragmatic summary to explain and analyze language form, functional meaning and relevant contextual features. For learners with higher language level in the learning stage, teachers can lay emphasis on the use of real language materials with pragmatic characteristics, and create a real language environment for learners through role-playing, online interaction, network self-help, etc., so as to strengthen their understanding and experience of implicit pragmatic knowledge.

The results of the first item indicate that “most respondents are able to use language for different purposes”, which means respondents can use language to meet the different communicative needs and practices. The results of the third item show that “most respondents are proficient in English for communication and teaching and can translate into Chinese naturally according to the teaching practice”. A person with pragmatic competence is not only competent and effective in pragmatic communication, but also able to help others achieve the purpose of pragmatic communication.

The results of the fifth item display that respondents will meet the difficulties with the varieties of English (including the changes of English with time, place, person, etc.). Variation can change with time, place and person and it is very difficult for respondents of English as foreign language to recognize, identify and distinguish.

The results of the second item reveal that respondents are not good at getting past the language and understand the speaker's real intentions. It means that recognition of speakers' intentions play an important part in how we understand language. Over the past 25 years, much of the research in cognitive science - including parts of psychology, philosophy, linguistics, computer science, neuroscience, and anthropology - has been devoted to examining whether intention plays an important role in the experience of meaning, particularly in how people interpret verbal communication. Although other methods of studying linguistic meaning have also been widely adopted, such as truth-conditional semantics, it is generally accepted that understanding many aspects of linguistic meaning depends critically on identifying the speaker's intent. Respondents of college English teachers must learn a lot about how speakers communicate their intentions, and how listeners can figure out exactly what it is that others are trying to communicate.

To sum up, Table 5 of Chinese college English teachers' language competence arrived on a weighted mean of 3.00 indicating that the respondents are moderately competent in general. Among these items cited, linguistic competence got the highest weighted mean score of 3.29. It means most respondents of Chinese college English teachers have the ability to understand meaning, express meaning, express intention and reflect emotional attitude through listening, speaking, reading and writing in a certain social context. It was followed by the sociolinguistic competence and pragmatic competence that show a mean score of 3.01 equally. It means most respondents of Chinese college English teachers can use English in various appropriate social settings where communication takes place (sociolinguistic competence) and employ appropriate and accurate language to express their thought and apprehend the meaning and intention of what the other speaker says (pragmatic competence). Intercultural competence came in lowest-ranked in the list with the average value of 2.68. It indicates most respondents of Chinese college English teachers lack the ability to function effectively across cultures, to think and act appropriately, and to communicate and work with people from different cultural backgrounds – at home or abroad.

Table 5: Summary Table on Chinese College English Teachers' Language Competence

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
1. linguistic competence	3.29	Competent	1
2. Intercultural competence	2.68	Competent	4
3. sociolinguistic competence	3.01	Competent	2
4. pragmatic competence	3.01	Competent	3
Composite Mean	3.00	Competent	

Legend: 3.50 – 4.00 = Highly Competent; 2.50 – 3.49 = Moderately Competent; 1.50 – 2.49 = Slightly Competent; 1.00 - 1.49 = Not Competent

4. Conclusions

In terms of language competence, the respondents are moderately competent with all four indicators: linguistic competence, intercultural competence, sociolinguistic competence and pragmatic competence. Among these indicators, linguistic competence rank first, which is the basis of language competence. Compared with other three indicators, intercultural competence was relatively weak. It is necessary to cultivate college English teachers' intercultural competence in the future.

First, use the network environment to expand intercultural communication experience. The network environment has an incomparable advantage over the traditional classroom, which realizes the openness, interaction, sharing, collaboration and autonomy of foreign language learning. This study makes full use of the Internet to expand cross-cultural communication experience, communicate with people from different countries and regions in real time, and cultivate cross-cultural awareness on the basis of fully understanding the background of cross-cultural differences.

Second, improve teachers' knowledge structure of intercultural communication. In the process of teaching, only by deeply grasping the essence and connotation of language, constantly expanding and organically combining the knowledge of language, culture and communication, can teachers' intercultural communication knowledge be improved in a more comprehensive and rich way.

Third, carry out foreign language intercultural teaching from a multicultural perspective. The cultural transformation of modern society is accelerating day by day. The complex social structure creates the multi-culture, and the multi-culture promotes the diversified development of education. Taking roots in national culture, absorbing foreign culture and combining local culture can cultivate teachers' cultural sensitivity and tolerance, master foreign language as a communication tool, enhance practical application ability and improve cultural creativity.

Fourth, pay attention to non-verbal communication. Non-verbal communication includes manners, conversation, clothing and greetings, etc. It covers multiple levels of behavior and information to express one's own thoughts or to understand the intentions of others. Teachers should pay special attention to the cultivation of non-verbal communication ability and creatively use non-verbal communication strategies to complete communication tasks.

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