Abstract

It is widely accepted that to become competent in a second language (L2), one needs to acquire not only linguistic competence, but also pragmatic competence. Olshtain and Blum-Kulka (1985) argue that it may take many years of total immersion in the target environment to develop pragmatic competence without the teaching of pragmatics. Previous interlanguage pragmatics studies have reported that in foreign language settings L2 learners are exposed to a narrow range of speech acts and realization strategies, and they have limited practice opportunity with native speakers (Alcon Soler, 2008). All of these underscore the need of pragmatics instruction in foreign language settings.

Different technology tools ranging from emails to online chat rooms have been implemented to promote instruction in pragmatics. Previous studies have reported an overall benefit in use of these technologies (e.g., Sykes, 2005). Especially in foreign language settings, technology may play an even more facilitative role in learners’ pragmatic development in view of the various resources that technology can provide. Nevertheless, a limited number of studies have been conducted so far to look at the instructional process of pragmatic competence facilitated by technology.

This study, therefore, is intended to examine whether and/or how a self-access, learner-centered website facilitates students’ learning of Chinese expressions of gratitude. As a pilot study of a large-scale research project, eight American undergraduate students who study Chinese as a foreign language took part in this study. Following a pretest-posttest design, all of the students were asked to complete a written production questionnaire that elicits their use of gratitude in Chinese, and a rating questionnaire that examines their metapragmatic assessment of Chinese expressions of gratitude before and after the website instruction. In addition to the two questionnaires, this study conducted retrospective interviews to help the researcher learn more about students’ rating process.

The instruction lasted five weeks. Students were asked to study two units of the website developed by the researcher on a weekly basis. After finish studying the website, students were also asked to complete the associated exercises and activities designed in the website. In addition to the website learning, students were required to write weekly responses to a series of prompt questions provided by the researcher. These prompt questions are primarily used to help the researcher learn about whether the explicit instruction promotes students’ pragmatic awareness in expressing gratitude and how students perceive the use of this website as a learning tool.

It was found that the instruction resulted in more appropriate use of gratitude and more target-like assessment of expressions of gratitude. In addition, students reported that they were
more sensitized to the expressions of gratitude after receiving the instruction and thus all believed that their pragmatic awareness was promoted. As for the use of the website as a learning tool, almost all of the students responded positively, and suggested integrating the website to the language curriculum.