LEARNING TO EXPRESS GRATITUDE IN MANDARIN CHINESE THROUGH WEB-BASED INSTRUCTION

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This study explored the effectiveness of a self-access website as a tool to teach expressions of gratitude to learners of Mandarin Chinese. The web-based instruction included explicit instruction on how to express gratitude appropriately in Mandarin and various consciousness-raising exercises/activities. Two groups of learners who differed in their proficiency in Chinese received instruction for five weeks. The findings indicated that the instruction positively affected the metapragmatic assessment and pragmatic awareness of the learners at two different proficiency levels. In their reflective e-journals, learners also reported the benefits the website provided for their pragmatics learning. Based on the findings, this study proposed implications for the teaching of pragmatics.

INTRODUCTION

The past 14 years have witnessed a growing body of research that investigates the effects of instruction on the development of interlanguage pragmatic (ILP) competence of learners since Bardovi-Harlig (2001) underscored the need for direct teaching in pragmatics. These instructional studies report not only the teachability of a majority of pragmatic features, but also the overall effectiveness of instruction over no instruction inside the classroom (for reviews, see Kasper & Roever, 2005; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Rose, 2005; for a meta-analysis, see Jeon & Kaya, 2006). In view of the various resources that technology can provide, recent efforts have been directed toward exploring the role of technology in the instruction of ILP competence.

Previous studies have employed different technologies to enhance instruction in pragmatics and have reported their overall usefulness and benefits (e.g., Belz, 2007; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Taguchi & Sykes, 2013). For example, Liu (2007) compared the relative effectiveness of instruction delivered through two methods—classroom instruction versus web-based instruction via email and WebCT discussion—and reported positive effects for both methods on the acquisition of English requests. Sykes (2005) explored the effects of three types of group discussion (computer-based written, oral chats, and traditional face-to-face discussion) on learner performances of Spanish refusals, and concluded that synchronous computer-mediated communication was promising in pragmatics instruction. In addition, Sykes (2008) created synthetic immersive environments (SIEs) not only to help teach students pragmatics in Spanish but also to assess their pragmatic performances after they had used a pragmatics website on Spanish speech acts. The results showed that student pragmatic awareness was promoted after studying pragmatics in the virtual space.

In addition to these technologies, self-access websites (i.e., websites designed for self-learning of students) have been reported to have great potential to promote ILP instruction in foreign language

settings (Cohen, 2008; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010), but the number of studies that have explored the role of websites in the teaching of pragmatics is still limited. Responding to this need, I developed an instructional website to further explore the effectiveness of web-based instruction in pragmatics.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Schmidt's noticing hypothesis (1990, 1993) provided the rationale for the explicit instruction of ILP competence. He identified different levels of awareness or consciousness, and referred to the level of "conscious registration of the occurrence of some event" as "noticing" (Schmidt, 1993, p. 26). Because of the limited storage and processing capacities of working memory (e.g., Baddeley, 1974; Raaijmakers & Shiffrin, 1982), Schmidt hypothesized that in order for the target features in the input to be available for further processing, learners need to be aware of relevant linguistic devices and contextual factors for pragmatics learning. Therefore, he advocated explicit instruction in linguistic strategies and contextual factors to promote learner noticing and facilitate their acquisition of pragmatics.

In addition to explicit instruction, another way to attract attention of learners and make them notice the target features is the pragmatic consciousness-raising (PCR) approach. PCR is "an inductive approach to developing awareness of how language forms are used appropriately in context" (Rose, 1999, p. 171). The aim of this approach is to sensitize learners to contextual uses of language and to offer them analytic tools to conduct their own analysis and form their own generalization (Rose, 1994, 1997, 1999). Rose (1997) discussed a three-step PCR activity to help promote pragmatic awareness of learners: (a) familiarizing learners with theory and relevant information in pragmatics, (b) guiding learners to conduct pragmatic analyses of their first language (L1) data, and (c) asking learners to carry out a similar analysis of the data in their second language (L2). Based on this activity, a variety of PCR techniques have been proposed and applied in ILP instruction. For example, given language examples or authentic speech samples, learners are asked to find the differences in the use of target pragmatic features between their L1 and L2 after they are familiarized with relevant information (e.g., realization strategies and contextual factors) in pragmatics (e.g., Narita, 2012; Safont, 2003; Tateyama, 2009). Alternatively, instead of providing learners with language examples, researchers asked learners to find and record realistic scenarios involving the use of target pragmatic features in everyday communication, and then to describe the scenario, answer questions about relevant pragmatic information, and keep a record of the strategies they noticed in scenarios (e.g., Ishihara, 2007; Vellenga, 2008). These studies have also reported overall effectiveness of the PCR techniques in promoting pragmatic awareness of learners.

Website-Delivered Pragmatics Instruction

Despite the need for direct teaching of pragmatics, it is still given insufficient attention in many foreign language classrooms due to, for example, limited time and resources. Self-access websites seem to have the potential to compensate for these limitations (Cohen & Ishihara, 2010). For example, websites can provide learners with varied resources, such as access to authentic target input and interactive opportunities with different speakers, to facilitate their pragmatics learning. More importantly, websites can meet different needs of individual learners (Cohen & Ishihara, 2005; Ishihara, 2007) by serving as self-directed learning tools that allow learners to study pragmatics at their own pace and on their own time outside the classroom. Learners are also given freedom to choose as many or as few online resources as they need.

In view of these advantages that websites can provide for L2 learners, researchers have developed self-access websites to deliver instruction in ILP. For example, the Spanish website Dancing with Words (Cohen & Sykes, 2006) was structured with eight modules that covered a wide range of speech acts in Spanish, such as making requests, extending invitations, and giving compliments. Each module provided learners with explicit instruction in contextual factors that affect how to perform speech acts in everyday communication as well as a repertoire of realization strategies. Another website, designed for

intermediate- to advanced-level learners of Japanese (Cohen & Ishihara, 2005), introduced five speech acts: apologies, compliments, refusals, requests, and thanks. Both websites offered learners authentic materials through audio or video as well as different varieties of online exercises and output practice. In addition, websites provided learners with linguistic assistance and explicit feedback to facilitate their learning. Researchers have piloted the two websites on a small scale, finding that learners responded positively to the web-based curriculum. Their pragmatic awareness was promoted to some degree after they used the websites (Cohen, 2008; Ishihara, 2007). However, results about speech act performances of learners also showed that not all of their use of speech acts benefited from the web teaching. After using the website designed for learners of Japanese, for example, students seemed to make the highest gains in terms of requests but little improvement in the case of compliments (Cohen & Ishihara, 2005). In view of the mixed findings and the small number of studies available, it remains unclear if websites can work as effective tools to teach L2 pragmatics. Therefore, there is a need to conduct more studies to further explore the effectiveness of website-delivered instruction in pragmatics.

L2 Proficiency and Pragmatics Instruction

L2 proficiency has been reported to be a factor that might influence the effectiveness of instruction in pragmatics (Narita, 2012; Takahashi, 2010), but very few studies have explored the possible effects of instruction across proficiency levels. This might be the case for the following reasons. First, previous research has reported inconclusive findings about how proficiency correlates with pragmatic development of learners (Kasper & Rose, 1999), which proves problematic for instructional research and teaching practices. Second, the majority of prior instructional studies have focused on learners at the intermediate or advanced level (Kasper & Roever, 2005; Rose, 2005), and examined whether the instruction contributes to the ILP competence of learners who have achieved a certain level of linguistic competence. By contrast, they have paid less attention to beginning learners, possibly with the underlying assumption that pragmatics acquisition requires a linguistic threshold. Lastly, the small number of studies that have explored the effects of instruction across levels, such as Codina-Espurz (2008) and Rueda (2004), have yielded inconsistent findings. Therefore, more studies that examine the effects of instruction across proficiency levels are needed.

Chinese Expressions of Gratitude

Expressions of gratitude have received less attention in ILP in relation to requests and apologies, though it is an important social function in all languages and cultures (Eisenstein & Bodman, 1993). Previous cross-cultural studies have reported noticeable differences between how gratitude is expressed in American English and in Mandarin Chinese (e.g., Bi, 1996; Li, 2004). For example, Chinese speakers use more indirect thanking strategies than their American counterparts, who seem to prefer to explicitly verbalize gratitude to everyone who offers help (e.g., Cheng, 2005; Li, 2004; Yang, 2009). Some of these indirect strategies, such as expressing gratitude by apologizing and by showing care, have no equivalents in English (e.g., Bi, 1996; Li, 2004). In spite of these differences, few ILP studies have examined how students learn Chinese expressions of gratitude nor have they explored the effects of instruction on appropriate expressions of gratitude in Chinese (with Yang, 2009, 2014 as exceptions).

In an attempt to fill gaps in prior research mentioned above, I developed a self-access website that instructs learners how to express gratitude appropriately in Chinese and investigated the effects of the online instruction on Chinese L2 learners at different proficiency levels. Particular attention is paid to whether the effects of such online instruction vary across levels, and whether the instructional website works as an effective teaching tool for Chinese L2 learners.

METHDOLOGY

This study adopted a pretest–posttest design to investigate the effects of web-based instruction. It included two treatment groups who differed in their proficiency in Mandarin, but received the same type

of pragmatics instruction delivered via a self-access website.

Participants

Thirty-six students, who spoke English as their first or dominant language and were studying Chinese as a foreign language in the Chinese program at a Midwestern university in the United States, volunteered to take part in this study. Prior to receiving the instruction, all of the participants were asked to complete a background questionnaire and a local standardized Chinese proficiency test (CPT). The background questionnaire elicited the background information of participants such as gender, age, educational background, years of studying Chinese, and time spent studying abroad (i.e., in a Chinese-speaking environment). The CPT was used to assess Mandarin Chinese proficiency in listening, grammar, and reading on a 0–100 scale. Before taking part in this study, all the participants reported that they had not received any systematic instruction in Chinese expressions of gratitude.

Based on their background information as well as their CPT scores, participants were either assigned to a lower-level or a higher-level group.[1] The lower-level group included 18 participants who were all undergraduate students. These participants, ranging in age from 18 to 23, had studied Chinese for no more than one and a half years prior to participating in this study. Their CPT scores were between 13 and 30 points ($M = 23$), and none of them had previously studied abroad, though four students did report that they had traveled to China for pleasure. The other 18 participants in the higher-level group had studied Chinese for more than two years before receiving the online instruction. All of them, ranging from 18 to 45 years old, were undergraduate students except four who were graduate students Their CPT scores ranged from 45 to 84 points ($M = 63$), and most of them had studied abroad before.

Instruments

This study employed metapragmatic assessment tasks (MAT) to measure participant assessment of the appropriateness of expressions of gratitude. Reflective e-journals were used to track their self-access study progress and ongoing perceptions of the web-based instruction.

Metapragmatic Assessment Tasks (MAT)

The MAT included eight scenarios and their corresponding thanking responses. Participants were asked to evaluate the appropriateness of the given thanking responses according to specific situations and interlocutors. Although gratitude can be expressed in response to different situations, such as receiving a favor, service, or gift, the scenarios in this study were all about receiving a favor, and they were situated in study-abroad contexts; that is, the scenarios were common situations that take place in Beijing, China. In addition, all the given thanking responses were selected from the data collected from previous studies (Yang, 2009, 2014), but were somewhat modified to correspond with the instructional materials on the website. In particular, two of these responses were appropriate for the specified situations, but the other six were inappropriate, either violating social norms or involving pragmalinguistic errors.

Participants were asked to evaluate the appropriateness of each given response on a six-point rating scale, from 0 (*extremely poor/not comprehensible*) to 5 (*excellent/native*) (see Appendix A). It was adapted from the Acceptability Scale in Eisenstein and Bodman (1993). One sample item is given below:

> Situation: After completing the assignment, Chris prints something at the library. But suddenly the printer malfunctions. Chris asks a stranger for help. After the person helps Chris fix the small problem, Chris says: 你真是太厉害了！("You are really awesome!")

> Your rating of this response:

> 0----------------1-----------------2----------------3----------------4---------------5

In light of possible difficulty that the lower-level learners could have in recognizing Chinese characters, this study provided participants with an aural Chinese version of the scenario in addition to a written Chinese version and its English translation. Participants could choose to listen to the aural version as many times as they needed, and all versions of the MAT scenarios were delivered via computer. In addition, to ensure participants were familiar with the rating scale, this study trained each participant with a worksheet that included a detailed description and example for each point of the scale before completing the assessment task.

Reflective E-Journals (E-journals)

Participants were asked to write weekly reflective e-journals during the instruction period. These were intended to help the researcher understand what participants had learned from the instructional website, what they thought of the design and the use of the website as a teaching tool, whether and to what extent the instruction sensitized them to the use of expressions of gratitude in the foreign language environment, and whether and how the knowledge they gained from the website influenced their expressions of gratitude in everyday communication. The reflective e-journals were structured; participants were given elicitation questions that corresponded to what they studied on the website every week. In writing their journals, participants were required to include their answers to the questions provided, but were not limited to these questions. In addition, participants were given the freedom to choose the language they wanted, such as English, Chinese, or a mixed use of the two. They were given a minimum length limit and were encouraged to write more than the limit. The minimum length was 150 words in English or 250 characters in Chinese, based on results of a small-scale pilot of this study. Though given the freedom of language choice, most participants still chose to write the e-journals in English.

Overview of the Instructional Website

The self-access website was developed to raise learner noticing of expressions of gratitude that emerge in the foreign language environment and to promote their pragmatic awareness. Pragmatic awareness in this study refers to learner perception, understanding, knowledge, and reflection about different aspects of expressions of gratitude, involving both realization strategies and contextual factors that affected the choice of strategies. In addition, learner sensitivity to the contextual use of gratitude in everyday communication was included.

Grounded in the noticing hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990, 1993), the website offered learners explicit instruction on how to appropriately express gratitude in Chinese and various PCR activities/exercises for practice. The website was structured into eight instructional units and two review sessions (see Appendix B). Each unit consisted of explicit descriptions and explanations about different aspects of Chinese expressions of gratitude, including the repertoire of thanking strategies available in Chinese, contextual factors that affect the choice of strategies, and underlying pragmatic principles associated with how gratitude is expressed in Chinese. In addition, the pragmatics website contained a home page that explicitly explained the primary goal of the online instruction and gave a brief introduction to important concepts related to the learning of expressions of gratitude. For learners to fully understand the materials, all of the metapragmatic information on the website was written in English, with the occasional use of Chinese to help with the expressions of gratitude.

To further promote pragmatic awareness of learners, the website featured some PCR activities that have been widely used and reported useful in ILP instruction (e.g., Narita, 2012; Safont, 2003; Vellenga, 2008). For example, participants were given two scenarios with the corresponding thanking expressions in Chinese and in English. Some of the key words in the expressions were bold-typed, underlined, or highlighted in different colors to help promote their noticing. Participants were asked to compare and analyze the differences between the two responses as well as to give their observations and reflections about the differences (see Figure 1). The website also contained PCR activities that asked learners to perform their own data collection and analyses. For example, learners were asked to find and record an

authentic situation where someone expressed gratitude in Chinese. They were then provided a series of questions that prompted them to analyze the situation and to write their own findings.

In addition to the explicit instruction and PCR activities, this website made use of additional technological resources to facilitate pragmatics learning of learners. For example, the website provided learners with access to authentic pragmatic input through videos and offered them opportunities to engage in metapragmatic discussion through asynchronous chat forums.

In the following you will be given three pairs of direct thanking expressions in American English and their corresponding expressions in Chinese. Please compare the use of these thanking strategies in English and Chinese. Can you find any differences in the use of these expressions, e.g., sentence structure? Please write your own observations in English and submit your answers.

1. Thank you, I really appreciate **your time.**

谢谢你，感谢你花时间(spend time)帮助我。

2. Thanks for **your book.**

谢谢你借(jiè, to lend)书给我。

3. Thanks for **the good news.**

谢谢你告诉 (gàosù, to tell; inform)我这个好消息 (xiāoxi, news)。

Your Observation:

Figure 1. One example of the PCR activities that ask participants to make comparisons

Procedure

Participants received pragmatics instruction via the self-access website for five weeks. Two weeks before the instruction, all participants completed the background questionnaire, the Chinese proficiency test, and the MAT. During the five-week instruction period when no teaching of Chinese expressions of gratitude was involved in classroom instruction, participants studied two units at their own pace on their own time outside the classroom every week, and wrote their weekly reflective e-journals in response to prompt questions provided by the researcher. A reminder email was sent to each participant every week to ensure they followed strict procedures and emailed their completed journal entries to the researcher by the due date. One week after the instruction period was over, participants were asked to complete the same version of the MAT.

Data Analysis

According to politeness principles in Chinese as well as the target assessment of L1 speakers, each thanking response in the MAT was assigned a correct rating number on a six-point Likert scale. If participants rated the response correctly, their rating was given 10 points; otherwise, fewer points were

assigned, based on how participants rated the response. For example, if the thanking response provided by the MAT was pragmatically appropriate, participants were given 10 points when they rated the response 5 (*excellent/native*) on the scale. If, however, participants rated the response 4 (*good/near-native*), their rating was given 8 points because they were correct in evaluating this response as appropriate for the specified situation, even though their assessment was not exactly target-like. On the contrary, participants were given 0 points if they rated the response 1 (*very poor/not acceptable*). This scoring rubric was designed in such a way as to track the possible improvement participants may have displayed after receiving the instruction. The rating scores were then analyzed by the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 19.0.

Content analyses were conducted for the reflective e-journals. The parts that reflected different aspects of pragmatic awareness and feedback on the website were identified and the corresponding percentages were also calculated. Particular attention was given to how participants expressed their opinions on such topics as (a) what they learned from the web-based instruction, (b) whether and how the instructional materials sensitized them to Chinese expressions of gratitude in the foreign language setting, (c) to what extent the instruction affected their expressions of gratitude in everyday communication, and (d) how they regarded the use of the website as a teaching tool.

The researcher and another L1 speaker of Chinese, who was familiar with ILP research, analyzed the data. First, the L1 speaker of Mandarin Chinese was trained by the researcher in terms of the six-point Likert scale. Second, a subset of the data was chosen and analyzed independently by the two raters, and the interrater correlation (.92) was obtained. Third, all of the data were re-analyzed by the two raters independently. Finally, the two raters discussed and eliminated any differences in their analyses of the data to ensure unified scoring and analysis.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Results of MAT Data

After the metapragmatic assessment task (MAT) ratings were assigned scores, a two-way repeated measures ANOVA was conducted on the analyzed data. Two variables were taken into account in the statistical analysis: Group (proficiency level of participants) and Time (between pre- and post-tests). Table 1 displays the results of the statistical analysis, the mean score, the standard deviation for each group, as well as the F values indicating statistical differences for Time, Group, and the interaction of Time and Group.

Table 1. *ANOVA Results of MAT Data*

	Pre-test		Post-test	
Group	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Lower-Level	15.9	7.1	24.1	11.3
Higher-Level	24.6	13.1	32.3	13.9

*Notes. Time: F (1, 34) = 10.14, p = .003, η_p^2 = .230; Group: F (1, 34) = 8.01, p = .008, η_p^2 = .191; Time * Group: F (1, 34) = .01, p = .921*

The results show that the main effect for Time is statistically significant ($p = .003$); participants in both groups made more target-like assessments of Chinese expressions of gratitude after the instruction: the lower-level group gained 8.2 in their mean ratings, while the higher-level group gained 7.7 in their assessments. In addition, the main effect for Group is significant ($p = .008$); participants in the higher-level group assessed expressions of gratitude in a more target-like manner than those in the lower-level

group. The standard deviation for the higher-level group in the pre-test is high ($SD = 13.1$), suggesting great variation among learners in this group; while the standard deviation for the lower-level group increased substantially from the pre-test to the post-test, which suggests that gains for this group varied greatly after the five-week online instruction.

However, there is no interaction between Time and Group ($p = .921$). That is, the effects of instruction do not seem to vary across the two groups. Table 2 shows the mean score for each group as well as the gains each group made after the instruction.

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics of MAT Data*

	Pre-test	Post-test	Gains
Group	*M*	*M*	Post-test-Pre-test
Lower-Level	15.9	24.1	8.2
Higher-Level	24.6	32.3	7.7

The table shows that the two groups both made gains after the instruction, but the difference between the gains of the two groups was not statistically significant: the effects of instruction did not have differential effects on learner metapragmatic assessment of Chinese expressions of gratitude. Learners in the lower-level group, however, did make slightly higher gains than those in the higher-level group.

Results of Reflective E-Journals

Each participant wrote five reflective e-journals during his/her online instruction: a total of 180 entries were obtained. The researcher performed content analyses of the journal entries and identified the parts that reflected the pragmatic awareness of the learners and their opinions of the website. The qualitative analysis shows that, overall, pragmatic awareness of learners was promoted after the instruction, regardless of their proficiency in Chinese. Their enhanced pragmatic awareness was reflected in many aspects, such as (a) their improved understanding of Chinese expressions of gratitude, (b) increased knowledge of realization strategies and contextual factors that affect the choice of thanking strategies, (c) increased discussion of Chinese expressions of gratitude, and (d) more attention to the use of Chinese expressions of gratitude in everyday communication. Table 3 presents quotes from the journal entries of learners to illustrate their enhanced pragmatic awareness.

A majority of learners (83%) also explicitly reported an improved ability to evaluate the appropriateness of Chinese expressions of gratitude as well as enhanced confidence in expressing gratitude in everyday communication after the instruction, as seen in these two examples from their journal entries: "I feel that my ability to evaluate the appropriateness of other people's Chinese expressions has greatly improved. Most of the time, I do not have much difficulty" and "I am pretty confident! I feel like in daily situations, I will be much better than I was before I started taking these online lessons."

In writing their weekly journals, many learners (56%) directly expressed their readiness to apply what they had learned from the website to everyday communication and described how they used the newly acquired thanking strategies by giving specific examples:

> I have often used these strategies in chats with my girlfriend via QQ. Last night, for example, she said she wanted to do something for my birthday. I told her that it would be too much work and she didn't have to do anything.

> Tonight I went to a bonfire with friends. When we got back to campus, I needed a ride back to my apartment. A Chinese guy gave me a ride back, and when we arrived at my place, I thanked him, apologizing for causing him inconvenience and said if I hadn't had him to give me a ride back, I

would have had a long, cold walk back home.

Table 3. *Enhanced Pragmatic Awareness in Reflective Journaling*

Group Enhanced awareness	Lower-Level Group	Higher-Level Group
Improved understanding of Chinese expressions of gratitude	It's easier to understand what native speakers mean when they use these thanking phrases now, and it sounds more natural when these expressions of gratitude are adopted in communication with native speakers.	Now I understand why people say "Mafan ni le." I hear that frequently from my Chinese friends, and now I understand it's sort of a mixture of an apology and a thank you.
Increased knowledge of realization strategies and contextual factors	This week, I did not have many opportunities to try out the new thanking strategies. But I think I have a much more extensive vocabulary that I can now use when expressing gratitude in Chinese.	I learned about the concept of politeness in Chinese and how contextual factors possibly affect the choice of thanking strategies in everyday communication.
Increased discussion of Chinese expressions of gratitude	Several times, I discussed the thanking strategies in units 3 and 4 with our instructors.	I did engage in discussion with acquaintances on the topic and sought their opinions on the matter.
More attention to the use of Chinese expressions of gratitude in everyday communication	1. I was keenly aware of my classmates' ability to demonstrate these strategies. 2. I now pay attention to the context of my thanks. If around friends, my thanking is less formal than it was previously.	1. I tried to pay more attention to when other Chinese people used these forms, so I would know what contexts to use them in. 2. I have noticed a lot of these strategies used in television dramas.

In addition, learners discussed their opinions of the design and use of the instructional website. All learners, regardless of their proficiency in Chinese, responded positively to the materials and reported that they would highly recommend this website to their friends who wanted to learn about how to express gratitude in Chinese. In particular, they discussed the usefulness of having online resources (e.g., videos and discussion forums) on the website, and the benefits of having the freedom to easily access the online materials, as shown in the journal quotes below:

I really like the videos; they really bring the content to life. When sometimes the passage might be confusing, the videos make it clearer what it looks like when these behaviors are acted out and how to make these interactions look natural.

The discussion board is nice because it allows all of us who are not fluent or experienced in the Chinese language to express our feelings and thoughts in a professional manner. As for the videos, I feel that having a visual to reflect upon is a very helpful thing and helped me to gain an understanding of the content much faster.

You can use this website whenever and wherever there is internet, and it works well on my smart

phone.

> I really think the site is very user-friendly and intuitive, and I could do it on my own time and study the materials at my own pace. Also, if I didn't understand something completely, I could always go back and look at it again.

However, learners also discussed their individual learning needs and made suggestions for the website to meet their own requirements. For example, a certain number of learners (25%) in the higher-level group thought the instruction was too easy and suggested incorporating more extensive and challenging materials.

> An area of improvement could be expanding the dialogues by making them longer and more detailed. Another idea is to include more optional exercises to further reinforce the material studied.

> I think the exercises are good; however, I think for my level, it could be more extensive and challenging.

Finally, learners raised several important issues about the ILP instruction in their reflective e-journals. First, all learners in both groups emphasized the need for the direct teaching of Chinese expressions of gratitude. For example,

> I think that it is rather important to learn how to express gratitude in any language. I suppose that in Chinese it is even more important as I have always thought of Chinese culture being more traditional then American culture.

> We've only been introduced to very basic expressions of thanks in class (xiexie), but I don't believe it's a topic we've delved deeply into. It's obviously a crucial skill and probably requires special attention, as its role in connecting speaker and listener is so key. I am glad that this website focuses on this.

In particular, the higher-level learners discussed this necessity based on their prior Chinese learning experiences. For example,

> I say xiexie ("thanks") for everything, and Chinese people think it's always too much, but if I don't say xiexie ("thanks"), then I feel rude. I really want to understand how to adequately express gratitude without sounding too ridiculous or making others uncomfortable.

> As a native English speaker, my habit is to say xiexie ("thanks") a lot, even among family and close friends, but when interacting with my Chinese friends, they expressed to me that they do not like it when I say xiexie ("thanks") too much, as it is a sign of not having a close relationship. Learning how to appropriately express Chinese in various situations can help learners of the language avoid these types of problems.

Second, learners suggested providing this online instruction for students at an early stage of their Chinese learning: "Having access to this material at an earlier stage would have helped me recognize the importance of the differences in thanking strategies employed by English and Chinese speakers" and "This material would be very helpful for first year Chinese students. As a first-year student, I was not aware of the complexity of thanking strategies involved in learning Chinese."

In addition, the higher-level learners not only discussed the possibility of integrating this online website

into the language curriculum in foreign language settings, but also helped to figure out a feasible way, that is, to fit the materials into a study abroad curriculum.

> Adapting this material into a curriculum, however, might prove to be difficult because a lot of this material necessitates discussions about culture that competes with class time that can be used for grammar and vocabulary and reading and writing. Fitting this material into credit hours earned during a study abroad program could be an alternative when the classroom can guide people living in China, which would target those students who could most benefit from understanding these social interactions.

DISCUSSION

This study developed a self-access website on Chinese expressions of gratitude and investigated the effects of the online instruction to further explore the effectiveness of using websites as teaching tools in ILP. This section discusses the findings and proposes implications regarding the instruction of pragmatics.

Effects of Web-Based Instruction

The analysis showed that all learners, regardless of their proficiency in Chinese, made significantly more target-like assessments of Chinese expressions of gratitude after the five-week instruction period, and their pragmatic awareness was also enhanced overall. In addition, learners reported in their reflective e-journals that they were more capable of evaluating the appropriateness of Chinese expressions of gratitude and more ready to apply what they had learned from the website to their everyday communication after using the website. All of these findings suggest that the web-based instruction was effective in promoting pragmatic awareness and metapragmatic assessment of learners. In other words, the explicit consciousness-raising approach (i.e., explicit instruction supplemented by PCR activities) adopted by this study seemed to have facilitated pragmatics learning of learners. This lends empirical support to Schmidt's noticing hypothesis (1993). Schmidt hypothesized that noticing is a necessary condition for the learning of pragmatics and further emphasized that global noticing of pragmatic features is not enough, but noticing of relevant linguistic forms and contextual factors is required. In the current study, explicit instruction and PCR exercises/activities delivered via the website directed attention of learners to different varieties of thanking strategies available in Chinese and made them conscious of how contextual factors constrain Chinese expressions of gratitude. As a result, learner pragmatic awareness of assessing Chinese expressions of gratitude was promoted overall. Nevertheless, we should be cautious in discussing the effectiveness of this web-based instruction due to the lack of a control group and to the small sample size.

The results correspond with prior studies that have examined the effects of explicit instruction and/or the PCR approach on pragmatic development of learners. For example, Narita (2012) integrated PCR activities into the instruction, found that students who participated in the PCR activities outperformed those who did not, in both their knowledge and production of Japanese hearsay evidential markers. Similarly, Tateyama (2009) instructed L2 Japanese learners with two different methods and compared the relative effectiveness. One approach provided learners with explicit instruction in Japanese requests, while the other combined explicit instruction with PCR activities. The results revealed positive effects for both methods, but no difference was observed between the two.

Previous instructional ILP studies situated in computer-mediated learning environments also yielded similar findings to this study. Cohen and Ishihara (2005) and Ishihara (2007) designed a web-based pragmatics curriculum that adopted an explicit pragmatics-focused consciousness-raising approach for learners of Japanese as a foreign language, finding that the curriculum helped promote pragmatic awareness of learners. Cohen and Sykes (2006) developed an instructional website that included eight

modules on a variety of speech acts in Spanish. Their small-scale trial studies reported overall effectiveness of using the website as a teaching tool in terms of heightened pragmatic awareness and increased target-like pragmatic behaviors by learners (Cohen, 2008).

Effects of Instruction across Levels

The five-week online instruction facilitated target-like assessment of the appropriateness of Chinese expressions of gratitude by promoting their noticing of realization strategies and relevant contextual factors, but the statistical analysis revealed no significant difference between the lower-level and higher-level groups in terms of the effects of instruction on learner assessment of learners. In other words, both groups seemed to have equally benefited from the instruction, and the effects did not vary across levels. The lack of varying effects of instruction in this study might be attributed to the following two reasons. First, this study divided participants into two groups—lower-level and higher-level—which is not a standard way of dividing learner language proficiency (i.e., novice, intermediate, and advanced). In addition, the difference between the mean of the higher-level group's CPT scores ($M = 63$) and that of the lower-level group's ($M = 23$) might not be adequate to make the effects of instruction significant in statistical analysis. Second, it might have something to do with the speech act under investigation in this study. Expressions of gratitude, involving a great number of formulaic expressions, are a relatively less challenging speech act compared to others (e.g., requests) in Chinese. Therefore, the proficiency level of learners might not interfere much in their learning of expressions of gratitude.

It should be noted, however, that the standard deviation for the lower-level group increased substantially from the pre-test ($SD = 7.1$) to the post-test ($SD = 11.3$), which suggests that gains for this group varied quite significantly after the online instruction. We may thus conclude that unlike higher-level learners, lower-level learners might still not have been able to reach automaticity when they processed the noticed information after only five weeks of online learning. In addition, the analysis of e-journals revealed differences in how the two groups perceived the online instruction. Unlike the lower-level participants, learners in the higher-level group not only asked for more challenging instructional materials on the website, but also discussed the importance of overt teaching of pragmatics and the possibility of integrating the web-based pragmatics instruction into study abroad curriculum. This difference might be explained by prior study abroad experiences of higher-level learners. Most of the participants in the higher-level group had previously studied abroad, which provided them with rich exposure to Chinese expressions of gratitude. The higher-level learners might therefore have been able to easily integrate newly learned strategies into their ILP systems, and thus could direct more attention to deeper understanding and perceptions of their pragmatics learning.

The majority of instructional ILP studies have focused their attention on examining the effects of instruction on learners at a single level of proficiency; that is, very few studies exploring the effects of instruction across levels have been conducted (Takahashi, 2010). When compared with the small number of studies available, the conclusions are not consistent. Rueda (2004) obtained results similar to this study. She provided pragmatics-focused instruction on the realization strategies of three speech acts for low-level and intermediate-level learners of English as foreign language. Her analysis reported on the overall effectiveness of the instruction on speech act performance of learners, but no differential effects of instruction on learners across levels. Codina-Espurz (2008), however, yielded quite different findings. In her study, two treatment groups that differed in their proficiency in English received the same type of explicit instruction on request mitigation devices. She found that only the high-proficiency learners benefited from the pedagogical intervention and thus concluded differential effects of the instruction on learners in the low-proficiency and high-proficiency groups, but because a pre-test was lacking in this study, the findings were rather tentative.

It proves difficult to interpret these inconsistent findings among the three studies due to many differences in the research methodology, such as differential measurements of target language proficiency, varying

lengths of the pedagogical intervention, and different instruments used to measure the effects of instruction. To further explore the possible influence of learner linguistic competence on their pragmatic development, there is a strong need to conduct more studies to investigate the effects of L2 proficiency on instructional effectiveness.

Pedagogical Implications

Participant feedback and reflections on the instructional materials provided useful insights into several issues in ILP instruction, such as the importance of pragmatics instruction, means of addressing different needs of learners across levels when teaching pragmatics, the prospects of using websites to teach pragmatics, and methods for integrating pragmatics instruction into curriculum. In the reflective e-journals, learners emphasized the necessity and importance of the instruction of pragmatics from their own perspectives. Previous studies (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003) have underscored the need to teach pragmatics for a variety of reasons, such as the insaliency of certain pragmatic features and the distinct differences in pragmatic performances between L1 speakers and learners, even those with advanced linguistic competence, but little of the discussion has captured the perspective of learners themselves. None of the participants in this study received systematic instruction on Chinese expressions of gratitude prior to taking part in this study, but they all deemed the instruction important, based on their own perceptions and their own learning experiences. For example, higher-level learners in the reflective e-journals expressed their strong desire to learn how to express gratitude appropriately in Chinese because their prior overuses of direct thanking expressions (e.g., xiexie, "thanks") had caused misunderstandings when they communicated with Chinese friends. These findings provide support for direct teaching of pragmatics in classroom practice.

The results showed that all learners, including lower-level participants, seemed to have achieved more target-like assessment of Chinese expressions of gratitude after the five-week instruction period. In addition, they reported their enhanced pragmatic awareness in the weekly reflective e-journals. These findings suggest that pragmatic features, and Chinese expressions of gratitude in particular, are teachable to low-proficiency learners, which corresponds with the results of Martínez-Flor (2008) and Tateyama, Kasper, Lara, Tay, & Thananart (1997). In their reflective journaling, learners also advocated for starting the instruction of pragmatics early. We may therefore conclude that pragmatics can be taught to learners at an early stage of their language learning.

Learners at different proficiency levels received the same type of instruction in Chinese pragmatics, and the effects of instruction seemed not to vary across levels. This suggests that it may be applicable to provide the same instructional materials for learners across levels in teaching practices. However, learners also expressed their specific learning needs in the reflective e-journals, so the instruction should be tailored to meet the individual needs of learners. For example, some higher-level learners reported their dissatisfaction with the difficulty level of the instructional materials and asked for more challenging materials to be incorporated. Accordingly, instructors can focus their teaching more on helping these higher-level learners establish mappings between realization strategies and relevant contextual factors, and may design more communicative exercises for them to practice or include more culture-related materials to encourage students to reflect deeply on the underlying politeness principles and cultural values.

Finally, all of the participants in the reflective e-journals expressed their positive views of the instructional materials, and discussed the usefulness of the online resources on the website and the benefits of having the freedom to study the materials at their own pace and on their own time. The results correspond with previous studies that have reported the effectiveness of websites in ILP instruction (e.g., Cohen, 2008; Cohen & Ishihara, 2005; Ishihara, 2007). In view of the limited time and resources in foreign language classrooms, we may conclude that websites hold considerable promise as a fine supplement or substitute for classroom instruction in terms of pragmatics teaching. In other words, web-

based instruction might be integrated as a supplementary part of a language course, or be used as a tool for student self-learning outside the classroom. Web-based learning outside the classroom can not only provide learners freedom to study pragmatics at their own pace, but also free up more class time to be used for other aspects of language learning.

Learners who had study abroad experiences proposed another alternative in addition to integrating this online instruction into language curriculum in foreign language settings: incorporating the online instruction into study abroad curriculum. According to them, study abroad students may best benefit from the instruction because they are immersed in rich pragmatic input and are motivated to learn by urgent communicative needs; thus they would be strongly motivated to apply the web-based instruction consciously as they observe how Chinese speakers express gratitude. In short, studying abroad provides ample and immediate opportunities for learners to apply their knowledge to their communicative practices. It corresponds with the position of Shively (2010), who proposed a model for pragmatics instruction in study abroad settings and argued for the need to take advantage of the various resources that technology can offer.

CONCLUSION

This study found that learner assessment of Chinese expressions of gratitude became more target-like after receiving the web-based instruction, and their pragmatic awareness was also promoted to some degree. These findings suggest that the explicit consciousness-raising approach adopted by the web-based instruction was effective in facilitating pragmatics learning of learners, and all learners benefited from it, regardless of their proficiency in Chinese.

We should, however, be cautious in interpreting the effectiveness of the instruction and proposing pedagogical implications because there are several limitations to this study. First, the sample size is small (each group in this study included only 18 participants). A larger sample size might be able to achieve more power in inferential statistics and thus provide more generalizable results. Second, a control group is lacking. Without a control group, it is difficult to attribute the gains completely to the effects of the instruction. Third, the reflective e-journal writing might also help promote pragmatic awareness of learners during the five-week instruction period, and thus might have an effect on the results, though the prompt questions in the e-journals were primarily used to help elicit learner opinions of the instructional materials and feedback on the website. In addition, the great variation was observed among learners in the higher-level group in the pre-test. The results show that the standard deviation for pre-test scores of higher-level participants was high in MAT assessment, suggesting that this was not a homogeneous group. To have a smaller standard deviation, we might break this group down into two groups based on the Chinese proficiency test scores.

Future studies can expand the investigation from expressions of gratitude to other pragmatic features in Chinese. Researchers can design and develop online materials that provide explicit instruction and PCR activities for students to study other speech acts in Chinese, such as making requests and giving compliments, and pilot these web-based materials to investigate whether they benefit the pragmatic development of students. If such web-based instruction proves equally effective in facilitating student learning, it is promising to combine all these online materials to build a large-scale pragmatics website in Chinese. Both learners and instructors can refer to, use, select, or modify the materials and exercises on the website whenever they need.

In addition, possible future research can expand the investigation from foreign language contexts to study abroad settings. This study provided web-based pragmatics instruction for learners who study Chinese as a foreign language. However, it remains unclear whether the beneficial effects of such instruction in foreign language settings can be transferred to learners who study Chinese as a second language.

APPENDIX A. Acceptability Scale

0   Extremely Poor/Not comprehensible

    Failure to respond to the task, or to respond with utterances that are extremely hard to comprehend

1   Very Poor/Not acceptable

    Comprehensible, but a violation of social norms, utterances that may potentially offend the hearer, often instances of sociopragmatic failure. Very poor completion of the task

2   Poor/Problematic

    Errors that might cause misunderstandings, but of a less serious nature. Often instances of pragmalinguistic failure

3   OK/Acceptable

    Appropriate utterances for the specified context, but may contain some small grammatical errors that do not interfere seriously with the understanding of native speakers

4   Good/Near-native

    Grammatically accurate and pragmatically appropriate utterances, but still sound a little awkward compared to native speakers, e.g., its length, choice of vocabulary, or register

5   Excellent/Native

    Clear and appropriate utterances, close to native responses in content, syntax and lexicon, etc.

APPENDIX B. Instructional Units on the Website

The website includes a total of 10 units (including the two review sessions). A brief introduction to these units is presented below.

Unit 1: Introduction

This unit states the primary goal of this online instruction and gives a brief introduction to expressions of gratitude and why it is necessary to teach Chinese expressions of gratitude to L2 learners.

Unit 2: Direct thanking strategies

This unit explicitly teaches participants the repertoire of direct thanking strategies in Chinese, and provides them with exercises and activities to practice.

Units 3–5: Indirect thanking strategies

The three units explicitly teach seven types of indirect thanking strategies that are commonly used in Chinese, and provide associated exercises and activities for participants.

Unit 6 and Mid-Review—Combinations of thanking strategies

The two units review all of the thanking strategies that have been taught in previous units and provide participants with associated exercises and activities.

Units 7–8: Politeness in Chinese

The two units introduce politeness principles in Chinese as well as the explicit rules regarding how to choose and vary thanking strategies in response to contextual factors.

Final Review

This unit reviews the impacts of contextual factors on how to express gratitude in Chinese and provides exercises and activities for participants to practice.

NOTES

1. Participants were divided into the two groups mainly based on their CPT scores and prior Chinese learning experiences such as time spent studying abroad. It is hard to strictly equalize the scores on the CPT with the ACTFL proficiency levels. However, it might be possible to make a rough comparison: the overall proficiency of the lower-level group (CPT score range is between 13 and 30 points) is similar to the Novice level according to the ACTFL guidelines, while that of the higher-level group (CPT score range is between 45 and 84 points) is similar to the Intermediate level.

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