On the Teaching and Learning of L₂ Sociolinguistic Competence in Classroom Settings

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Bio Data

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Abstract

It is well-recognized that in acquiring a new language, second language (L₂) learners, in addition to learning structural, functional, and discoursal rules, have to internalize sociolinguistic rules that can guide them in the choice of appropriate forms. Research has amply shown that even advanced learners' communicative behavior, due to a lack of sociolinguistic competence, may often deviate from L₂ conventions so as to cause many cross-cultural misunderstandings. The study reported in this paper was an investigation of classroom practice and its effects on the learner's development of sociolinguistic competence. The purpose is to examine and discuss, based on the data obtained from classroom observation, what foreign language teachers may need to pay close attention to when teaching a foreign language.

Key Words: sociolinguistic competence, communicative competence, classroom observation, communicative language teaching

Introduction

The second language (L₂) teaching profession has long been involved in a search for methods that would not only be generalizable across widely varying audiences, but also could successfully be used to teach a foreign language to students in the classroom. To meet the demands of the diversity of language learners in multiple

worldwide contexts, researchers and practitioners have gradually learned from a long search to realize that "there never was and probably never will be a method" (Nunan, 1991, p. 228) for all learners, and thus come up with a cautiously eclectic, integrated approach aiming to help teachers make enlightened choices of classroom tasks and activities that are solidly grounded in the valuable findings from research on L_2 learning and teaching (Brown, 2001).

Nowadays Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has become a well-recognized approach in this profession. The CLT approach centers on the widely-discussed notion of communicative competence, and it has been well recognized nowadays that foreign language learners cannot really learn the target language well without paying close attention to this aspect of competence. Take college students in Taiwan for example. They have often been criticized that their communicative competence in English is substantially limited, for having learned English for at least 6 years (3 years at junior and 3 years at senior high school) before attending college, the majority of these EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners still show many difficulties employing this language to freely express themselves in everyday situations or even conduct a simple conversation with native English speakers. It has been suggested that the poor performance is closely related to the fact that the English testing practice most Taiwanese junior and senior high school students are faced with is firmly rooted in discrete, routinized skill goals heavily based on the outdated Grammar Translation Method and/or Audiolingual Method, rather than in communicative objectives based on CLT. To complicate matters, the high school curriculum, unfortunately, is intimately linked to such practice because the school's ratings and the teacher's reputation lie mostly in students' performance on entrance-related examinations for entering good senior high schools and colleges (Yu,

2003). Gladly, efforts have been made to address this problem in college English teaching programs, most of which are now purported to be anchored in the principles of the CLT approach. The study reported in the present paper was an investigation of such classroom practice and its effects on the learner's development of L_2 sociolinguistic competence. The purpose is to examine and discuss, based on the data obtained from classroom observation, what foreign language teachers may need to pay close attention to when teaching this indispensable competence.

Background

In 1972, Hymes, in reaction to the Chomskyan dichotomy of *competence* (i.e., knowledge of a language) and *performance* (i.e., actual use of a language), pointed out forcefully the notion of communicative competence, arguing that "there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless" (p. 278). Ever since, L_2 teaching has gradually shifted its focus from linguistic forms to actual language use, and this kind of competence has been claimed to represent "a concept that attracts researchers and curriculum developers" and provide "a sturdy framework for integrating linguistic theory, research, and teaching practice" (Savignon, 1991, p. 263).

Accordingly, a major change over the past three decades in L_2 instruction can be observed in the shift from an explicit emphasis on language itself, i.e., grammar, vocabulary, and phonology, etc., to an enthusiastic focus on the expression and comprehension of meaning through language use. Today the term CLT is considered representing a currently well-recognized approach that is generally accepted as a norm in L_2 learning and teaching. As Brown (2001, p. 46) nicely and humorously put it, CLT, along with a number of concepts closely allied to it such as "learner-centered,"

"whole language based," "content-centered," and "cooperative," has become such a bandwagon term that without the endorsement of it "teachers cannot be decent human beings and textbooks cannot sell." Compared to approaches that are primarily or even exclusively form-focused and metalinguistic in orientation, the new approach, designed to engage learners in the pragmatic, functional, authentic use of the target language for meaningful purposes, indeed does a better job of leading to higher levels of fluency and communicative confidence in the L_2 (Lightbown & Spada, 1990).

According to Canale and Swain's (1980) and later Canale's (1983) classic definition, communicative competence consists of four indispensable components: grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competences. Simply put, grammatical competence deals with sentence-level rules only, discourse competence with rules that govern the relationship among sentences to form a meaning whole, sociolinguistic competence with rules of speaking that depend on pragmatic, sociocultural elements, and strategic competence with the way the speaker manipulates language to fulfill communicative goals. If the foreign language course aims to enable learners to reach a level of communicative competence, all four components are of great importance.

The present paper focuses on sociolinguistic competence because it seems to be the most neglected aspect among the four categories of communicative competence in foreign language curriculum. The 'de-emphasized' status of this competence in educational practice has to do with the fact that it is closely related to the sociocultural part of acquiring a second language. This type of competence in effect "requires an understanding of the social context in which language is used: the roles of the participants, the information they share, and the function of the interaction. Only in a

full context of this kind can judgments be made on the appropriateness of a particular utterance" (Savignon, 1983, p. 37). However, although the teaching of socio-cultural understanding seems so critical for appropriate use of language that no one would deny the need for and importance of having this component integrated with required L_2 study, we can easily observe a number of reasons why many language courses today yet do not include socio-cultural materials. For example, Omaggio (2001) summarizes three main reasons why such understanding is often not treated both as a topic in its own right and as an indispensable aspect of language teaching: a) Language teachers often think that they do not have time for sociocultural teaching in an already time-limited curriculum. Sometimes teachers even think that after students master the basic skills, they will naturally be exposed to sociocultural materials. b) Teachers may not have enough confidence in believing that they can teach sociocultural aspect of foreign language learning well. c) The teaching of sociocultural competence often involves dealing with student attitudes; it thus is a sort of hazy, threatening, and unquantifiable area that teachers usually find very challenging when trying to guide their students to understand and appreciate the logic and meaning of the target culture. Consequently, it appears to be no surprise that sociolinguistic competence is often neglected in educational practice.

Notwithstanding the seemingly adverse status of this competence, it is now an undeniable truth that when acquiring a new language, L_2 learners, in addition to learning structural, discoursal, and strategic rules to meet the needs of linguistic accuracy and fluency, have to internalize sociolinguistic rules that can assist them in the choice of appropriate forms. Perhaps the fascination that the development of sociolinguistic competence holds for L_2 researchers originates from the serious trouble to which the lack of this awareness may lead for learners. Often, mastery of

linguistic forms combined with sociolinguistic confusion can make learners seem so improper as to cause misunderstandings or even offense when they can understand only the literal meaning of the words but do not know the sociolinguistic rules of use for interpreting those words. No wonder even advanced learners' communicative behavior would often deviate from L_2 conventions so as to cause many cross-cultural misunderstandings. It therefore goes without saying that the teaching of sociolinguistic competence can never be treated lightly if foreign language teachers intend to assist learners not only in employing grammatically correct forms but also in knowing when to use these forms and under what circumstances.

Specifically, sociolinguistic competence can be generally divided into two areas. One is appropriateness of form, that is, pragmalinguistics, which signals "the particular resources that a given language provides for conveying particular illocutions" (Leech, 1983, p. 11); the other is appropriateness of meaning, that is, sociopragmatics, which defines the ways in which pragmatic performance is subject to specific sociocultural conventions and values (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993). For nonnative speakers, the misunderstandings they are often faced with in the cross-cultural realization of communicative acts usually arise from their failure in appropriate use of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence.

Given that the learning of sociolinguistic competence is highly related to the appropriateness of behavior conditioned by the target cultural conventions, Chinese EFL learners are worth studying because it has been suggested that their culture of learning may put some serious constraints on the adoption of the CLT approach in Chinese language classrooms (Hu, 2002). Chinese culture of learning refers to the fact that much behavior in the language classroom "is set within taken-for-granted

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frameworks of expectations, attitudes, values and beliefs about what constitutes good learning, about how to teach or learn, whether and how to ask questions, what textbooks are for, and how language teaching relates to broader issues of the nature and purpose of education" (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996a, p. 169). Influences on language teaching from such a culture lay special emphasis on "memorization" and "understanding and analytical ability" (Connell, 1987, p. 203) in classrooms, where the teacher is usually respected as the source of knowledge, and much time is spent on explication of the structure of language and the usage of words (Gao, 2005). It thus has been argued that CLT and the Chinese culture of learning are in conflict in several important respects (Hu, 2002), and students may thus perceive the teaching method employed by their instructors as unsuitable to their needs (Grabe & Mahon, 1981; Yu, 1984; Burnaby & Sun, 1989; Li, 1999; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996b; Wan, 1997). It then would be of great interest to observe teachers/students interaction in CLT-based classrooms. No empirical studies thus far have specifically examined, through classroom observation, how sociolinguistic competence is taught in the L_2 programs that are based on the CLT approach *for* Chinese EFL learners in Taiwan. This study, hence, aims to extend the scope of EFL research by investigating the teaching of sociolinguistic competence for Chinese EFL learners in Taiwan, who have been often considered to have a rather poor performance in this area of competence, and the findings may contribute to a better understanding of how EFL learners can be assisted in improving their sociolinguistic competence.

Classroom Observation

Research Questions

Given the great importance of sociolinguistic competence argued above, the investigator undertook a detailed examination of the amount and type of

sociolinguistic competence provided in four college English classes in Taiwan. The specific questions asked during the classroom observation period were (a) how different foreign language teachers interpreted the component of sociolinguistic competence in terms of their classroom practice, and (b) whether classroom practices had any effect on learners' development of sociolinguistic competence.

Participants

The participants who took part in this study were 112 first-year college students from four intermediate-level, compulsory English classes studying in Taiwan. These students were required to take the EFL course two hours a week. The classes were selected through a student questionnaire asking about their background information and a teacher questionnaire focusing on communicative orientation of L_2 classroom interaction. There were two main reasons why these classes were chosen. First of all, the instructors were all strongly purported to represent CLT orientation to instruction; it thus seemed easy for the observer to find them paying attention to this aspect of communicative competence in teaching. Second, the students in these four classes were mostly similar in age, parental education, urban or suburban residence, and representation of men and women. So the chance of attributing detected differences to variables other than those being studied could be greatly reduced. Nevertheless, because the participants were not randomly selected, no claim is here made that the classes chosen constituted a representative sample of all college English classes in Taiwan.

Instruments

All the students taking part in the experiment were given a pre-experiment and post-experiment, teacher-designed sociolinguistic test. This test was a 25-item

multiple-choice test devised to measure degrees of politeness, formality, appropriateness, and register variation in the spoken mode. For each item, a sociocultural context was provided, and the participants needed to choose from a list of four alternatives the most appropriate way to respond to that particular situation. The scoring for this test was based on native-speaker responses to the items. A sample question is as follows:

> You are having dinner with your friend's family. The food that your friend's mother has prepared is delicious, and you want some more. You've decided to say something in order to get some more. Which of the following, do you think, is the most appropriate?
> "You are a great cook."
> "Please give me more food."
> "This food sure is delicious."
> "Could I have some more?"

Furthermore, to determine how sociolinguistic competence was taught in different classrooms and to compare how different these language classrooms were, the Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching (COLT) scheme (Allen, Fröhlich, & Spada, 1984) was employed because it has been one of the most sophisticated observation schemes that have been developed so far (Nunan, 1992) and, more importantly, because the investigator could match the scheme to the purpose of the present research. To best answer the research questions, a modified version of this scheme was utilized in this study to document the observed classroom interactions and behaviors in terms of the communicative orientation and degree of L_2 sociolinguistic instruction. Specifically, whether a cluster of predetermined features and categories on the scheme can be observed is a key to judging the degree of communicative orientation and sociolinguistic instruction of a given class.

The COLT scheme consists of two parts. Part A, usually referred to as the macrolevel analysis, is designed to conduct a real-time coding that describes classroom activities at five major levels. The first, *activity type*, such as drill or role play, etc., is employed to help the observer identify the kinds of tasks and exercises that students need to do in classroom. Compared to the other levels, it not only is qualitative as opposed to quantitative in nature, but is the only open-ended category, within the context of which, the information of classroom processes realized by the other levels are provided. The second level, *participant organization*, such as teacher-centered activities like whole-class interaction or student-centered activities like group work, records the amount of time spent on different types of class interaction. The third level, *content*, can be employed to determine whether an observed class is primarily code-based or meaning-based in its orientation. Code-based instruction is realized through a subcategory, explicit focus on language (form, function, discourse, and sociolinguistic rules), whereas meaning-based orientation is realized through the subcategory of 'other topics.' The fourth level, *student modality*, i.e., listening, speaking, reading, or writing, measures how much time students spend practicing the four skills. The last level, *materials*, focuses on information regarding type, length, and source of texts being used. In a word, the Part A analysis permitted a description of classroom practices for different focuses of communicative competence within activities. For example, if an activity was described as sociolinguistics-focused, the features of instruction were specified.

In addition, a modified section of Part B, generally referred to as microlevel analysis, was used to conduct a post hoc analysis of classroom language at the level of verbal interaction. To code both teacher and student talk during classroom activities, the scheme focused on the extent to which: a) the target language is used (use of target

language), b) the information exchanged or requested is unpredictable (information gap), c) speakers engage in extended discourse (sustained speech), d) speakers pay attention to a correction of the linguistic form of an utterance (reaction to message or code), e) speakers incorporate preceding utterances (incorporation of preceding utterances), f) speakers spontaneously initiate talk (discourse initiation), and g) classroom talk is unrestricted use of language such as free conversation or oral reports (relative restriction of linguistic form) - the last two of which were exclusively used for coding student talk (Allen, Fröhlich, and Spada, 1984, pp. 240-243). In brief, Part B analysis permitted an investigation of the verbal interaction of teacher and student talk to probe how communicative competence was taught and learned in class (see Allen, Fröhlich, & Spada, 1984; Fröhlich, Spada, & Allen, 1985; Spada, 1984, 1987, 1990 for details regarding the coding procedures for the COLT and the rationale and definition for the inclusion of different categories of Parts A and B).

Procedures

Each of the four classes was observed for two hours every week, over a four-month period in 2005 (approximately 32 hours per class). All classes were audio- and videotaped. As suggested above, following Fröhlich, Spada, and Allen's (1985) classic study, all the coding in Part A was done real time initially during the observation period and Part B was done post hoc after the observation, and then both types of coding were further refined based on the cassette and videotape recording of the observed classes.

Reliability of Coding

The coding for each observed class was carried out independently. The coders were required to check their entries for Part A immediately after each observation session

and their entries for Part B after each minute of coding. In addition, in order to achieve interrater reliability, 20% of the data for Part A and Part B was randomly selected to be independently coded by a second rater (Cohen, 1960). This second rater relied on tape-recorded data to do the coding. A corrected-for-chance level of kappa of at least .85 was considered acceptable in the present study. The interrater agreement coefficients were 87% and 91% for the Part A and the Part B data, respectively.

Data Analysis

As aforementioned, a revised version of the COLT scheme was adopted in the present study. Where the various features in Part A were concerned, only the subcategory 'explicit focus on language' in the *content* parameter was examined closely in the present study because the focal point of this paper was on sociolinguistic instruction—an often-neglected subcomponent of communicative competence, while the COLT was originally designed to measure the overall degree of communicative orientation. Other features in Part A served as an ancillary tool to help illustrate class differences when differences in sociolinguistic instruction were observed and discussed. This way, it may be likely for the researcher to present a fuller picture of how the observed classes were instructed in this aspect of competence.

To investigate whether there were differences in the kinds of sociolinguistic instruction that L_2 learners were receiving, the observation data from the 'explicit focus on language' category were analyzed using descriptive statistics to present the percentage of the amount of time each class spent on developing learners' sociolinguistic competence. The investigator would then further compare the quantitative data in an analysis of variance (ANOVA) to see whether there were any significant differences in instruction among the four observed classes. For the

microlevel analysis of Part B data, the analysis aimed to provide some descriptive information to see whether there were differences in classroom language geared toward sociolinguistic competence among the observed classes.

To determine whether the observed differences in instruction might contribute to variation in learners' learning outcomes, an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted to compare the post-test means among the four classes under investigation. The rationale for employing ANCOVA was that we could statistically control any initial differences in the participants' pre-test scores that might have confounded differences in the post-test performance among the groups. The mean scores of each post-test proficiency test were examined separately to reveal whether learners in one class improved more than their counterparts in the others (Spada, 1987).

Results and Discussion

The first question asked during the classroom observation period was whether different language teachers would differ in their teaching of sociolinguistic competence. While the overall observation based on the analyses of the various features in Part A showed that all four classes, as purported, were indeed communicative in their approach most of the time, these four classes could be roughly divided into two types. They can be seen as respectively representative of what Johnson (1982) has referred to as the 'separationist' and the 'unificationist' positions in interpreting communicative language teaching. The instructors in classes A and B appeared to be a 'pro-separationist,' for they tended to focus mainly on functional practice, with little explicit teaching in the formal features of language. In contrast, the instructors in classes C and D seemed to be a 'pro-unificationist' because they, although still anchoring their teaching primarily in a CLT approach, believed in the

efficacy of form-based instruction, especially in an EFL environment, and thus often added some flavor of formal features in their classes. The difference in the ways in which these two groups of instructors interpret CLT could serve as a contrast in the present study to explore whether there were instructional differences in teaching sociolinguistic competence between them and whether these differences would contribute to variation in learners' performance.

A qualitative analysis based on the first category - *activity type* - in Part A of the COLT scheme revealed that teaching differences in sociolinguistic instruction seemed to exist between these two types of classes. As noted above, the purpose of this analysis was to examine whether there were any differences in the kinds of classroom activities and in the way in which these activities were carried out when sociolinguistic instruction was observed. The results indicated that in 'pro-separationist' classes A and B, sociolinguistic instruction was observed in authentic activities, which referred to classroom tasks simulating real-life communicative situations such as listening to English radio programs, whereas for 'pro-unificationist' classes C and D, sociolinguistic instruction was found in activities which reflected traditional pedagogic practices such as transformation drills or multiple-slot substitution drills.

While the observed instructors were found to interpret CLT differently and engage in different types of activities in which sociolinguistic instruction was observed, they all devoted very little time to activities oriented to a better understanding of sociolinguistic competence. The percentage of the total observed class time on sociolinguistic instruction was 4%, 3%, 5%, and 2% for classes A, B, C, and D, respectively. The ANOVA finding indicated that this difference was not significant (*F*

= .39, *p* < .7575, ns). We thus know that these language teachers did not differ significantly in their instruction of sociolinguistic competence.

In addition, the analysis of classroom language based on part B indicated that the very few sociolinguistics-focused behaviors of the observed teachers were always reactions to students' performance or to learner requests for commenting on their language use. In other words, teachers never specifically took the initiative in presenting sociolinguistic rules to help their students learn how to use the target language appropriately. Therefore, the sociolinguistic information exchanged or requested in classroom was basically predictable, and teachers only paid attention to the correction of learners' incorrect use of sociolinguistic forms, rather than creating opportunities for their students to incorporate preceding utterances or engage in extended discourse for a better sociolinguistic understanding.

Accordingly, the answer to the first research question appears to be that while the observed instructors differed in the classroom activities in which sociolinguistic instruction was observed, they did not differ in the class time spent on teaching sociolinguistic competence and in the classroom language used to improve this competence.

Furthermore, in order to investigate the second question, i.e., whether classroom practices had any effects on learners' development of sociolinguistic competence, the test scores from the post-treatment multiple-choice sociolinguistic tests were compared through ANCOVA and found not significantly different between one another (*F* = .33, *p* = .8036, ns). Given that very little time had been spent in helping learners develop sociolinguistic competence, this result could actually be expected.

The finding of the present study clearly showed that very little attention had been paid to the teaching of sociolinguistic competence in the four classes observed; it thus came as no surprise that students' competence in this category of communicative competence did not show any differences. In fact, students in the four classes all performed very poorly on the sociolinguistic pre- and post-test and separate t-test analyses of pre- and post-test scores indicated that students in each class did not improve significantly over the 4-month session (t = -.63, .11, -.87, -.74, ns for classes A, B, C, and D, respectively). Because, as mentioned earlier, sociolinguistic competence is closely related to the sociocultural side of language learning, the current finding in fact lends support to Omaggio's (2001) argument that the teaching of culture, even though having been advocated for many years by foreign language experts, remains insubstantial and sporadic in most L_2 classrooms, and, therefore, is one of the most often neglected aspects in foreign language curriculum.

It is important to note here that the present study, which was based on classroom observation to collect data, is in essence a post hoc description of some particular classroom events and outcomes. It, therefore, can only be taken as suggestive of directions for future studies. In addition, this kind of data is generally considered limited, and we cannot simply assume that the instructional method is the only variable that is related to the observed outcome (Lightbown & Spada, 1990). Nevertheless, what is observed in class may lead us to further research into the question of the specific effects of communicative language teaching on sociolinguistic competence.

Given the limited nature of the present study, how can we account for the observed result? It is likely that the inherent characteristics of sociolinguistic

competence may hold the key. As suggested above, the teaching of sociocultural rules is a very challenging task for L_2 teachers. As today no one would overlook the importance of social, cultural, and pragmatic elements in communication when learning a foreign language, we can see that CLT has become a well-recognized approach in foreign language teaching. Hence, it is so patently obvious that foreign language classroom practices in different parts of the world are often claimed to be oriented toward such competence. However, considerable debate exists as regards the extent to which it is feasible to instruct sociolinguistic competence. On the one hand, some do not seem to show much confidence in the feasibility of teaching, thus contending that supposing the classroom environment is appropriately structured and well-organized, L_2 learners will develop this kind of competence naturally along the course of their learning. In addition, following this line of argument, it has often been suggested that the sociocultural aspect of linguistic competence will be picked up unconsciously in the process of acquiring more readily instructable features such as grammatical rules, pronunciation, and vocabulary (Holmes & Brown, 1987).

On the other hand, others have contended that the learner should be made aware not only of what native speakers use to express themselves (i.e., linguistic forms), but also of how they can do it properly (i.e., language use). For example, Edmondson *et al*. (1984) place special emphasis on the importance of cognitive learning, which is the acquisition "of knowledge about communicative norms, values and presuppositions of one's own and the target culture" (p. 124). Whereas, to date, there have been few studies focusing on the efficacy of teaching sociolinguistic competence, the existing research indeed appears to lend support to the view that formal instruction of the sociocultural rules of language use can help L_2 learners communicate more appropriately and effectively with native speakers of the target language (e.g.,

Billmyer, 1990; Holmes & Brown, 1987; House, 1996; Kasper, 1997; Rose & Kasper, 2001).

Based on the result of the present study that poor sociolinguistic performance is likely to relate to the lack of teaching in class, this may be taken as suggestive of directions for future instruction in communicative language programs. Given that knowledge of the target sociocultural conventions governing linguistic behavior and underlying surface forms seems central to the acquisition of sociolinguistic awareness in L_2 (Sifianou, 1992), the foreign language teacher, through a systematic teaching of sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge, can help learners express themselves more appropriately and prevent them from unintentionally causing offense or misunderstandings. In contrast, "a laissez-faire, or osmotic approach, in which the teacher expects students to simply 'pick up' or absorb relevant knowledge without explicit teaching, risks disempowering learners, depriving them of choice and sophistication in their use of English" (Holmes & Brown, 1987, p. 543). In addition, we need to recognize that teaching sociolinguistic competence is by no means a straightforward and easy task. One obvious reason is that teaching such competence requires much sensitivity because whereas learners "are fairly amenable to corrections which they regard as linguistic, they are justifiably sensitive about having their social . . . judgment called into question" (Thomas, 1983, p. 104).

However, it is possible that if teachers are too prescriptive in terms of what constitutes appropriate behavior, learners may lose the chance of finding ways of employing L_2 that they personally find comfortable (Holmes & Brown, 1987). This issue is of great importance because it relates to L_2 learners' motivation. A great number of studies and experiments (see, e.g., Dörnyei, 1998) have amply shown that motivation is an indispensable key to success in any human learning task. No doubt

certain target language features may seem offensive, incomprehensible or too foreign to learners; thus, if they are not allowed to decide not to adopt these L_2 features precisely, they may not be motivated enough to learn the L_2 well. In other words, to enhance learners' motivation level, they certainly need to be given the right to violate certain target culture norms, if the violation is marked. This way they may find themselves motivated to learn the L_2 well. The speech act of complimenting is a case in point. We can often hear that an American would compliment on someone's appearance by saying '*what a gorgeous dress you have on today!*,' but a Chinese may never do that because while compliments are frequently given to show the speaker's friendliness or to start a conversation in American culture, it is not in Chinese (Yu, 1999). Therefore, forcing Chinese learners of English to act exactly like Americans to compliment a lot may backfire.

After all, cultural norms become psychologized as aspects of personality, so it would seem unreasonable to expect learners to totally change their personalities. Accordingly, L_2 teachers need to be aware of the degree to which learners are learning the target language for instrumental purposes, i.e., to function effectively in another culture and to further a career goal, but perhaps not to 'pass' as a native, or for integrative purposes, i.e., "to integrate themselves into the culture of the second language group and become involved in social interchange in that group" (Brown, 2000, p. 162). L_2 teachers can thus be aware of how or why their students are motivated in L_2 acquisition process. The issue of the degree of L_2 teachers' awareness of their students' motivations may be of particular importance for Chinese learners of English because as stated earlier, research has suggested that Chinese culture of learning may lead these learners to perceive the CLT approach as unsuitable to their needs (e.g., Burnaby & Sun, 1989; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996b; Grabe & Mahon, 1981; Hu,

2002). If some learners indeed feel this way, it does not come as a big surprise to find them low-motivated.

The above discussion clearly shows that L_2 instruction may be further complicated by the fact that language and culture are intricately interrelated with each other. It goes without saying that L_2 teachers need to increase learners' sociolinguistic awareness involved in cultural norms in order to assist them in improving their L_2 communicative performance. Moreover, as cultural conventions are so deeply ingrained in every individual that he or she cannot really escape his or her own culture, L_2 teachers cannot expect learners to forego their cultural identity and totally conform to the target culture norms. It seems that maybe the optimal goal of L_2 instruction is to help learners become aware of, rather than reduce, cultural differences. That is, learners should be provided with adequate knowledge that will facilitate their understanding of these differences. It is hoped that they may thus become more flexible toward and tolerant of cross-cultural variations, and even when they decide not to conform to other cultural norms, they will at least be able to identify the sources of possible misunderstandings (Sifianou, 1992). As a result, L_2 learners "will be enabled to avoid appearing impolite, hypocritical, or ironical, and also to make less biased judgments of others" (p. 208). Learners' chances of experiencing cross-cultural miscommunication can thus be greatly reduced.

Conclusions

The present study was designed to observe Chinese EFL classroom behaviors and learning outcomes regarding the development of sociolinguistic competence. The purpose was to find out how different foreign language teachers interpreted the component of sociolinguistic competence in terms of their classroom practices, and whether these practices had any effect on learners' development of this competence.

The results suggest that while the observed instructors differed in their interpretation of communicative competence, they devoted very little time to activities oriented to sociolinguistic competence and that classroom practices did not seem to have much effect on learners' sociolinguistic performance. One possible direction for future studies may focus on the classes that are instructed in sociolinguistic competence and look into the instructional effects. This line of study may thus be conducive to a better understanding of instructional influences on L_2 learners' sociolinguistic acquisition.

Specifically, the findings of the present study have practical educational implications in L_2 learning and teaching. On the one hand, L_2 learners may need to understand pragmatic aspects of the target culture better in order not only to speak grammatically but also to interpret appropriately what they hear and to interact effectively with members of the target culture. On the other, L_2 teachers may need to incorporate many cross-cultural pragmatic analyses in their teaching in order to address learners' possible communicative problems (Canale & Swain, 1980). In other words, through paying conscious attention to the relevant sociocultural factors in a given context, L_2 teachers can better help learners avoid lapsing unconsciously into the norms of their native language and thus causing unintended offense.

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