Chinese learners' cognitive processes in writing email requests to faculty

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A B S T R A C T

For the past decades, cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics have focused on native and non-native speech act descriptions, and only a small number of studies have investigated the cognitive processes involved in speech act productions. To bridge the gap, the present study examined the cognitive processes of L2 learners engaged in an email task involving two requests to faculty. Concurrent and retrospective verbal reports were collected from 15 pairs of intermediate-level Chinese EFL learners and were analyzed in terms of *intention, cognition, planning* and *evaluation*. The analysis identified that when responding to the email task, the learners adopted various politeness strategies to express their requestive intentions, and focused their attention on lexical, grammatical and situational features of the task. In addition, the learners planned their emails systematically in the order of Greeting, Message and Closing, and evaluated their performances in terms of degree of politeness and the persuasiveness of their reasons. This study concludes with suggestions for future research and pedagogy.

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1. Introduction

For the past decades, interlanguage pragmatics (henceforth ILP) research has primarily focused on native/nonnative productions of a particular pragmatic feature in a given social context. These studies have generated considerable contributions to our understanding of ILP, but it has become necessary for ILP researchers to "go beyond the common practice of analyzing L2 speakers' competence solely on the basis of performance data" (Kormos, 1998, p. 354) and to investigate L2 speakers' cognitive processes. Such research will provide insights into the current state of their pragmatic knowledge (Woodfield, 2010) and the reasoning behind their productions (Gass & Mackey, 2000). To date, however, only a handful of ILP studies have examined what learners are thinking during and/or after performing a given pragmatic task (e.g., Cohen & Olshtain, 1993; Félix-Brasdefer, 2008; Hassall, 2008; Ren, 2014; Robinson, 1992; Woodfield, 2010, 2012).

To address this gap, this study examined 30 intermediate-level Chinese EFL learners' cognitive processes when engaging in an email task to university professors. Email pragmatics has received increasing attention in ILP research for the past 15 years, with a particular focus on requests to faculty (Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996). When drafting such email, learners need to employ status-congruent strategies and properly address the hierarchical student–professor relationship in order for their requests to be successfully granted. However, the linguistic and stylistic rules for institutional email have not yet been clearly

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defined, and that instruction on email pragmatics has seldom been incorporated in a language curriculum (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007). When writing to senior academics, L2 learners are left to their own devices, so probing the cognitive processes would provide an understanding of their current email competence and form the basis for instructional design. This study collected Chinese learners' paired verbal reports and analyzed them in terms of *intention, cognition, planning* and *evaluation* (Ericsson & Simon, 1993) in an attempt to contribute to the existing verbal report studies in ILP research and to widen the scope of this line of investigation.

2. Literature review

2.1. Verbal report in SLA research

Since the 1980s, there has been a large increase in psychology, education and cognitive science in the use of verbal reports, or "oral records of thoughts" (Kasper, 1998, p. 358), as a source of data to understand subjects' cognitive processes as they perform a given task. In their pioneering works, Ericsson and Simon (1980, 1993) classified verbal reports as either concurrent or retrospective on the basis of timing of verbalization. To collect concurrent verbal reports (henceforth CVRs), subjects are asked to speak aloud their thoughts while they are conducting a given task. However, they are advised not to "describe or justify what they are doing" (Ericsson & Simon, 1993, p. xiii). On the other hand, retrospective verbal reports (henceforth RVRs) are collected immediately after the completion of a task by asking subjects to comment, justify or explain what they have just done. Ericsson and Simon (1993) argue that "whenever possible, concurrent verbal reports should be collected, so that processing and verbal report would coincide in time" (p. xiii), but they also recognize the importance of using RVRs for triangulation.

In SLA research, the use of verbal reports in interaction with L2 production data is not without debate, though. For instance, Selinker (1972) contended that only the production data should be employed to conduct research and formulate theories, whereas Gass and Mackey (2000) maintained that "understanding the source of second language production is problematic because often there are multiple explanations for production phenomena that can only be assessed by exploring the process phenomena" (p. 26). Furthermore, the validity of verbal reports has been challenged with respect to *veridicality* and *reactivity*. The former refers to "whether the information in verbal reports accurately represents the thought process it is designed to capture", while the latter refers to "whether the act of thinking aloud alters the end state of the cognitive process" (Bowles & Leow, 2005, p. 417). Despite the controversies, verbal reports have been extensively used in various fields in SLA research, including reading and writing, comparison between L1 and L2 strategies, L2 test-taking strategies, discourse, oral interaction research, attention and awareness studies, and so forth (cf. Camps, 2003; Egi, 2004, 2008; Leow & Morgan-Short, 2004).

2.2. Verbal report in ILP research

Robinson (1992) conducted a pioneering probe into learners' cognitive processes in ILP research. In that study, Robinson worked with 12 Japanese learners of English and adopted a written discourse completion task (henceforth WDCT) in combination with CVRs and RVRs. The learners' verbalizations yielded nine categories of data, including attended information, utterance planning, evaluation of an alternative, pragmatic difficulty, linguistic difficulty, knowledge about American English refusals, sources of knowledge, methodological difficulty and language of thoughts.

Four studies that followed Robinson combined open roleplays with retrospective interviews to explore L2 learners' cognitive processes in speech act productions, as shown in Cohen and Olshtain (1993), Félix-Brasdefer (2008), Hassall (2008) and Woodfield (2012). In Cohen and Olshtain's study, 15 advanced Hebrew learners of English were asked to roleplay with a native speaker of English in two apology, two complaint and two request situations. Their RVRs indicated that the learners tended to plan a general direction instead of specific expressions which they would probably use during the roleplays, that they often thought in two or three languages when planning and executing speech act utterances, that they resorted to a variety of strategies to search, retrieve and select language forms, and that their cognitive processes exhibited three distinct production styles—metacognizers, avoiders and pragmatists.

Félix-Brasdefer (2008) investigated the cognitive processes and perceptions of refusals reported by 20 EFL learners of Spanish with respect to cognition, language of thought and insistence in the act of declining an invitation. The learners were found to focus their attention on improvising a reason to refuse politely, offering an alternative to smooth the conversation, and using the monitor to ensure correct grammar and vocabulary. In addition, most learners strategically consulted the target language to plan their utterances. The learners also reported that they did not have sufficient pragmalinguistic resources to insist after being declined, although they were aware of the need to do so in the target language culture.

Hassall (2008) conducted retrospective interviews with 19 learners of Indonesian after they responded to two complaint and two request roleplay situations. It was found that the low-proficiency group tended to focus on linguistic forms more often than L2 pragmatic norms, while the high-proficiency group tended to focus on L2 pragmatic norms more frequently than linguistic forms. The verbal reports also showed that the low-proficiency group acquired pragmatic knowledge through formal instruction, while the high-proficiency group benefited mostly from a year of study abroad in the target language community. Like those in Félix-Brasdefer's (2008) study, these learners indicated a gap between what they knew about the target culture and what they actually produced in the L2 to conform to that culture.