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The Effects of L2 Proficiency on Pragmatics Instruction: A Web-Based Approach to Teaching Chinese Expressions of Gratitude

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This study investigated whether the effects of pragmatics instruction delivered via a self-access website in a Chinese as a foreign language learning environment vary according to learners' language proficiency. The website provided learners with explicit instruction in how to express gratitude appropriately in Chinese and offered them pragmatic consciousness-raising activities for practice. Two groups of learners who differed in Chinese proficiency received the instruction over five weeks. The results showed that all learners produced more appropriate expressions of gratitude and used more varied thanking strategies in the posttest, but higher-level learners benefited more from the instruction in both pragmatic awareness and production. In their reflective e-journals, learners reported the promising possibilities of using websites as a tool for teaching pragmatics in foreign language contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen a growing interest in exploring the effects of pragmatics instruction on learners' competence in interlanguage pragmatics (ILP). These instructional ILP studies have focused on the effects of pragmatics intervention and differences in teaching methods (Bardovi-Harlig, 2012; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Rose, 2005; Taguchi, 2015), but have paid less attention to how learner-related factors possibly affect the instructional effectiveness. It has been argued that learner-related factors, such as motivation and proficiency, influence the teachability of pragmatics (e.g., Takahashi, 2010a, 2010b, 2015), and more studies in this direction are needed.

The relationship between second language (L2) proficiency and pragmatic competence has received much attention in ILP. Although a high level of L2 proficiency does not necessarily guarantee a corresponding level of pragmatic competence (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig, 1999; Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1993; Eisenstein & Bodman, 1986), limited proficiency seems to restrict pragmatic development (e.g., Salsbury & Bardovi-Harlig, 2000; Taguchi, 2007). It appears that proficiency could be a necessary condition for the development of learners' pragmatic competence (Alcón-Soler, 2008; Bardovi-Harlig, 1999; Glaser, 2014). If L2 proficiency positively correlates with pragmatic development, a relevant question to be asked in ILP instruction may be: Do learners at a higher level of proficiency also make more gains over their lower-level counterparts after receiving pragmatics instruction, or is the instruction likely to make the lower-level learners catch up with their higher-level peers? In an attempt to empirically answer this question, this study focuses on L2 learners of Chinese and investigates

whether effects of pragmatics instruction vary according to learners' proficiency.

Studies have found web-based technology to play a facilitative role in promoting L2 pragmatics learning (e.g., Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Taguchi & Sykes, 2013). Especially in foreign language settings, technological tools, and websites in particular, can provide learners with a variety of resources to enrich their exposure to pragmatic input while also offering them opportunities to engage in contextualized practice with different people. To further examine the potential of websites as a tool for teaching pragmatics, this study develops a website to deliver instruction of pragmatics to learners in a foreign language learning environment.

Chinese Expressions of Gratitude

The expression of gratitude is “an illocutionary act performed by a speaker which is based on a past act performed by the hearer” (Eisenstein & Bodman, 1986, p. 167). The speaker believes that the act has benefited him or her, thus showing appreciation toward the hearer.

Previous studies have reported differences in gratitude realization in Chinese and American English (e.g., Bi, 1996a; Liu, 2004; Yang, 2015). For example, Chinese speakers use more indirect thanking strategies than their American counterparts (Cheng, 2005; Liu, 2004; Yang, 2015). Some indirect strategies, such as expressing gratitude by way of showing care, are more or less Chinese-specific and have no equivalents in English (Bi, 1996a; Li, 2004; Liu, 2004). For example, after a friend helps move a box of books, Chinese speakers can choose to express gratitude by displaying care and warmth to him/her, such as *Nǐ yí dì ng lèi huài le, kuài xiūxi yí xià ba* (“You must be exhausted. You’d better take a break”). Though this kind of expression sounds like a judgment to English speakers, it is considered an appropriate way of expressing gratitude in Chinese.

Social distance purportedly has an effect on the choice of thanking strategies in Chinese (Bi, 1996a; Li, 2004; Liu, 2004; Yang, 2015). According to Gu (1990) and Bi (1996b), one of the four notions that underlie Chinese politeness is modesty, understood as self-denigration. Since close friends and family members are in intimate relationships to the self, the self requires self-denigration of them. In the case of expressing gratitude, therefore, Chinese speakers would tend to more indirectly express their appreciation to people with whom they are close. For example, if Chinese speakers explicitly express gratitude to their close friends and family members after receiving a small favor, their close friends and family members would feel estranged. By contrast, when expressing gratitude to a person in a distant relationship, the self is required to acknowledge his or her indebtedness explicitly. That is, appreciation toward a stranger in similar situations would be explicitly expressed. Studies (e.g., Bi, 1996a; Liu, 2004) have found that these differences often cause misunderstandings for learners who are not familiar with the use of thanking strategies and politeness principles in Chinese, so it is necessary to help students learn about how gratitude is expressed in the language.

Noticing and L2 Processing Capacities

Schmidt (1993) used ‘noticing’ to mean “registering the simple occurrence of some event” (p. 26), and hypothesized that noticing was necessary for learning. For ILP acquisition in particular, he emphasized that global noticing was not sufficient; rather, “attention to

linguistic forms, functional meanings, and the relevant contextual features” (p. 35) was required. Accordingly, explicit instruction in realization strategies and relevant contextual factors has been advocated in ILP instruction. In addition, pragmatic consciousness-raising (PCR), an inductive approach to facilitate learners’ noticing of target form-function-context mappings, has been proposed. The PCR approach does not aim to explicitly teach learners about different aspects of pragmatics, but to guide them to conduct pragmatic analysis given samples of language use (Rose, 1994, 1999). Although noticing seems necessary for learning, Schmidt (2001) indicated that it might not be a sufficient condition; that is, many other factors may influence the acquisition of ILP competence.

While the noticing hypothesis accounts for learners’ processing in the input stage, Bialystok’s (1993) L2 processing model explains the process after pragmatic features have been noticed (Kasper, 2009). This model asserts that learners’ pragmatics learning is based on two cognitive components: analysis of knowledge and control of processing. Analysis of knowledge is “the process of making explicit, or analyzing, a learner’s implicit knowledge of a domain” (Bialystok, 1993, p. 48). The changes this process brings about are divided into three levels of representation: conceptual, formal, and symbolic. At the symbolic stage, learners have the ability to achieve form-function-context mappings, and pragmatic competence is achieved mainly through the development of symbolic representations. On the other hand, control of processing is “the process of controlling attention to relevant and appropriate information and integrating those forms” (Bialystok, 1993, p. 48), and effective processing requires learners to attend to necessary information without detours. For adult L2 learners, the main task of acquiring pragmatic competence is the control of processing or, more simply, the ability to choose appropriate strategies according to particular contextual variables. Though this model has been used widely in ILP research, it is not without its problems. For example, specificity in explaining the factors that possibly influence L2 learners’ processing capacities is lacking.

Instructional ILP Studies

A growing body of research has examined the effects of instruction on L2 learners’ pragmatic development (for reviews, see Kasper & Rose, 2002; Rose, 2005; Taguchi, 2011, 2015; Takahashi, 2010a, 2010b). These studies, the majority of which were conducted on L2 English, have concluded that learners who received instruction in pragmatics generally outperformed those who did not (e.g., Rose, 2005; Taguchi, 2015). A meta-analysis by Jeon and Kaya (2006) also reported overall effectiveness of the direct instruction of pragmatics over mere exposure in language classrooms.

As one of the most frequently used teaching approaches, explicit instruction has been seen to yield more benefits over the implicit treatment overall (e.g., Jeon & Kaya, 2006; Taguchi, 2015; Takahashi, 2010a, 2010b). The explicit method has been operationalized in many different ways. It can take the form of metapragmatic description and explanation (e.g., Nguyen, 2013; Safont, 2004); instructors explicitly teach learners rules about pragmatics. In addition, instructors offer learners the opportunity to engage in metapragmatic discussion by calling on learners to talk about different aspects of target features in response to prompt questions (e.g., Pearson, 2006; Vellenga, 2008). When receiving metapragmatic information or engaging in metapragmatic discussion, learners are often provided with different types of feedback (e.g., Koike & Pearson, 2005; Takimoto, 2006). Explicit feedback that promotes learners’ noticing represents another component of explicit instruction.

In addition to explicit instruction, different PCR methods, such as the learners-as-researchers approach (Tanaka, 1997), have been employed to promote learners' noticing in ILP instruction. The learners-as-researchers approach gives students the opportunity to observe, record, and analyze the use of speech acts in everyday communication. It is aimed at motivating learners to actively engage in pragmatic analysis of language use, assisting them in their own reflections, and raising their self-awareness in pragmatics. For example, Vellenga (2008) designed an activity that asked learners to find a realistic scenario involving request making, to describe the scenario and relevant contextual factors, and to keep a record of the request strategies they noticed in the scenario.

Of particular relevance for the target language of this study, the instructional ILP research in L2 Chinese has been very limited (see Taguchi, 2014; Yang, forthcoming, for reviews). The existing studies have focused on how different instructional approaches (e.g., explicit vs. implicit, differential amounts of practice) affect learners' pragmatic development. For example, Yang (2014) investigated the effects of explicit versus implicit instruction on a small group of Chinese as a foreign language learners' expressions of gratitude. The explicit group received metapragmatic instruction in thanking strategies and contextual factors that affect how gratitude is expressed in Chinese, whereas the implicit group studied practical examples that involved Chinese expressions of gratitude. The study found no significant difference between the explicit and the implicit groups in terms of learners' production of gratitude, and thus argued for more empirical research in L2 Chinese to be conducted.

L2 Proficiency and Effects of Instruction

L2 proficiency is reported to possibly influence the effectiveness of pragmatics instruction (Alcón-Soler & Martínez-Flor, 2008; Narita, 2012; Takahashi, 2010a). However, the majority of previous instructional ILP studies have examined the effects of instruction on learners at a single level of proficiency, with little attention to potential differences across levels.

The small number of studies that have explored the effects of instruction across levels have also yielded mixed findings. For example, Codina-Espurz (2008) provided both lower- and higher-proficiency learners with explicit metapragmatic information on English request mitigators for three one-and-a-half hour sessions, reporting positive effects of instruction for only the higher-proficiency group. By contrast, the three groups of learners who differed in English proficiency in both treatment groups (i.e., explicit or implicit) of Fordyce's (2014) study were reported to have equally benefited from the pragmatics intervention in their epistemic scores; that is, no differential effects of instruction were found for learners across levels. In addition, Langer (2013) explicitly taught Spanish requests to beginning, intermediate, and advanced learners and measured their possible gains using written dialogue completion tests. The results showed that all learners benefited from the pedagogical intervention, irrespective of their proficiency; but the intermediate learners displayed the most improvement. Therefore, it remains unclear whether and, if yes, how effects of pragmatics instruction vary according to learners' L2 proficiency.

Use of Websites in ILP Instruction

Most of the prior instructional ILP studies have adopted a teacher-delivered approach to teaching pragmatics; teachers are trained to deliver instruction to students inside the classroom. But technology, such as websites, may present promising possibilities for ILP

instruction (Cohen, 2008; Cohen & Ishihara, 2005; Ishihara, 2007; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Taguchi & Sykes, 2013), especially in foreign language contexts. Because of the linguistic foci and limited time inside the classroom, pragmatics instruction has not been given sufficient attention. But the resources that websites offer enable students to study pragmatics at their own pace and at their convenience outside the classroom. On the one hand, websites can provide learners with more access to authentic use of language and more opportunities to engage in social interaction. In addition, they can respond to learners' individual needs by giving them freedom to choose as many or as few online resources as they wish (Cohen & Ishihara, 2005).

Despite the potential of using websites to teach L2 pragmatics in foreign language settings, only a very small number of empirical studies have examined their role in ILP instruction, and the findings concerning the effects of web-based instruction were also mixed (e.g., Cohen, 2008; Cohen & Ishihara, 2005; Ishihara, 2007). For example, an instructional website designed for Japanese L2 learners (Cohen & Ishihara, 2005) provided students with explicit instruction in five speech act units and various awareness-raising activities. The results of a pilot study showed that learners expressed positive opinions of the instruction and reported their enhanced pragmatic awareness after using the website (Ishihara, 2007), but the production data revealed that not all of learners' speech act strategies benefited from the online curriculum (Cohen & Ishihara, 2005). Therefore, there is a need for more studies that explore the role of websites in ILP instruction.

To further examine the effects of L2 proficiency on instructional effectiveness and the potential of using websites to teach pragmatics in foreign language contexts, this study provided two groups of learners who differed in their proficiency with instruction in Chinese expressions of gratitude via an instructional website. The two research questions are:

1. Do effects of pragmatics instruction delivered via the website vary according to learners' proficiency in L2 Chinese?
2. How do L2 Chinese learners consider the possibility of using the website as a tool for teaching pragmatics in foreign language contexts?

METHOD

This study adopted a pretest-posttest design to investigate the effects of instruction on two groups of participants at different proficiency levels in Chinese, who received the same type of pragmatics instruction via a self-access website for five weeks.

Development of the Instructional Website

Informed by the noticing hypothesis and instructional principles proposed by previous research (e.g., Ishihara, 2007; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010), this study took an explicit consciousness-raising approach to develop the instructional website. It was structured with eight instructional units and two review sessions (see Table 1). The units consisted of metapragmatic information about Chinese expressions of gratitude, including realization strategies, effects of the contextual variable of social distance on pragmatic choice, and politeness principles that constrain how gratitude is expressed in Chinese. In addition, the website offered participants the opportunity to engage in metapragmatic discussion through

asynchronous forums: each participant responded to a series of elicitation questions provided by the researcher as well as to other participants' comments. With the help of authoring tools, the website was able to provide participants with instant explicit feedback on their answers.

Table 1
Overview of the Website

Unit(s)	Content of the Website
Unit 1	Introduction to expressions of gratitude
Unit 2	Direct thanking strategies in Chinese
Units 3-5	Indirect thanking strategies in Chinese
Unit 6	Combinations of thanking strategies
Unit 7	Thanking strategies and politeness in Chinese
Unit 8	Variable of social distance
Reviews	Summary

The website also consisted of awareness-raising tasks, such as the PCR activities that adopted the learners-as-researchers approach: participants needed to find and record an authentic scenario in which someone expressed gratitude in Chinese to a best friend or to a stranger; then participants responded to a series of questions that prompted them to analyze the relationship between interlocutors, study the strategies used, and evaluate the response (see Figure 1).

Please find a realistic scenario in which a native speaker of Chinese expresses gratitude to his/her best friend or a stranger in Chinese. You may find the scenario on TV, in a movie, or other media (including online sources). Describe the scenario and interlocutors in this scenario (in English), record the expression of gratitude (in Pinyin), and analyze the use of thanking strategy based on what you have learned so far. Please submit your report.

Please describe the scenario here (including the source):

Please record the expression of gratitude here:

Please analyze the use of thanking strategies:

Your Code Name:

Please click Submit to send your report.

Press Reset to clear the form.

Figure 1. One example of the PCR activities that adopt the learners-as-researchers approach

To provide participants with more exposure to pragmatic input as well as rich contextual cues, this website included videos that were shot in real-life scenarios. These videos involved appropriate expressions of gratitude in Chinese and were also edited by adding Chinese subtitles. Participants could learn how people chose to communicate expressions of gratitude in ways other than just through words.

Considering low-level learners' limited proficiency in Chinese, the website featured language-focused exercises that helped students learn about thanking strategies, and also provided them with glossaries and video transcripts to facilitate their self-learning. Learners could choose to refer to these help options when the need arose. In addition, the website offered learners output practice to enhance their production skills. However, due to the limitation of self-access materials, this website depended largely on elicited writing methods (i.e., written open-ended production exercises).

To test its effectiveness, the researcher piloted this website among a small group of learners comparable to those who would participate in this study. The researcher modified some of the exercises/activities to render the website more accessible and user-friendly based on the feedback.

Participants

Thirty-six students enrolled in the Chinese program of a U.S. Midwestern university participated in this study on a voluntary basis. This program focused on instruction in vocabulary and grammar and did not teach the target pragmatic features. All participants spoke English as their native or dominant language and studied Chinese as a foreign language. None of them were Chinese heritage learners. They were assigned to two groups based on their scores on a Chinese proficiency test (CPT, see *Instruments* for detail), and there was a significant difference in the mean scores between the two groups ($t(34) = 10.616, p < .05$).

The lower-level group included 18 participants, with six females and 12 males. The mean of their ages was 20. They were majoring in different areas, such as business, physics, and nursing. This group's CPT scores were between 13 and 30 points (mean = 23.2), and all of them had studied Chinese for approximately one year before taking part in the study.

The higher-level group was also composed of 18 participants, with seven males and 11 females. Their mean age was 23, and they were also specializing in different majors, such as Chinese, international studies, and linguistics. This learner group's CPT scores were between 45 and 84 points (mean = 62.7). In addition, all of them had studied Chinese for more than two years prior to this study.

Instruments

All participants were asked to complete a background survey for eliciting their demographic information and previous Chinese learning experiences, a CPT for assessing their proficiency in Chinese, a written discourse completion test (DCT) for eliciting their production of Chinese expressions of gratitude, and reflective e-journals for soliciting their ongoing perception of the instruction. The four instruments are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Summary of the Instruments

Instruments	Purpose of using the instrument
Background survey	Collect participants' demographic information
Chinese proficiency test (CPT)	Assess participants' proficiency in Chinese (100 points in total, including listening, grammar, and reading)
Discourse completion test (DCT)	Elicit participants' production of Chinese expressions of gratitude
Reflective e-journals (E-journals)	Solicit participants' perceptions and opinions of the online instruction

This study employed the written DCT to collect learners' production data for a number of reasons. First, L2 learners often feel pressured when tested orally (Eisenstein & Bodman, 1986), and oral production tasks may not accurately measure exactly what learners, low-level students in particular, have acquired from their website learning. Second, Eisenstein and Bodman (1993) compared expressions of gratitude collected by different instruments, finding no significant difference among these data sources (written DCT, oral DCT, role-plays, and authentic discourse). In addition, considering that the website used elicited writing tasks as

output practice, the written DCT seemed a suitable method to assess learners' production after the web-based instruction.

In view of low-level learners' possible difficulty in Chinese character recognition, this study provided participants with an aural Chinese version of the DCT description in addition to a written Chinese version and its English translation. Participants could choose to listen to the aural description if needed. However, when responding to scenarios, participants were required to use Chinese characters or Pinyin (a Chinese transliteration system).

The 14 scenarios in the questionnaire, selected and revised from instruments of previous studies (Eisenstein & Bodman, 1986; Yang, 2009), were all everyday situations that took place in Beijing. The contextual variable of social distance, purported to affect how Chinese speakers express gratitude (Bi, 1996a; Li, 2004; Liu, 2004), was involved. It included two levels in this study: a close relationship (e.g., best friend) and a distant relationship (e.g., stranger). This study grouped together the two items that described the same or similar scenarios to bring under control two other contextual variables (power and imposition) proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). For example, in the two scenarios labeled as "borrowing a pen," one item asked the participant to express gratitude to his/her best friend, while the other solicited gratitude to an unfamiliar classmate. The scenarios were scrambled and rearranged into three groups based on different locations where they took place (i.e., in the apartment, at the university, and at other places in Beijing) to avoid sensitizing participants to the variable of social distance in the questionnaire (see Appendix A).

In addition to the DCT, this study solicited participants' opinions and perceptions of the web-based instruction by asking them to write weekly e-journals responding to prompt questions provided by the researcher. Each week participants were required to include their answers to an average of six prompt questions in their e-journals. Some of these questions were similar across weeks, but others were designed according to the specific content of the unit. Participants were given the choice to write their reflective e-journals in either English or Chinese.

Some examples of the prompt questions are presented below:

1. *To what extent do you think what you have learned makes you more aware of how Chinese speakers or your classmates express gratitude in Chinese? To what extent do you think the instruction has affected how you express gratitude in daily life?*
2. *What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of the instructional materials on the website?*
3. *If the instructional materials are presented and practiced in the classroom, which would you prefer: website learning or classroom learning?*

Procedures

The pragmatics instruction lasted five weeks and was carried out via the website outside the classroom. Two weeks before they began the online program, all participants completed the background survey, the CPT, and the written DCT. One week later, participants were emailed a worksheet that included a detailed timetable and instructions regarding what they would be required to do each week. After the instruction began, every week participants self-studied two units and completed corresponding exercises/activities on the website, in addition to writing reflective e-journals in response to prompts provided by the researcher. A weekly reminder email was also sent to each participant to ensure that they completed the required

assignments on the website. One week after the instruction ended, participants completed the same version of the written DCT.

Data Analysis

Data collected using the DCT were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Participants' responses were rated on a six-point scale of 0 (*extremely poor/not comprehensible*) to 5 (*excellent/native*) revised from Eisenstein and Bodman (1986). This rating scale was used to assess appropriateness of students' responses when presented with specific situations (see Appendix B).

The data were rated by the researcher and another Chinese speaker. First, the Chinese speaker was trained by the researcher; second, a sub-set of the data was rated independently by the two raters and the interrater correlation .90 was obtained; third, all data were re-rated independently. The final step was to eliminate the remaining rating differences between the raters through item-by-item discussion so that each response was assigned a unified score. Then the rating scores were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 22.0.

The DCT responses were also coded by the two raters based on the coding scheme established by previous studies (e.g., Yang, 2009). The coding procedures followed the rating procedures mentioned above. Expressions of gratitude were coded into semantic formulas. For example, the expressions *Xièxie nǐ! Wǒ tài xǐhuan zhè ge lǐwu le* ("Thank you! I love this gift very much") were coded as: direct strategies (using thanks) + indirect strategies (expressing subjective feelings).

Regarding the e-journal entries, the two raters conducted content analyses of them. The procedures for analysis followed the rating procedures above. The raters paid particular attention to how the instruction possibly affected students' noticing and use of gratitude in communication and what they thought of the use of the website as a teaching tool for L2 pragmatics in foreign language settings.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Results of DCT Data

According to the design of this study, two variables, group (i.e., proficiency in L2 Chinese: lower-level vs. higher-level) and time (i.e., pretest vs. posttest), were involved in the analysis. A split-plot ANOVA was conducted on the data. Table 3 summarizes the results of statistical analysis.

Table 3
ANOVA Results for DCT Data

Group	Pre-test		Post-test		Gains
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Post-test–Pre-test</i>
Lower-Level	33.3	5.6	36.6	8.8	3.3
Higher-Level	36.6	8.9	48.5	7.7	11.9*

Time: $F(1, 34) = 39.59, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .54$

Group: $F(1, 34) = 10.65, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .24$

Time * Group: $F(1, 34) = 13.02, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .28$

The table shows that the main effect for time is significant; both groups' thanking responses in the DCT were rated as more appropriate after the instruction: the lower-level group gained 3.3 in their expressions of gratitude, while the higher-level group gained 11.9 in their mean ratings. The main comparison of the two groups also reveals significant effects; the higher-level group expressed gratitude more appropriately than the lower-level group. In addition, there is an interaction between time and group; the instruction seemed to have differential effects on the two groups in their production of Chinese gratitude: participants in the higher-level group made statistically significant gains after the instruction, while the gains of the lower-level group did not reach the significant level. In other words, while both groups improved, learners with a higher level of proficiency increased significantly more in terms of appropriate expressions of gratitude than their lower-level peers.

As previously mentioned, this study also coded learners' expressions of gratitude into semantic formulas. The results showed that learners in both groups used a wider variety of thanking strategies in their DCT responses after the instruction. For example, all lower-level participants employed only one direct thanking verb (*xièxiè* "thanks") throughout all scenarios in the pretest; however, after the instruction, many of the lower-level learners expanded their use of direct thanking variants to include *duōxiè* ("many thanks") and *gǎnxiè* ("appreciate"). Likewise, higher-level learners also employed new types of indirect strategies to express gratitude in the posttest, such as expressions of care (e.g., *Nǐ yídìng lèi huài le, kuài xiūxi yíxià ba* "You must be exhausted. You'd better take a break.").

Although the learners' thanking strategies became more varied after using the website, a considerable number of responses produced by lower-level learners in the posttest were still rated very poor or not acceptable (i.e., "1" on the six-point scale). For example, after receiving a small favor from his/her best friend Xiaobai, such as passing a water cup, Chinese speakers would be most likely to employ indirect strategies to express appreciation. However, many learners in the lower-level group still used direct thanking strategies, which would make Xiaobai feel estranged. On the other hand, for some scenarios in which it would be appropriate to explicitly express gratitude in Chinese, many of the lower-level learners incorrectly chose indirect thanking strategies. For example:

You want to take notes in the class, but realize that you don't have a pen. You ask a stranger sitting in front of you to lend you one. After you finish using the pen and return it to the person, what do you say to this person?

Response from one lower-level student: Mǎfan nǐ le! ("Sorry for bothering you!")

In light of the distant relationship between the stranger and the speaker, Chinese speakers would be most likely to use direct strategies (e.g., a simple *xièxie* “thanks”) to explicitly express gratitude. But the lower-level participant inappropriately chose the strategy of apologizing (*máfan nǐ le* “sorry for bothering you”). In this scenario, it did not seem like a big favor for the stranger to lend a pen to the speaker, so it would not make sense for the speaker to apologize by claiming to have caused the stranger trouble. By contrast, higher-level learners made fewer pragmatic errors of this kind.

Moreover, the coding analysis results revealed that learners in both groups increased their use of combinations of strategies after receiving the instruction, and lower-level learners in particular produced much longer thanking responses in the posttest than in the pretest. For example, most of the lower-level learners used a simple *xièxie* (“thanks”) to express appreciation in the pretest, whereas a certain number of them started combining the direct thanking strategy (*xièxie*) with other thanking strategies (e.g., *xièxie* “thanks” in combination with giving compliments *nǐ zhēn bàng* “You are awesome,” etc.) in their posttest responses. Nonetheless, some of these strategy combinations still involved grammatical errors or incorrect use of words/phrases, which contributed to their low scores on the scale. By contrast, overall, higher-level participants not only increased their use of combinations of thanking strategies in the posttest, but also produced fewer ungrammatical expressions.

Analysis of Reflective E-Journals

Learners reported their increased noticing of Chinese expressions of gratitude in the weekly e-journals, but higher-level learners showed a higher level of awareness than lower-level students overall. For example, lower-level learners noticed only linguistic differences in gratitude realization between American English and Chinese, whereas higher-level learners noticed more pragmatic differences in contextual factors, as illustrated by the quotes below.

Lower-level group:

1. *Mostly when I'm thankful for something or someone, I say “thanks, thank you, or I appreciate it.” Chinese seems to have more colloquial expressions of gratitude.*
2. *The difference I noticed is when you use a longer sentence to thank someone. In English, we can say “Thank you for sending that note to me,” but we often shorten it to “Thanks for the note.” In Chinese, I learned that the action is always emphasized.*

Higher-level group:

1. *Chinese people that are relatively close to each other do not use *xièxie* (“thanks”) very much, as it is a bit too formal and it makes them feel distant from one another. In English, it is very common for good friends and family members to use “thanks” to express gratitude to one another.*
2. *It seems that directly expressing thanks in Chinese, especially among people closely related, was a rarity. This doesn't hold true in English, where family members are often dutiful in expressing thanks.*

Higher-level learners even discussed relevant cultural factors underlying Chinese expressions of gratitude and associated the difference with other aspects of communication, for example:

It is interesting that Chinese people often employ indirect thanking strategies, whereas Americans tend to use more direct strategies. This reflects a deeper cultural difference and portrays different perceptions about relationships between people in society. I think this relates to the fact that Chinese people also value indirectness in their culture. These seemingly small cultural differences are actually represented in everything from government to business customs.

In addition, higher-level learners reported their willingness to apply what they learned from the website to real-life interaction. For example, when asked whether they had attempted to use the new thanking strategies in communication, the majority of learners in the higher-level group provided specific examples:

1. *My Chinese friend's mother helped me tidy my kitchen this morning, and I said something like Nín lèi huài le ba, kuài xiūxi yíxià ba ("You must be exhausted. You'd better take a break.")*
2. *This week, as my classmates and I were preparing for the Mid-Autumn Festival party, our teacher helped us quite a bit in getting ready for it. Afterwards I thanked her, saying tài xièxie nín le ("thank you very much").*

However, all lower-level learners answered in the negative:

1. *No, I have not. I tried to use them today during our make-up oral exam, but I had a hard time using it in conjunction with my lack of vocabulary.*
2. *I haven't utilized any of the phrases learned. I feel I need more time learning these phrases before using them.*

All learners expressed their positive views of the web-based instruction in the e-journals, reporting that they would highly recommend this website to their friends interested in learning about Chinese expressions of gratitude. Based on the learners' comments, some benefits of the website are summarized below, with illustrative quotes from the e-journals.

1. *Informative: The strength of the instructional materials includes the comprehensiveness of the units covered. It seems that all forms of Chinese expression of gratitude are covered in the lessons.*
2. *Clear: Good examples and clear explanations.*
3. *User-friendly: I really think the site is very user-friendly and intuitive, and I appreciate the layout.*
4. *Well-organized: I think the materials are laid out well, and the exercises and activities have direct correlation to the lessons.*
5. *Easy-access: The thing I like most about this website is that I can always go back and go over the information whenever and wherever I want to (as long as there is internet connection).*
6. *Interesting: The activities were fun, and the videos/visuals kept us excited.*
7. *Effective: It's presented in a simple yet effective manner, and each lesson is in relatively small doses, so it's easier to retain what we've just learned.*
8. *Free: I think that the fact that it is free makes the medium very good.*

In particular, learners expressed their preference for the video clips and discussion forums integrated into the website, and discussed the usefulness of these resources from their own perspectives. For example:

1. *I really enjoyed the video clips. They gave a great example for students like myself who do not hear Chinese spoken out of class most of the time.*
2. *I thought the online discussion was really insightful. It's interesting to hear how other students in my position perceive the information. The videos also helped to visualize these expressions in reality as opposed to just in text.*
3. *The videos and online discussion did stretch me in new and novel ways. I liked to interact with other people in the online forums.*

Although they responded to the online instruction positively, learners also discussed weaknesses of the website and made suggestions accordingly. For example:

1. *Information can be presented in a more interactive fashion.*
2. *I would advise the inclusion of even more examples.*
3. *I felt more instant feedback on whether our written responses were proper could be provided.*

One of the e-journal questions asked learners about their preferred medium for receiving pragmatics instruction (i.e., classroom instruction vs. web-based instruction). Analysis of learners' responses revealed good prospects for web-based instruction, though learners who prefer classroom learning still predominate. Nine learners (25%) expressed a preference for the website as a tool for learning Chinese pragmatics. According to them, the website can be an effective substitute for classroom instruction because it is easier to use and more accessible; learners have great freedom to decide when and where to access the website, and they can go back to it over and over again.

Seven participants (19%) preferred a combination of the two modes of instruction. They claimed that both had strengths and drawbacks, so a combination of the two would fully benefit them. For example, one student commented:

I feel the website is a fine supplement, but teaching how to appropriately express gratitude is important enough to introduce in a classroom setting. With that said, I feel both play an important role and neither should be promoted without the other; they should go hand-in-hand.

However, the majority of learners still preferred classroom instruction for the benefits it provided, such as the opportunity to ask questions whenever they want and to get instant feedback from teachers. Nonetheless, many learners who claimed preference for classroom instruction also acknowledged the advantages of the web-based teaching, such as its low risks and easy accessibility, as shown below:

1. *Since we are already in the classroom environment, we always want to stick to it. But to be honest, website learning is easier, as it is a no-risk environment.*

2. *I have a fairly low amount of self-discipline and classroom learning may be more helpful in my case. However, if I were living far away, or wanted to go over the materials whenever and wherever I can, it would be really nice to have the website.*

DISCUSSION

L2 Proficiency and Effects of Instruction

The results showed that all learners increased their employment of appropriate expressions of gratitude in the posttest, and their use of thanking strategies also became more varied. These findings suggest that the explicit instruction and PCR activities delivered via the website were effective in facilitating learners' pragmatic production. This lends further support to the noticing hypothesis and corresponds with the findings of previous instructional ILP studies (Rose, 2005; Taguchi, 2015; Takahashi, 2010a, 2010b). Although both groups seemed to benefit from the instruction, the statistical analysis found that the effects of instruction varied according to learners' proficiency; learners in the higher-level group gained more from the instruction than their lower-level peers.

The coding analysis showed that there were still many grammatical errors or incorrect choice of words in lower-level learners' posttest responses, which contributed to their low rating scores on the appropriateness scale; by contrast, higher-level participants produced relatively fewer grammatically incorrect expressions. Compared with higher-level participants, lower-level learners made relatively more sociopragmatic errors in the posttest. This suggests that lower-level learners still had considerable difficulty varying thanking strategies according to the contextual variable of social distance. However, higher-level participants performed much better in this respect. Overall, in their reflective e-journals, higher-level learners reported more enhanced awareness of Chinese expressions of gratitude in relation to lower-level students.

These findings indicate that higher-level learners seem more capable of processing noticed information than lower-level participants, and proficiency is one of the learner-related factors that affect learners' processing abilities. According to Bialystok's (1993) L2 processing model, learners' processing abilities are composed of analysis of knowledge and control of processing. First, a high level of L2 proficiency can result in easier and faster coding of symbolic representations in learners' minds when processing the noticed information. Because symbolic representations are primarily developed through form-function-context mappings, learners with high linguistic competence may easily integrate new pragmatic forms into their ILP systems and establish connections between forms and the intended pragmatic meanings. Second, a high level of L2 proficiency helps free up more attention to be directed to developing control of strategies. According to Bialystok's model, analysis is "prior," and control of processing "presupposes" the analysis of knowledge (p. 55). With easier and faster coding of representations in the process of analyzing knowledge, learners can direct more attention to refining their ability to control strategies for specified situations, the primary task of learning pragmatics for adult L2 learners.

The differential effects of L2 proficiency on learners' pragmatic gains also indicate that L2 proficiency makes a difference for pragmatic teachability (e.g., Takahashi, 2010a, 2010b). After receiving the web-based instruction, the lower-level students learned a few new thanking strategies, and also showed improved understanding in linguistic differences between their L1 English and L2 Chinese. But constrained by their limited grammar and

vocabulary, the lower-level learners did not seem fully capable of acquiring all of the new thanking strategies introduced by the website or applying them to everyday communication, nor were they fully ready for the learning of sociopragmatic use of language, though they had access to both types of instructional materials on the website. By contrast, the higher-level learners appeared to have acquired a repertoire of thanking strategies and to have learned ways to vary strategies according to specified situations. This lends further support to the claim that proficiency may be a necessary condition for learners' pragmatic development (Alcón-Soler, 2008; Bardovi-Harlig, 1999; Glaser, 2014), and suggests that more linguistic assistance is needed for the teaching of L2 pragmatics to the lower-level learners.

The finding that the effects of pragmatics instruction vary according to learners' L2 proficiency also corresponds with Codina-Espurz's (2008) results. In her study, two treatment groups that differed in English proficiency received the same type of instruction in request mitigation devices. It was found that the effects of instruction differed between the two groups; the higher-level learners benefited more from the intervention. In addition, Codina-Espurz found that the positive effects of instruction seemed to exist only among the higher-level learners, and thus concluded that pragmatics instruction might be effective if learners had achieved a certain level of linguistic competence. By contrast, the lower-level learners in the current study (the majority of them were in second-semester Chinese courses when receiving the instruction) made improvement in their production of Chinese gratitude in the posttest. This different finding might be explained by the quantity and quality of the instruction. Jeon and Kaya (2006) in their small meta-analysis suggested that long-term instruction (more than five hours) may result in more benefits for learners. Codina-Espurz (2008) provided explicit instruction for students for a mere three one-and-a-half-hour sessions during two weeks, but the instruction in the current study lasted five weeks and took learners a minimum of one hour every week (based on their reflective e-journaling), excluding the time they spent writing weekly e-journals. In addition, the web-based instruction of this study not only included metapragmatic information on the target feature but also involved various awareness-raising exercises/activities as well as additional reviews and audiovisual materials.

Feedback on Web-Based Instruction

Participants expressed their positive evaluation of the instruction and discussed the strengths of the website in their reflective e-journaling, highlighting such features as comprehensiveness, clarity, user-friendliness, and fun. In particular, the participants reported benefits of using videos, which provided more access to authentic materials than they could find in classroom instruction alone; and expressed their preference for being able to study the materials on their own time and at their own pace. These resources and advantages offered by the web-based teaching not only compensate for the limitations of classroom instruction (e.g., limited time and resources), but also enrich learners' exposure to pragmatic input in foreign language contexts.

The results of this study corroborate the findings of Cohen and Ishihara (2005) and Ishihara (2007). They designed an instructional website that took an explicit pragmatics-focused awareness-raising approach for intermediate-level learners of Japanese in foreign language contexts, and incorporated it into a Japanese language courses on a trial basis. The findings showed that the online instruction helped promote learners' pragmatic awareness and improved their use of speech act strategies to some degree.

In the reflective e-journals of this study, 25% of the participants expressed a preference for the web-based instruction, and 19% recommended combining online teaching with classroom instruction. This suggests that a number of students responded positively to the website as a medium for pragmatics instruction. Nonetheless, the majority of participants preferred classroom learning and discussed weaknesses of the website. Their feedback and suggestions can help modify the website and make the web-based instruction more effective. For example, learners appreciated the interactive nature of the classroom. With this preference in mind, websites could incorporate synchronous chat rooms or other online communication tools (Taguchi & Sykes, 2013). Learners also expressed the desire to ask questions whenever they need to and to obtain instant feedback on their responses. To meet these needs, we might set up virtual office hours where students could ask teachers for more assistance. Ideally, the modified website can become a more effective tool for learners to study pragmatics, and technology can be further exploited to supplement and reinforce the teacher's role in ILP instruction.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study found that learners increased their appropriate use of gratitude in the posttest, but the effects of instruction seemed to vary according to learners' L2 proficiency. We should be cautious in interpreting and generalizing these findings because of some limitations.

First, a control group is lacking. Without a control group, it is hard to attribute all gains that learners made to effects of instruction, though the focus of this study was on the differential effects of instruction on learners across levels rather than on comparing those who received instruction with those who did not. Second, the sample size is small. Due to the small number of participants, it is difficult to generalize the positive findings associated with using the website to teach pragmatics to other learner populations in other foreign language contexts. Therefore, more studies are needed to further explore the potential of using websites to promote ILP instruction/learning. Third, in view of the written practice modality offered by the website, this study employed the written DCT as the outcome measure, finding that higher-level learners benefited more from the instruction in their production. However, since the written DCT is subject to much methodological criticism in eliciting learners' pragmatic production, do higher-level learners also have an advantage over their lower-level peers in oral production as well as other outcome measures? This should be empirically examined in future endeavors. Last but not least, this study divided participants into lower- and higher-level groups, but this does not represent a standard way of categorizing learners' language proficiency. To further explore the effects of learners' proficiency on instructional effectiveness in ILP, learners at three different levels (i.e., novice, intermediate, and advanced) should be recruited.

CONCLUSION

This study provided two groups of learners who differed in proficiency with the same type of instruction in Chinese expressions of gratitude via a self-access website over five weeks. The results showed that all learners produced more appropriate expressions of gratitude and used more varied thanking strategies in the posttest, but higher-level learners benefited more from instruction in both pragmatic awareness and production. The findings not only contribute to our current understanding of the effects of learner-related variables on instructional

effectiveness in ILP, but also provide useful implications with regard to how to effectively teach students at different levels. Learners at different levels received the same type of instruction in pragmatics in this study, and they all responded positively to the instructional materials. This suggests that it may be viable to offer learners across levels with the same instructional materials. But in light of the fact that lower-level learners reported that their limited linguistic proficiency restricted their use of thanking strategies in daily communication, teachers should provide lower-level learners with more assistance in their learning of pragmalinguistic aspects of languages use (e.g., instruction in grammatical and lexical aspects related to target pragmatic features may supplement the provision of metapragmatic information).

The analysis of learners' reflective e-journals revealed that websites have great potential as a fine supplement or substitute for pragmatics teaching in classrooms. The web-based instruction can either supplement pragmatics teaching during class (if any) or work as a self-guided learning tool to promote students' learning of pragmatics outside the classroom. Web-based learning not only enables learners to study pragmatics whenever and wherever they wish, but also responds to their individual needs to maximize their learning potential.

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APPENDIX A

Sample DCT Scenarios

Part 1: In the apartment

You are waiting for the elevator. It is crowded and Xiaobai (your best friend) has squeezed in the elevator. When the door is about to close, Xiaobai holds the door for you to enter. What do you say to Xiaobai?

Part 2: At the university

You arrive late to the class. You see that the other students have a handout. You ask the unfamiliar classmate sitting next to you to pass you a handout. After the person passes it to you, what do you say to this person?

Part 3: At other places in Beijing

You are walking to a new restaurant, but unfortunately you get lost on the way. You ask a stranger for directions. After the stranger tells you how to get there, what do you say to this person?

APPENDIX B

Rating Scale

0 Extremely Poor/Not comprehensible

Failure to respond to the task, or responds 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 grammatical errors that do not interfere seriously with appropriateness.

4 Good/Near-native

Pragmatically appropriate utterances, but still sound a little awkward compared to native speakers in terms of length, register, etc.

5 Excellent/Native

Clear and appropriate utterances, close to native responses.