Effect of National Cultural Distance as Predictor of Pragmatic Competence on Writing Proficiency

Vahid Rafieyan

International College of Liberal Arts, Yamanashi Gakuin University, Kofu, Yamanashi, Japan

Abstract

Writers whose national culture has less distance from the cultural values of the target language community are supposed to be more familiar with the pragmatic features of the target language and consequently write more comprehensibly for target language readers than writers whose national culture has more distance from the cultural values of the target language community. To assess the actual effect of national cultural distance from target language community as a predictor of target language pragmatic competence on target language writing proficiency, the current study was conducted over a group of German undergraduate students perceived as culturally close to Britons as the target language community and a group of South Korean undergraduate students perceived as culturally distant from Britons. The study, which compared the ability of the two groups of participants in using proper target language politeness strategies in writing letters of application, found that less national cultural distance from the cultural values of the target language community results in more appropriate use of target language pragmatic features in target language writing. The pedagogical implications of the findings suggested providing opportunities for language learners in foreign language contexts to have contact with target language speakers through telecollaborative partnership and to be exposed to target language pragmatic features through target language pragmatic instruction.

Keywords: National Cultural Distance, Pragmatic Competence, Writing Proficiency

1. Introduction

Writing clearly and comprehensibly is a cultural object, existing only in the social world of human beings, as a product of social activities. Writing is also very much shaped by the educational system in a writer's native culture. The rhetorical means available to a writer for realizing his or her rhetorical strategy are limited by the value and belief system prevailing in the discourse community which constitutes the social context for the text. In academic writing, the most relevant discourse communities contrasting the writer are the academic community being addressed, and the writing culture which the writer was socialized into when initially began learning to write, usually his or her national culture (Mauranen, 1993).

National cultural distance, defined as the extent to which the shared norms and values in one country differ from those in another, was presented by Hofstede (2001) in a model consisting of five dimensions: power distance which refers to the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally; individualism, as opposed to collectivism, which refers to societies in which ties between people are loose and people are not integrated into strong, cohesive groups; masculinity, as opposed to femininity, which refers to societies in which social gender roles are clearly distinct and do not overlap, that is, men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on marital success whereas women are supposed to be modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life; uncertainty avoidance which refers to the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations and try to avoid such situations; and confucian dynamism which on long-term orientation pole refers to perseverance, ordering relationships by status, thrift, and having a sense of shame and on short-term orientation pole refers to personal steadiness and stability, protecting face, respect for tradition, and reciprocation of greetings, favors, and gifts.

Writers whose national culture has less distance from the academic community being addressed are supposed to write more comprehensibly for readers of the academic community being addressed than writers whose national culture has more distance from the academic community being addressed (Rafieyan et al., 2014a). In fact, the reason for most communication failure is that the underlying norms and assumptions of the cultures the writer and the reader come from may differ significantly (Ghobadi & Fahim, 2009), that is, miscommunications are attributed to the lack of culture-specific pragmatic knowledge required in a circumstance (House, 2006). Thus; given the effect of level of national cultural distance from the academic community being addressed on

familiarity with culture-specific pragmatic knowledge of the academic community being addressed on one hand and the significance of familiarity with culture-specific pragmatic knowledge conditioning language use in writing comprehensibly for the readers of the academic community being addressed on the other hand, the current study seeks to investigate the effect of national cultural distance from target language community as a predictor of target language pragmatic competence on target language writing proficiency. In this regard, the research question to be addressed is:

Does level of national cultural distance from target language community have a significant effect on target language writing proficiency?

Accordingly, the null hypothesis is:

Level of national cultural distance from target language community has no significant effect on target language writing proficiency.

2. Literature Review

The critical role of having a good command of target language pragmatic knowledge in presenting target language writing comprehensibly for the readers has been fully confirmed by a number of researchers in the area of interlanguage pragmatics. The majority of these researchers (e.g. Al-Khatib, 2001; Upton and Connor, 2001; Vergaro, 2004; Al-Ali, 2006; Bagwasi, 2008; Youn, 2014) have explored the role of target language pragmatic knowledge in writing various kinds of letters including personal letters, application letters, business letters, etc. In these studies, the researchers compared the way foreign language learners and native speakers of the language present politeness strategies in letter writing as a mode of communication and explored the problems faced by foreign language learners in expressing their ideas in writing appropriately according to the pragmatic features of the target language.

In one of these studies, Al-Khatib (2001) explored the problems encountered by Jordanian university students of English in communicating in writing with native speakers of the language in terms of the cultural background of both the foreign language writers and the native language readers. The data for the subsequent analysis consisted of 120 personal letters written by 120 students of English at two Jordanian universities. Each student was asked to write a personal letter to a hypothetical native British friend inviting him or her to visit Jordan for sightseeing or for attending a wedding party. A close examination of the data showed that most writers tended to emphasize their ideas by repeating and paraphrasing them, and sometimes by handling them in an indirect way. The difference between Jordanian society and British society in terms of politeness strategies led to the conclusion that different values are attached to letter-writing as a mode of communication, whether in terms of form or content.

In another study, Upton and Connor (2001) tried to locate in the corpus cross-cultural differences which may ultimately influence the efficacy of the letters of application written by the American and European participants. The data for the study came from the Indianapolis Business Learner Corpus (IBLC), which is composed of job application letters and resumes of business communication students from the United States, Belgium, and Finland, with a total of 153 application letters analyzed. The study employed the coding scheme for genre move developed by Connor, et al. (1997), with two minor modifications. The results showed that none of the three groups used either positive or negative politeness strategies exclusively, or even more frequently than another group. There were differences, however, in the use of specific politeness strategies among the groups.

Vergaro (2004) conducted another research study to explore the way persuasion is achieved in different cultures through the medium of a business letter. The study aimed at analyzing contrastively the rhetoric of a corpus of Italian sales promotion letters and English sales promotion letters. The corpus used for the research consisted of 43 Italian authentic sales promotion letters and 26 English authentic sales promotion letters. The study found that although uniformity of expression in the business community is limited to the conventions imposed by the genre used, cultural values still affect writing at the level of the utterance or strings of utterances, that is, within the genre constraints there is still room for creativity.

Al-Ali (2006) was the other researcher who investigated the types of pragmatic politeness strategies as well as the types and frequencies of genre component move preferences used by Arabic-English bilinguals in their letters of application addressed to an English native setting. A corpus of 90 letters of applications written by 90 Arabic-English bilingual undergraduate Jordanian students of English at two universities in Jordan was created. With regard to the types of politeness strategies, the bilingual writers were found to employ a high degree of positive politeness as far as their letters of applications are concerned while English native readers expect that the

bilingual writers would make frequent use of negative politeness strategies to emphasize the potential employer's freedom of action. In the light of the results obtained from analyzing the genre components, most of the bilingual participants' cover letters were not considered in an appropriate way to articulate the communicative purpose of this particular genre.

Bagwasi (2008) also used a corpus of letters written during the protectorate period by and to British administrators and letters written by and to Botswana local chiefs to explore the main differences and similarities between letter writing by Botswana and British administrators. The study found that in the British written mode there is directness in presenting the point, very little syntactic ornamentation, and emphasis on the content of the letter. On the other hand, the conventions of letter writing in Setswana require greetings and on employment of address forms that convey respect and politeness in Setswana culture. Letters written by Botswana thus have longer punctuations and salutations that involve greetings and best wishes. Letters written by Botswana also tend to have more features of repetition, spoken and colloquial forms, downgrading as well as discourse markers that express the openings and endings of conversations. This suggests that Botswana writers do not only transfer local lexical and syntactic patterns but also transfer cultural strategies for address, organization, and politeness.

Finally, Youn (2014) measured levels of syntactic complexity in written pragmatic production of letters of English as a Second Language with regard to two independent criterion measures: proficiency and pragmatic performance. Participants were 40 students of English as a Second Language in an American university. The participants were organized into three different levels of language proficiency and then regrouped into three different pragmatic performance groups. The study included four written tasks, each task representing an automatic situation that requires pragmatic competence in an English for Academic Purposes setting. The findings showed that pragmatics and proficiency are distinct constructs, although related to some extent. Pragmatically advanced learners utilized various syntactic features, as shown by the different degrees of the complexity measures across the pragmatic performance levels that differed from those across proficiency levels.

The review of literature in the areas of interlanguage pragmatics and target language writing proficiency shows that the majority of studies conducted in the areas have explored the role of target language pragmatic competence in target language writing proficiency. These studies have confirmed that a good command of target language pragmatic knowledge leads to a high level of writing proficiency. There is, however, a dearth of research over the effect of perceived national cultural distance from target language society, which has been claimed and proved to be a predictor of target language pragmatic competence, on target language writing proficiency.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants in the study consisted of 60 exchange undergraduate students at universities in Malaysia. Among all the students, 30 of them were from Germany and the other 30 were from South Korea. The criterion for selection of German and South Korean students to participate in the study was based on the difference in the national cultural distance between these countries and the Great Britain as the target language country. According to the survey data collected about the values of 50 countries around the world by Hofstede (2001), Germany was found to have a very close culture to the Great Britain while South Korea was found to have a very distant culture from the Great Britain. The national cultural distance between Germany and the Great Britain as well as South Korea and the Great Britain; according to the five dimensions of power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, and long/short-term orientation; has been provided in table 1.

Table 1: Index Scores and Ranks for National Cultural Distance

Country	Power Distance		Uncertainty Avoidance		Individualism/ Collectivism		Masculinity/ Femininity		Long/Short-Term Orientation	
	Index	Rank	Index	Rank	Index	Rank	Index	Rank	Index	Rank
Great Britain	35	42-44	35	47-48	89	3	66	9-10	25	28-29
Germany	35	42-44	65	29	67	15	66	9-10	31	22-24
South Korea	60	27-28	85	16-17	18	43	39	41	75	5

Source: Hofstede (2001, p.500)

3.2 Instrument

The instrument used to collect the required data in the current study consisted of a job advertisement. The job advertisement described a situation in which each student participating in the study was required to write a letter of application in response to the advertisement. The situation described in the advertisement used in the current study was a position available at a language school in Spain as an English teacher. The position required applicants to be fluent in English and be able to teach English conversation to a group of teenagers. Having teaching experience, knowledge of computer skills, and experience of living abroad had been also mentioned to be an advantage in the job advertisement. Applicants were required to write a letter of application convincing the employer that they are suitable for the position offered.

3.3 Procedure

At the beginning of the fall semester in the academic year 2015/2016, 60 copies of the job advertisement was distributed among all 60 students (30 German and 30 South Korean students) participating in the study. The students were asked to write the letter of application as if they are really applying for the job. They were also instructed to relate their qualifications and professional experiences to the specifications of the job and to persuade the employer to hire them. However, they were not instructed to pay attention to target language politeness strategies in their letter writings. The students were given 20 minutes to complete the writing task. Following the completion of the task, the slips of the writing task were collected and prepared for subsequent analysis.

3.4 Data Analysis

To assess the performance of students participating in the study, the application letters written by students were rated by two native English speakers who were experts in teaching academic writing. The ratings, which focused on the appropriateness of target language politeness strategies in letter writing, were ranged from 1 to 5, with the value of 1 at the most extreme spectrum of inappropriateness and the value of 5 at the most extreme spectrum of appropriateness. To assess the level of agreement between the two raters, the inter-rater reliability was assessed through Cohen's Kappa. The analysis of Cohen's Kappa would give a value between -1 and +1. The interpretation of the values obtained through Cohen's Kappa, according to Landis and Koch (1977), are presented in table 2. The inter-rater reliability assessed for the writing task was 0.92 which according to the interpretation of values presented in table 2 indicates an almost perfect agreement between the two raters.

Table 2: Interpretation of Cohen's Kappa Values

Values	Interpretation
Smaller than 0.00	Poor Agreement
0.00 to 0.20	Slight Agreement
0.21 to 0.40	Fair Agreement
0.41 to 0.60	Moderate Agreement
0.61 to 0.80	Substantial Agreement
0.81 to 1.00	Almost Perfect Agreement

To compare the performance of German and South Korean students on the writing task, the mean scores for the ratings assigned to the writings of the students in each group was calculated. Following the calculation of the overall mean score for the performance of each group of participants, independent-samples t-test was used. Independent-samples t-test compares the mean scores for the two different groups (Pallant, 2013). The magnitude of the difference between the performance of German and South Korean students on the writing task was then assessed through the effect size statistics. All the analysis was performed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software, version 22.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Findings

Descriptive data for participants' performance on the writing task has been presented in table 3. Descriptive data presented in the table includes the number of participants in each group as well as the overall mean score and standard deviation for the participants of each group. The mean score for the performance of participants in the study on the writing task indicates that German participants (overall mean score: 2.80) outperformed South Korean participants (overall mean score: 2.23) in writing appropriately according to the pragmatic features of the target language community; however, mean score does not show whether the performance of participants in the two groups is significantly different or not. To determine if there is a significant difference in the mean writing proficiency of German and South Korean participants, independent-samples t-test was used. Independent-samples t-test is used when the mean scores of two different groups of people or conditions are compared, that is, to check whether or not there is a statistically significant difference in the mean scores for the two groups (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2013).

Table 3: Group Statistics

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Performance	Germans	30	2.80	0.714	0.130
	South Koreans	30	2.23	0.817	0.149

The results of independent-samples t-test has been presented in table 4. The first section of the independent-samples t-test output box gives the results of Levene's test for equality of variances. This tests whether or not the variance (variation) of scores for the two groups (Germans and South Koreans) is the same. The outcome of this test determines which of the t-values that Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software provides is the correct one to use. If the significance value for Levene's test is larger than 0.05 ($p > 0.05$), the first line in the table, which refers to equal variances assumed, is used. If the significance level of Levene's test is equal to 0.05 or less ($p \leq 0.05$), this means that the variables for the two groups are not the same. Therefore, the data violate the assumption of equal variances. In this case, the information in the second line of the t-test table, which refers to equal variances not assumed, should be used (Pallant, 2013).

Table 4: Independent Samples T-Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Performance	Equal variances assumed	0.255	0.615	2.859	58	0.006	0.567	0.198	0.170	0.963
	Equal variances not assumed			2.859	56.982	0.006	0.567	0.198	0.170	0.964

In the current study, the significance level for Levene's test is 0.615 which is larger than the cut-off of 0.05. This means that the assumption of equal variances has not been violated; therefore, the t-value provided in the first line of the table will be used. To find out whether there is a significant difference between the two groups, the column labeled "Sig. (2-tailed)", which appears under the section labeled "t-test for Equality of Means", should be referred to. If the value in the "Sig. (2-tailed)" column is equal to or less than 0.05 ($p \leq 0.05$), there is a significant difference in the mean scores on the dependent variable for each of the two groups. If the value is above 0.05 ($p > 0.05$), there is no significant difference between the two groups (Pallant, 2013). The "Sig. (2-

tailed)" value obtained from data is 0.006. As the value is below the required cut-off of 0.05, it is concluded that there is a statistically significant difference in the mean pragmatic competence scores for Germans and South Koreans.

Independent-samples t-test only indicates whether the difference between the performance of the two groups being compared is significant or not. It does not determine the level of difference. To determine whether the difference between the performance of participants in the two groups are large or not, effect size was analyzed. Effect size statistics provide an indication of the magnitude of the differences between the groups (not just whether the difference could have occurred by chance). There are a number of different effect size statistics, the most commonly used being eta squared and Cohen's d. Eta squared can range from 0 to 1 and represents the proportion of variance in the dependent variable (target language writing proficiency) that is explained by the independent variable (national cultural distance) (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2013). The formula for calculating eta squared is as follows: Eta squared = t^2/t^2 + (N1 + N2 - 2) (Pallant, 2013). Replacing with the appropriate values from the data obtained in the current study: Eta squared = $2.859^2/2.859^2$ + (30 +30 - 2) = 0.12.

Cohen (1988) proposed a set of guidelines to interpret the values obtained through eta squared analysis. The interpretations of eta squared vales according to Cohen (1988) have been presented in table 5. According to the guidelines proposed by Cohen (1988), the value of the effect size obtained for the difference between the performance of German and South Korean participants (Eta squared = 0.12) is almost large. Expressed as a percentage (0.12 × 100 = 12), it can be claimed that 12 percent of the variance in target language writing performance of students participating in the current study is explained by the national cultural distance from the target language community.

Table 5: Interpretation of Effect Size Values

Values	Interpretation
0.01	Small Effect
0.06	Moderate Effect
0.14	Large Effect

4.2 Discussion

The current study compared the effect of national cultural distance as a predictor of level of familiarity with pragmatic features of target language on target language writing proficiency of German and South Korean students. The findings of the study revealed the significant effect of national cultural distance from the target language community on the target language writing proficiency of students. Students whose cultural values were closer to the cultural values of the target language community were more familiar with the pragmatic features of the target language community and consequently had a better performance on the writing task than students whose cultural values were more distant from the cultural values of the target language community.

In other words, German students whose cultural values, according to the survey data collected about the values of 50 countries around the world by Hofstede (2001), were closer to the cultural values of the Great Britain performed significantly better on the writing task than South Korean students whose cultural values, according to the survey data collected about the values of 50 countries around the world by Hofstede (2001), were more distant from the cultural values of the Great Britain. Therefore, the null hypothesis of the study which states that level of national cultural distance from target language community has no significant effect on target language writing proficiency is rejected.

Superior performance of German students on the writing task over the performance of South Korean students on the task can be explained through the fact that Germans are geographically very close to the Great Britain and naturally visit or are visited by Britons more frequently than South Koreans who live thousands of miles away from the Great Britain. Consequently, they have much more opportunities to have contact with target language speakers and be exposed to the cultural features, culture-specific behaviors, and culture-specific expressions of Britons than South Koreans (Rafieyan et al., 2014a).

Moreover, Germany and the Great Britain both belong to the European Union, a union which considers all members as a united nation with no respect to the borders between them. Sharing the same currency, religious beliefs, and other societal features can have a great influence on sharing a lot of cultural values for the two countries which is almost the case for the countries located in the same region. These all have most probably

contributed substantially to the higher target language pragmatic knowledge of Germans and subsequently their superior writing performance over South Koreans (Rafieyan et al., 2014a).

The findings obtained in the current study support the findings obtained in the study conducted by Rafieyan et al. (2014a) who found that cultural distance from the target language community has a significant effect on language learners' ability to comprehend target language pragmatic features used in target language expressions. The findings obtained in the current study are also consistent with the findings obtained in the studies conducted by Al-Khatib (2001), Upton and Conner (2001), Vergaro (2004), Al-Ali (2006), Bagwasi (2008), and Youn (2014) who found that national cultural values affect the use of politeness strategies in target language writing.

5. Conclusion

The study found that level of national cultural distance from the target language community as a predictor of target language pragmatic competence has a significant effect on the level of target language writing proficiency of nonnative speakers. German exchange students in Malaysian universities whose cultural values were perceived to be closer to the cultural values of the Great Britain as the target language community were found to be more proficient in using the appropriate target language pragmatic features in writing than South Korean exchange students in Malaysian universities whose cultural values perceived to be more distant from the cultural values of the Great Britain. These findings suggest that language learners who have less contact with target language speakers and less exposure to target language pragmatic features should be provided with opportunities to have contact with target language speakers through telecollaborative partnership (Rafieyan et al., 2014b; Rafieyan et al., in press) and be exposed to target language pragmatic features through the incorporation of target language pragmatic features into target language classroom instruction (Rafieyan et al., 2013).

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Vahid Rafieyan is an Associate Professor of English at International College of Liberal Arts (iCLA), Yamanashi Gakuin University (YGU). He has PhD in TESOL from University Sains Malaysia (USM). In 2012, he was awarded as the best TESL student by Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). His area of specialization is interlanguage pragmatics and he has a number of publications in this area including: Relationship between Attitude toward Target Language Culture Instruction and Pragmatic Comprehension Development, Pragmatic Comprehension Development through Telecollaboration, and Relationship between Acculturation Attitude and Pragmatic Comprehension.

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