Theoretical Construction of Classroom Teaching Pragmatic Competence for Pre-service English Teachers in Ethnic Minority Universities

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Abstract: *As basic education English curricula in China shift from the transmission of linguistic knowledge towards the cultivation of core competencies, the appropriateness, interactivity, strategic quality and cultural sensitivity of teachers' classroom language have become key determinants of instructional quality. Drawing on research on pragmatic competence, second language (L2) pragmatics and pragmatics instruction, this paper defines the "classroom teaching pragmatic competence" of pre-service English teachers as a teacher competence with a distinct professional status: the integrated professional ability to select, organise, regulate and reflect on linguistic resources in accordance with instructional objectives and specific classroom situations, so as to realise such pedagogical functions as knowledge construction, teacher–student interaction, classroom management, learning scaffolding and affective support. Four constitutive features of this competence are identified: purposefulness, situatedness, interactivity and reflexivity. The paper then builds a theoretical framework grounded in pragmatic competence theory, communicative language ability theory, sociocultural theory, teacher knowledge theory and reflective practice theory, and discusses the dual effects of the multilingual context of ethnic minority universities on the formation of this competence. The study offers theoretical reference for the pre-service education of English teachers, for the assessment of classroom teaching pragmatic competence, and for the preparation of English teachers for basic education in ethnic minority regions.*

Keywords: *pre-service English teachers; classroom teaching pragmatic competence; pre-service teacher education; multilingual background; ethnic minority universities*

1. Introduction

Recent years have seen a gradual shift in basic education English curriculum reform away from a focus on linguistic knowledge and skills and towards disciplinary core competencies. The English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition) stresses that, while developing students' linguistic competence, the English curriculum should also promote their cultural awareness, thinking quality and learning ability, and it advocates the integration of teaching, learning and assessment[1]. Such a change in curricular goals entails a corresponding change in what English teachers are expected to be able to do: they are no longer merely transmitters of linguistic knowledge, but designers of classroom activities, organisers of the learning process, mediators of teacher–student interaction and supporters of students' language practice.

In this process, teacher language is simultaneously a medium of communication and a pedagogical resource in its own right. Take classroom questioning as an example. Teachers must consider not only whether their English is correct, but also whether a question matches students' cognitive level, whether it serves the instructional objective, whether it can stimulate thinking, and whether a follow-up question, a hint or a reformulation is needed when students fail to answer. In other words, the value of teacher language depends not only on "whether it is said correctly", but more importantly on "whether it is said appropriately and effectively, and with pedagogical significance, in a particular instructional situation". This issue brings research on general pragmatic competence into contact with research on teacher education.

For ordinary English learners, pragmatic competence mainly concerns the appropriate comprehension and use of language in a particular sociocultural context. For pre-service English teachers, however, language use carries a clearly occupational dimension. Student teachers must use

language to accomplish such instructional acts as questioning, explaining, modelling, giving feedback, correcting errors, evaluating, organising and managing. Their pragmatic competence is, in effect, a professional pragmatic competence embedded in instructional activity.

The context of ethnic minority universities compounds this issue further. A multilingual background means that student teachers' language experience is not a simple binary "mother tongue–English" structure but may involve multiple linguistic resources, including minority languages, Chinese and English. Cook's work on multicompetence shows that multilinguals are not simply the sum of several monolingual competences, but may develop a multilingual language system with distinctive properties of its own, together with heightened metalinguistic awareness[2]. The classroom teaching pragmatic competence of pre-service English teachers at ethnic minority universities therefore cannot be modelled simply on that of general English learners; it needs to be examined in the triple relationship between multilingual background, teacher professional development and basic education practice. Accordingly, this paper addresses three questions: first, how the conceptual content of classroom teaching pragmatic competence should be defined; second, what theoretical support this construct can draw upon; and third, what theoretical significance the multilingual context of ethnic minority universities holds for the formation of this competence.

2. Literature Review: From General Pragmatic Competence to Teachers' Classroom Pragmatic Competence

2.1 Pragmatic competence research: from linguistic form to situated use

Pragmatics is concerned with the relationship between language use and specific contexts. Leech defines pragmatics as the study of utterance meaning and its situated use, emphasising the relationship between communicative goals and principles of language use[3]. Within research on communicative language ability, Canale and Swain incorporate sociolinguistic competence into the framework of communicative competence, stressing that language use must conform to sociocultural rules[4]; Bachman further places pragmatic competence at an important position within the framework of communicative language ability, understanding it in terms of language functions and sociolinguistic use[5]; Bachman and Palmer subsequently link the assessment of language ability to concrete language use tasks, gradually moving language testing away from the testing of isolated linguistic forms and towards authentic contexts of use[6]. A significant shift is thus evident in the development of pragmatic competence theory: the criterion for evaluating language use has moved from "whether the language is correct" towards "whether the language is appropriate to a particular person, a particular purpose and a particular situation".

2.2 L2 pragmatics research: from pragmatic knowledge to pragmatic development

Research on L2 pragmatics has focused further on how learners acquire and develop pragmatic competence. Taguchi notes that the study of L2 pragmatic competence has grown into a substantial field of theoretical and empirical work, addressing the components, development, instruction and assessment of pragmatic competence[7]. Thomas's study of cross-cultural pragmatic failure is particularly illuminating: pragmatic failure does not necessarily stem from errors of linguistic form, but may arise from a communicator's misreading of particular discourse intentions and sociocultural rules[8]. This insight matters for English teacher candidates in ethnic minority regions, who, when using English in multilingual and multicultural settings, must deal not only with English linguistic forms but also with differences in pragmatic norms across languages and cultures.

2.3 Research on pragmatics instruction: teachability and developability

Pragmatic competence was once sometimes regarded as an ability that emerges naturally through prolonged language contact, but recent research shows that it is clearly teachable. Taguchi's review shows that pragmatics instruction has developed along a range of pathways, including explicit instruction, implicit instruction, input processing and skills training[9]. More tellingly, meta-analytic evidence provides strong support for the effectiveness of pragmatics instruction: Ren, Li and Lü's synthesis of 29 studies involving 1,898 L2 learners found that pragmatics instruction has a substantial positive effect on the development of L2 pragmatic competence, and that factors such as instructional time, type of instruction and measurement method moderate this effect[10]. This means that pragmatic competence is not a "covert ability" obtainable only through naturalistic exposure to a language, but a

professional competence that can be cultivated through systematic instruction, situated practice and feedback-based assessment.

2.4 Gaps in existing research

Existing research has addressed in considerable depth the pragmatic competence of L2 learners and the instruction and assessment of pragmatics. When the population of interest becomes pre-service English teachers, however, the problem changes in substance. First, research on general pragmatic competence is concerned with whether learners can perform communicative acts such as requesting, refusing, apologising and suggesting, whereas classroom teaching pragmatic competence is concerned with the relationship between speech acts and instructional acts. Second, assessment of general pragmatic competence tends to focus on learner performance, whereas assessment in teacher education needs to examine the degree of alignment among instructional objectives, student responses and teachers' linguistic behaviour. Third, traditional L2 pragmatics research has typically been set in monolingual or second language learning environments, whereas student teachers at ethnic minority universities are characterised by multilingual and multicultural experience; how multilingual resources shape teachers' pragmatic awareness and classroom language choices still requires theoretical elaboration. Fourth, the formation of pragmatic competence depends heavily on authentic situations, and teacher education precisely involves a transition between "university coursework" and "school practice"; practice teaching should therefore become a key theoretical link connecting pragmatics theory with teachers' professional competence.

3. Defining Classroom Teaching Pragmatic Competence

3.1 From "pragmatic competence" to "classroom teaching pragmatic competence"

This paper does not treat classroom teaching pragmatic competence as the mere application of general pragmatic competence in the classroom, but as a teacher competence with a distinct professional status. It should be noted that "classroom teaching pragmatic competence" is a conceptual integration based on existing theories of pragmatic competence, communicative language ability and teacher professional competence; it is a working definition and theoretical construct proposed in this paper rather than a concept of the same name already established by any particular scholar. Accordingly, classroom teaching pragmatic competence may be defined as the integrated professional ability of English teachers to select, organise, regulate and reflect on linguistic behaviour, in accordance with instructional objectives and students' characteristics, within specific classroom situations, so as to realise such pedagogical functions as knowledge construction, teacher–student interaction, classroom management, learning scaffolding and affective support (see Figure 1).

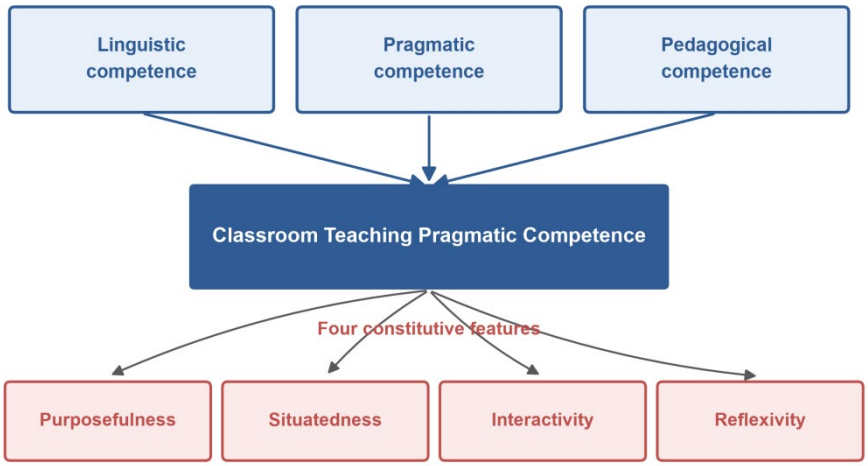


Figure 1. Conceptual construction of classroom teaching pragmatic competence

3.2 Four constitutive features

Classroom teaching pragmatic competence comprises four constitutive features. The first is purposefulness: teacher language has a clear instructional purpose, and every question, piece of feedback and instruction serves a specific instructional objective—this is the fundamental marker distinguishing teacher language from everyday communicative language. The second is situatedness: language choices are shaped by the stage of the lesson, students' proficiency, instructional content and interactional relationships, so that the same expression may take different appropriate forms at different stages of a lesson, such as lead-in, explanation, practice and summary. The third is interactivity: teacher language is not a one-way output but is continuously adjusted on the basis of students' responses; students' silence, incorrect answers or partial understanding all require immediate linguistic responses from the teacher. The fourth is reflexivity: teachers need to judge and revise their linguistic behaviour in the light of classroom outcomes, so that language use becomes a professional practice open to continuous improvement.

3.3 Relations to adjacent constructs

Classroom teaching pragmatic competence in fact occupies the intersection of linguistic competence, pragmatic competence and pedagogical competence. It is grounded in linguistic competence but goes beyond the correctness of linguistic form; it centres on pragmatic competence but is oriented towards the realisation of instructional functions; it relies on pedagogical competence but is always manifested through linguistic behaviour. It is not a linguistic ability that general English learners naturally possess, but a knowledge structure gradually formed in the course of teacher professionalisation. Extending the object of assessment from the "language product" to the relationship among "linguistic behaviour—instructional situation—instructional effect" is what distinguishes this construct from general pragmatic competence.

The construct also performs three theoretical functions. First, at the level of assessment, it provides a clear object for evaluating student teachers' classroom language performance, so that assessment no longer stops at the correctness of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary but reaches into the matching relationship between language use and instructional situations. Second, at the curriculum level, it provides a competence goal for the design of pre-service teacher education programmes, around which language skills courses, methodology courses and practicum courses can be aligned. Third, at the practical level, it provides a framework for observing and analysing such practice-based components as teaching observation, microteaching and the teaching practicum, moving the organisation of practice teaching from "accumulating experience" towards "goal-directed competence development".

4. Theoretical Foundations: Five Pillars Supporting Classroom Teaching Pragmatic Competence

The theoretical construction of classroom teaching pragmatic competence can draw on the following five theoretical pillars (see Figure 2).

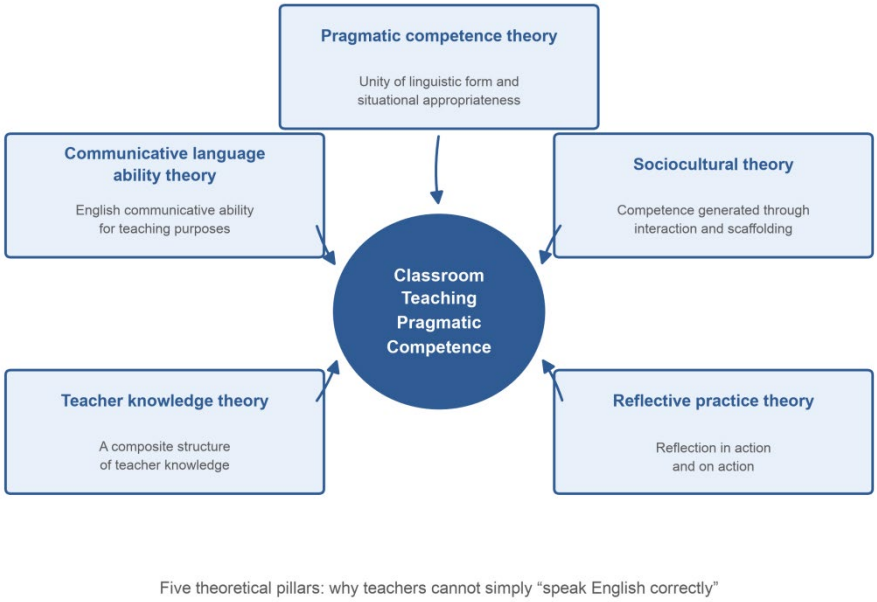


Figure 2. Five theoretical pillars supporting classroom teaching pragmatic competence

4.1 Pragmatic competence theory: the unity of linguistic form and situational appropriateness

Pragmatic competence theory answers the question of why a teacher cannot simply speak English correctly. Correctness of linguistic form is not equivalent to appropriateness of language use: teachers must select linguistic forms according to their interlocutors, instructional objectives and classroom situations. Pragmatic competence theory thus provides the most direct theoretical foundation for classroom teaching pragmatic competence: the professionalism of teacher language is manifested first of all in judgements about when, where and how to say something, and in what words.

4.2 Communicative language ability theory: the functionalisation of language ability

Canale and Swain's theory of communicative competence emphasises the relationship among linguistic knowledge, sociolinguistic knowledge and strategic competence[4]. Applied to teacher education, this theory suggests a further proposition: what student teachers need is not merely "English communicative competence" but "English communicative competence for pedagogical purposes". Accordingly, such classroom language behaviours as questioning, feedback, error correction and evaluation should all become important content in the development and assessment of student teachers' pragmatic competence.

4.3 Sociocultural theory: competence emerges through interaction and scaffolding

Sociocultural theory holds that cognitive development occurs in the course of social interaction, and teacher learning is no exception. Ishihara's study of teacher-based assessment for foreign language pragmatics, grounded in sociocultural theory, shows that teacher assessment can be integrated with the process of pragmatics instruction[11]; Samaras and Gismondi's Vygotskian reading of a teacher education programme likewise indicates that scaffolding in field settings can effectively support pre-service teachers' professional learning[12]. For student teachers, mentor teachers' modelling, peer collaboration, classroom practice and feedback can all constitute "scaffolds" for competence development. Practice teaching, therefore, is not simply a matter of increasing the number of practice opportunities; it is a means of helping student teachers, through social interaction, to move from "knowing how to express something" to "knowing when it should be expressed in that way".

4.4 Teacher knowledge theory: classroom pragmatic competence as professional knowledge

Shulman proposes the notion of a knowledge base for teaching, emphasising that teaching requires not only subject-matter knowledge but also pedagogical content knowledge, knowledge of learners,

curricular knowledge and knowledge of educational contexts[13]. It follows that classroom teaching pragmatic competence is in fact a composite form of teacher knowledge integrating English language knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, knowledge of learners, contextual knowledge and interactional knowledge. It is not an ability that can be acquired through English language training alone, but one that must be generated through the combined action of teacher education coursework and practice.

4.5 Reflective practice theory: pragmatic competence develops through reflection on practice

Schön proposes "reflection-in-action" and "reflection-on-action", emphasising that professionals think while acting and form professional judgements by reflecting on their practice experience[14]. This theory has direct explanatory power for classroom teaching pragmatic competence: when a teacher notices that students appear not to have understood an instruction and immediately adjusts the wording, this is reflection-in-action; when the teacher later reviews a video recording and asks "why did the students not understand, and did I use an expression that was too complex?", this is reflection-on-action. Pragmatic reflection is thus an important mechanism through which classroom teaching pragmatic competence moves from experience towards professional competence.

5. Theoretical Characteristics of Classroom Teaching Pragmatic Competence in a Multilingual Context

5.1 Multilingual competence and metalinguistic awareness

A multilingual background cannot be understood merely as an "interfering variable" in English learning. Cook's research indicates that multilinguals develop a composite language competence with characteristics of its own, rather than the simple addition of two independent monolingual systems[2]; May's edited volume The Multilingual Turn further critiques the monolingual bias in language education and stresses multilingual learners' multiple linguistic resources and their educational value[15]. On this basis, the multilingual background of pre-service English teachers at ethnic minority universities has at least a dual effect (see Figure 3).

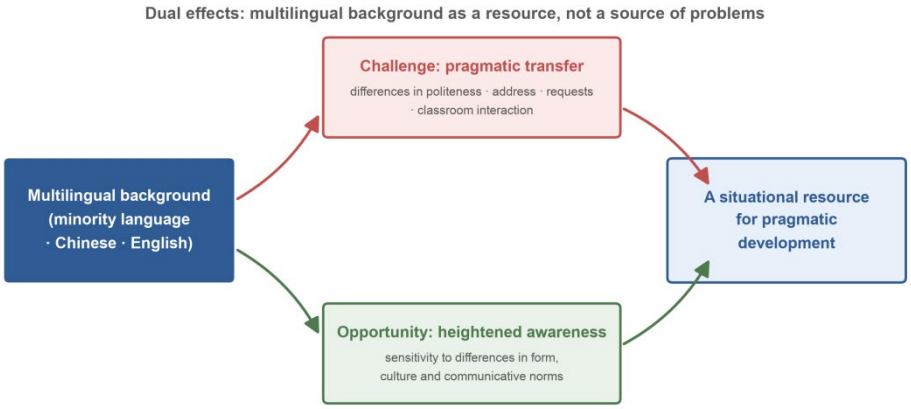


Figure 3. Dual effects of the multilingual background

5.2 The dual effects of pragmatic transfer and language awareness

On the one hand, a multilingual background may give rise to pragmatic transfer. Languages differ in politeness expressions, forms of address, requests, refusals and classroom interaction, and student teachers may carry the pragmatic rules of languages they already know into the English classroom. For example, relatively indirect request forms or particular conventions of teacher–student address in certain languages may be unconsciously transplanted into English classroom instructions and feedback, producing a deviation from English pragmatic conventions. On the other hand, a multilingual background may also heighten student teachers' language awareness, making them more sensitive to differences among linguistic forms, cultural meanings and communicative norms—and precisely this sensitivity underlies the ability to judge classroom contexts and regulate language. This paper therefore does not treat the multilingual background of ethnic minority universities as a mere "source of

problems", but as a situational resource for the development of pragmatic competence: student teachers' language experience is not a burden on their training but a professional foundation that can be transformed into classroom pragmatic judgement.

5.3 Defining pragmatic appropriateness

Appropriateness as understood here is not simply "expressing oneself like a native speaker of English", but the degree of fit between language use and communicative purposes, instructional tasks, students' characteristics, classroom relationships and specific contexts. This position is consistent with the orientation of cross-cultural pragmatics research, which rejects the absolutisation of any single linguistic and cultural norm[8]. In English classrooms in ethnic minority regions, teachers in particular need to understand the linguistic and cultural resources that students already possess and to avoid treating one particular English cultural norm as the sole standard. This makes "multilingual and intercultural pragmatic awareness" an important component of the professional competence of pre-service English teachers at ethnic minority universities.

6. Conclusion and Prospects

This paper re-examines the question of English student teachers' pragmatic competence from the perspective of teacher professional development, proposes "classroom teaching pragmatic competence" as a construct with a teacher-education orientation, and attempts to establish its theoretical framework. Compared with general L2 pragmatic competence, classroom teaching pragmatic competence is more strongly characterised by purposefulness, situatedness, interactivity, professionalism and reflexivity. It does not simply answer the question of whether a teacher's English is correct, but whether the teacher is able, in a particular classroom situation, to select the most appropriate and effective linguistic behaviour in the light of students and instructional objectives. Drawing on pragmatic competence theory, communicative language ability theory, sociocultural theory, teacher knowledge theory and reflective practice theory, the paper establishes the theoretical grounding of this construct and clarifies the status of the multilingual background of ethnic minority universities as a situational resource.

This theoretical framework also points towards the practical questions of assessment and development: how to assess student teachers' classroom teaching pragmatic competence in classroom situations, and how to foster its development through such practice settings as teaching observation, microteaching, simulated teaching and the teaching practicum, require further exploration in subsequent research[16]. Future research may also empirically test the conceptual framework proposed here through classroom video data, corpora, longitudinal tracking of student teachers and case studies of the teaching practicum, and may develop instruments for assessing English student teachers' classroom teaching pragmatic competence that are appropriate to ethnic minority contexts. In this way, pre-service education of English teachers may shift from "preparing people who know English" to "preparing people who can teach in English", and then to "preparing professional teachers who can teach English effectively in multilingual, multicultural basic education settings". This, too, constitutes the theoretical value of research on the classroom teaching pragmatic competence of pre-service English teachers at ethnic minority universities.

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