

Multilingual Learners' Grammatical and Pragmatic Awareness in Chinese EFL Context: From Three Layers of Language Awareness Perspective

Baiyinna Wu¹

¹ School of Foreign Languages, Inner Mongolia Normal University, Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, 010022, China

Correspondence: Baiyinna Wu, School of Foreign Languages, Inner Mongolia Normal University, Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, 010022, China.

Received: April 17, 2022

Accepted: May 11, 2022

Online Published: May 16, 2022

doi: 10.5539/elt.v15n6p1

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v15n6p1>

Abstract

The research was aimed to explore multilingual learners' grammatical and pragmatic awareness from perspective of three layers of language awareness: perception, noticing and understanding in Chinese EFL context.

The findings reveal that firstly, there exists negative correlation between three layers of grammatical and pragmatic awareness of multilingual learners with low English proficiency; however, there exists positive correlation between three layers of grammatical and pragmatic awareness of multilingual learners with higher proficiency levels. Secondly, on grammatical awareness, there is not a significant difference between Mongolian multilingual learners; on pragmatic awareness, in perception and understanding layer, there exists a significant difference, but in noticing layer, there is not. There were not significant differences between Han Chinese bilinguals and Mongolian multilinguals on grammatical awareness in perception, noticing and understanding as well as perceptual aspect of pragmatic awareness; however, there are significant differences in noticing and understanding. Thirdly, there is a low positive correlation between pragmatic awareness and pragmatic competence of Mongolian learners with different proficiency level.

The present research findings indicate the necessity of developing ethnic minority students' multilingual awareness by training of multilingual teachers and of implementing multilingual pedagogical approaches, and highlight significance of increasing teachers' language awareness by further development of language teacher education and cultivating learners' multilingual competence in EFL contexts.

Keywords: grammatical and pragmatic awareness, proficiency level, layers of language awareness, pragmatic competence, grammatical and pragmatic judgment test, discourse completion task

1. Introduction

There are 56 officially recognized ethnic groups in the People's Republic of China. The Han is the majority group, comprises approximately 91.51% of the national total population, according to the 2010 census, and the remaining 55 ethnic minority groups, mostly located in five autonomous regions, speak more than 80 languages, among them, about 30 have written forms. Inner Mongolia, one of the five autonomous regions, is located in the northern part of China. The education of these ethnic minority groups is of great vitality for the country's stability, unity and economic development (Zhang & Bob, 2020). There are about 48 ethnic minorities in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (IMAR), and Mongolian is the largest group, and bilingual education has been regularly provided for this minority group, and most of them are learning English as a third language after acquiring their mother tongue, and learning Chinese as a second language. Mongolian Nationality Schools in IMAR are expected to offer a trilingual education and Mongolian students have the right to receive higher education in two language systems, Mongolian or Chinese (Wei et al., 2019). Therefore, Mongolian students usually begin to learn Chinese as a second language when they are in the second grade, and start learning English as a third language at elementary school. So, most of them are almost balanced bilinguals of Mongolian and Chinese. Mongolian multilingual (Note 1) learners participated in this study were English majors, who began to learn Japanese as a second foreign language when they were sophomore. Han Chinese learners were bilinguals. Even in the same EFL context in China, Mongolian learners' English teaching and learning is quite different from and more complicated than that of Han Chinese. In the L3 acquisition, Mongolian learners'

previously learned languages could attribute to enhanced metalinguistic awareness which is accumulated through the experience of learning and is identified as an influential component of multilingual competence in a considerable body of publications (Angelovska & Hahn, 2014).

Grammatical and pragmatic awareness has been one of the most widely discussed topics in the area of second language acquisition research. The number of studies after the original study by Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) also explored the interrelationship between learners' grammatical and pragmatic awareness in EFL and ESL contexts. The research findings indicate that learners' target language proficiency plays a significant role in grammatical and pragmatic competence development; and language awareness plays a significant role in L2 learners' L3 or L4 learning, and having knowledge of more than one language leads to a heightened awareness of language and metalinguistic abilities which are put to use in L3 or L4 learning. As a result, multilinguals often demonstrate superior metalinguistic and meta-cognitive abilities (Jessner, 2008). Despite various calls to extend the study of the grammatical and pragmatic awareness development of learners of different proficiency levels and L1s in EFL contexts, this area of research has received less attention. Therefore, the present study endeavors to bridge the existing gap and shed more light on the issue of language awareness in multilingual teaching and learning by investigating whether grammatical and pragmatic awareness of Mongolian learners of different proficiency levels develop simultaneously, how proficiency level influences grammatical and pragmatic awareness development, whether multilinguals have more privilege in language awareness in Chinese EFL context, and how pragmatic awareness can be translated into corresponding pragmatic competence in production.

2. Literature Review

Grammatical and pragmatic competence are the two components of communicative competencies (Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei, 1998; Niezgodna and Röver, 2001), and one of the assumptions with regard to the relationship between these two is that pragmatic competence represents a part of overall L2 proficiency, so an increase in L2 proficiency can lead to an increase in L2 pragmatic competence. However, according to Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998:686), grammatical competence is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for interlanguage pragmatic competence.

Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei pioneers (1998) examined three variables: learning environment, overall L2 proficiency, and length of residence, playing significant roles in L2 pragmatic competence development. They investigated participants of 655 EFL learners in Hungary and Italy and ESL in U.S. and their 53 teachers' ability in recognizing pragmatic infelicities and ungrammaticality through timed judgment task by presenting 20 scenarios involving four speech acts: requests, apologies, suggestions, and refusals. The results showed that learning environment and overall L2 proficiency made significant differences on learners' pragmatic and grammatical awareness. The ESL learners were more sensitive to pragmatic infelicities, while the EFL learners were more sensitive to ungrammaticality. In regard to the influence of L2 proficiency, the participants in ESL environments were more aware of pragmatic aspects of the utterances but less aware of grammatical errors; the participants in the EFL context showed the opposite tendency. The results approved the significance of learning environment in developing learners' pragmatic competence, which can lead to different sensitivity to pragmatic awareness.

Since the influential research conducted by Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998), discussions of the relation between grammatical and pragmatic awareness development has aroused many scholars' great attention in the field of second language acquisition research. Niezgodna and Röever (2001) replicated Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's (1998) study with 124 EFL learners in the Czech Republic with low length of residence in an English-speaking country and 48 ESL learners in Hawaii, using the same instrument used in the original study to collect data. The results showed that the EFL groups regarded grammatical errors as more severe than pragmatic infelicities while the ESL group indicated the opposite tendency.

Findings from Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) and Niezgodna and Röever (2001) showed that both ESL groups judged pragmatic appropriateness as more important than their EFL counterparts. However, the researchers did not come to the consensus on the extent to which, L2 proficiency or length of residence contribute more to L2 pragmatics. Yamanaka (2003) conducted research to examine the correlation among L2 proficiency, length of residence and L2 pragmatic awareness. The results indicated that both length of residence and L2 proficiency correlated significantly with L2 pragmatic awareness; however, the correlation between L2 proficiency and L2 pragmatic awareness was found to be higher than that between the length of residence and L2 pragmatic awareness, indicating that L2 proficiency is more influential and represents a stronger predictor in L2 pragmatics than length of residence. Schauer (2006) replicated Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's (1998) study by investigating pragmatic awareness in ESL and EFL context. In addition to the judgment task used in the original

study, they used interview to explore how the participants classified ungrammaticality and pragmatic infelicity, and understand the reason why they thought it was problematic. Besides, they also considered the developmental aspects of pragmatic of ESL learners in England, which was not considered in the original study. The results indicated that the EFL group in Germany found less pragmatic infelicities than the ESL in England and the native speaker counterparts, while regarding grammatical error, the results were the reverse.

Inspired by Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) and the related research, Chinese scholars conducted a series of studies on English learners' grammatical and pragmatic awareness in Chinese EFL contexts. Li and Chen's (2007) study examined the correlations between pragmatic awareness and competence, grammatical awareness and competence of 49 first year and third year English majors, using the task designed by Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998). The results showed that: (1) Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic awareness and competence are significantly higher than their grammatical awareness and competence, which is opposite to the results from the studies of Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) and Niezgodá & Röever (2001); (2) Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic awareness and competence significantly correlate with their grammatical awareness and competence. The results suggest that in a Chinese EFL context, the development of pragmatic competence and awareness precedes that of grammatical competence and awareness. He and Gong (2013) investigated pragmatic and grammatical awareness of learners with different proficiency levels in the different learning stages, using the same instrument with Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998), accompanied with post-hoc interview. The results revealed that: (1) There are significant differences among the students with different proficiency in the different learning stages in regard to pragmatic and grammatical awareness; (2) Chinese English learners' grammatical and pragmatic awareness are not developing simultaneously: the former develops faster and higher than the latter. However, in the advanced stage of learning, pragmatic awareness is higher than grammatical awareness. (3) The learners' pragmatic awareness develops continuously while the grammatical awareness develops and then decreases. He and Gong (2015) explored the development and contributing factors of grammatical awareness of Chinese English learners with varying English proficiency levels, at different learning stages based on grammatical awareness questionnaire designed by Andrew (1998). The results indicated that: (1) Chinese EFL learners' grammatical awareness correlates with their L2 proficiency level; (2) The learners' grammatical awareness is not the highest in the advanced learning stage, and the learners' grammatical awareness develops to the climax and then decreases gradually; (3) Learner attention allocation, L1 grammatical awareness and learning environment are the main factors influencing Chinese EFL learners' development of grammatical awareness. Gong and He (2017) studied the characteristics and developmental trajectories of Chinese EFL learners' grammatical awareness according to Schmidt (1990) and Leow's idea (1997) that language awareness consists of three levels of awareness: perception, noticing and understanding, using questionnaires designed by Andrew (1999). The results showed that: (1) The level of perception displays a linear-rise developmental trend, the level of noticing shows a stable developmental pattern, and the level of understanding demonstrates an upturned "U" shape developmental model; (2) The developments of perception and understanding are both significantly different at various learning stages, which are the main factors influencing the development of grammatical awareness; (3) The three levels of grammatical awareness are significantly correlated, but in the stage of graduate learning, there exists negative correlation between perception and understanding, noticing and understanding. He & Gong (2020) explored the characteristics and developmental patterns of pragmatic awareness among Chinese English learners from the integrated and layered perspectives of pragmatic awareness, and the results indicated that the degree of pragmatic awareness and the levels of the three layers were significantly different among various proficiency levels, and the higher language proficiency the higher pragmatic awareness. Besides, the degree of pragmatic awareness and the levels of the three layers of female learners were always higher than those of male learners.

The literature review has revealed that the relevant research explored learners' grammatical and pragmatic awareness both in ESL and EFL contexts. The research findings in ESL contexts showed that learning environment and target language input made significant differences on learners' pragmatic and grammatical awareness, and ESL learners were more sensitive to pragmatic infelicities. However, these studies ignored examining grammatical and pragmatic awareness from levels of three layers of language awareness: perception, noticing and understanding. The research in EFL contexts informed that EFL learners were usually more sensitive to ungrammaticality, and in Chinese EFL contexts, the research mainly focused on characteristics and development of grammatical and pragmatic awareness of Han Chinese learners with varying proficiency levels at different stages of learning from levels of three layers of language awareness. However, the research findings both in ESL and EFL inform that the results are inconsistent and there is a disparity between grammatical and pragmatic awareness development, which calls for further research to gain deeper insights into the grammatical and pragmatic awareness development. Furthermore, few studies have investigated the influence of English

proficiency of multilingual learners in Chinese EFL context on grammatical and pragmatic awareness; Secondly no research tend to compare multilingual and bilinguals' language awareness in the same EFL context; thirdly, there have been very little research exploring the relationship between pragmatic awareness and competence in production. Therefore, the present study explores grammatical and pragmatic awareness of multilingual learners with different proficiency levels from perspective of levels of three layers of language awareness: perception, noticing and understanding. Specifically, the following three research questions are addressed:

- 1) What is the relationship between grammatical and pragmatic awareness of multilingual learners with different English proficiency levels?
- 2) Does multilingual learners' English proficiency level influence different layers of grammatical and pragmatic awareness?
- 3) Does multilingual learners' English proficiency level influence their pragmatic competence in production? How is learners' pragmatic awareness related to their pragmatic competence?

3. Research Method

3.1 Participants

A total of 102 English majors with different proficiency levels and language backgrounds, from 4 different classes at one university in one of the autonomous regions in China, participated in this research. Among them, 75 are Mongolians who learn English as L3 and or Japanese as L4 after acquiring L1, Mongolian, and learning Chinese as L2. The rest were 27 Han Chinese students, learning English as L2.

Table 1. Background of the participants

L1	Grade	No.	Language Background
	1 st year	30	Trilinguals (L1 Mongolian, L2 Chinese, L3 English)
Mongolian	2 nd year	29	Multilinguals (L1 Mongolian, L2 Chinese, L3 English, L4 Japanese)
	5 th year	16	Multilinguals (L1 Mongolian, L2 Chinese, L3 English, L4 Japanese)
Chinese	1 st year	27	Bilinguals (L1 Chinese, L2 English)

3.2 Tasks and Test

In the present study, grammatical and pragmatic judgment test, discourse completion task and Test for English Majors-Band 4 Test (TEM 4) were used to elicit data.

Task 1: Grammatical and pragmatic judgment test was designed based on the task developed by Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) to test multilingual learners' grammatical and pragmatic awareness. According to the idea of Schmidt (1990) and Leow (1997), language awareness consists of three layers of awareness: perception, noticing and understanding. Task 1 included additional tasks of error correction (noticing level) and providing explanations to the corrections (understanding level), which were not covered in the original study. The original study includes identifying whether the sentences were grammatically correct and pragmatically appropriate and rating the gravity of the incorrectness or inappropriateness of the statement (perception level).

Task 2: Discourse Completion Task, designed to test multilingual learners' pragmatic competence in production, has 20 unfinished conversations covering four speech acts include *requests, apologies, suggestions, and refusals*. Each scenario presents a conversation which could take place in a school or a shop or somewhere else between classmates, students and teachers.

TEM4 is used to measure English proficiency of Chinese university undergraduates majoring in English Language and Literature. It lasts for 135 minutes, and is administered once a year in April by the National Advisory Committee for Foreign Language Teaching on behalf of the Higher Education Department, Ministry of Education of People's Republic of China (Jin & Fan, 2011). TEM 4 test content includes listening (Note 2), writing, reading, grammar and vocabulary and cloze. The details of the test are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Background of TEM 4

No.	Tasks	Input	Format	Score (%)	
1	Reading	4–5 texts totaling 1800 words	Multiple Choice & Short Answer Question	20	
2	Writing	A topic, chart or graph prompts	Written	A text of about 200 Words	20
3	Grammar & vocabulary	20-30 sentences	Multiple Choice Question	20	
4	Cloze	A text of 250 words	Multiple Choice Question	10	

In order to investigate whether multilinguals have any advantage in grammatical and pragmatic awareness over bilinguals, reading, grammar and vocabulary and cloze parts of TEM 4 were used to evaluate English proficiency of 2nd year Mongolian multilinguals and 1st year Han Chinese bilinguals, whose English proficiency was anticipated to be similar.

Table 3. Result of TEM 4Test

L1	Grade Language Background	MSD	MD	Sig.
Mongolian	2 nd year Multilinguals	22.067	6.654	-8.533 .000
Chinese	1 st year Bilinguals	30.600	7.411	

The result in Table 3 shows that the mean of 1st year Han Chinese bilinguals’ English proficiency is higher than that of 2nd year Mongolian multilinguals (MD = -8.533), and there is a significant difference between them.

Some Mongolian learners do not pay much attention to English learning. Besides, because of the poor quality of English teachers’ instruction for Mongolian students in rural and pastoral areas, Mongolian learners’ English proficiency level is usually lower than that of Han Chinese students, even if they are all English majors in the same grade at the university.

3.3 Research Procedures

Firstly, the participants were organized to finish task 1 and task 2. Secondly, 1st year Han Chinese bilinguals and 2nd year Mongolian multilingual students were invited to attend the TEM 4.

Task 1: The participants were shown a written scenario of conversations. Firstly, they were asked to indicate the correctness of last utterances in the 20 scenarios by checking *yes* or *no*. If the answer was *no*, the participants were asked to rate the gravity of the incorrectness or inappropriateness by circling one number on a Likert-scale of 1-6 on the line between “Not bad at all” and “Very bad”. After that, the participants were asked to correct the utterances that they thought incorrect or inappropriate. Finally, the participants were required to explain the reason why they thought it was incorrect or inappropriate. If the answer was *yes*, the participants proceeded to the next scenario (see the following examples).

Example 1: Scenario with grammatical problem

Peter is talking to his teacher. The conversation is almost finished.									
Teacher: Well, I think that is all I can help you with at the moment.									
Peter: <i>That’s great. Thank you so much for all the information.</i>									
Is the part italicized grammatically correct? <table border="1" style="margin-left: auto; margin-right: auto; text-align: center;"> <tr> <td style="width: 20px; height: 20px;"></td> <td style="width: 20px; height: 20px;">x</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Yes</td> <td>No</td> </tr> </table> <p>◇ It is grammatically incorrect, so No is marked with (x).</p>		x	Yes	No	Is the part italicized appropriate in this situation? <table border="1" style="margin-left: auto; margin-right: auto; text-align: center;"> <tr> <td style="width: 20px; height: 20px;">√</td> <td style="width: 20px; height: 20px;"></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Yes</td> <td>No</td> </tr> </table> <p>◇ It is appropriate pragmatically, so Yes is marked with (√).</p>	√		Yes	No
	x								
Yes	No								
√									
Yes	No								
– If there was a problem, how bad do you think it was? Not bad at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 ▶ Very bad									

- ◇ Anna’s mistake is not serious, so number 2 is circled.
- And, how would you revise it?
- ◇ Correction:
- Peter: That’s great. Thank you so much for all the information.
- Explain the reason why it is not correct or not appropriate.
- ◇ The word “information” is uncountable noun.

Example 2: Scenario with pragmatic problem

John: Good morning, Sally.
 Anna: *Good night, John.*

Is the part italicized grammatically correct? <table border="1" style="margin: auto; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="text-align: center; width: 30px;">√</td> <td style="width: 30px;"></td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">Yes</td> <td style="text-align: center;">No</td> </tr> </table> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ It is grammatically correct, so Yes is marked with (√). 	√		Yes	No	Is the part italicized appropriate in this situation? <table border="1" style="margin: auto; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 30px;"></td> <td style="text-align: center;">×</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">Yes</td> <td style="text-align: center;">No</td> </tr> </table> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ It is not appropriate pragmatically, so No is marked with (×). 		×	Yes	No
√									
Yes	No								
	×								
Yes	No								

- If there was a problem, how bad do you think it was?
 Not bad at all — 1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 — 6 — Very bad

◇ Anna’s mistake is very serious, and then number 6 is circled.

- And, how would you revise it?

◇ Correction:

 Anna: Good morning, John.

- Explain the reason why it is not correct or not appropriate.

◇ One should not respond “Goodnight” to the greeting “Good morning.”

Task 2: The participants were asked to finish the conversation according to the given satiations.

Example 3: Scenario with production

- John invites his classmate Robert to have dinner together at the Grand Hotel, but Robert cannot come.
- John: Robert, we are going to have dinner together at the Grand Hotel tonight. Would you like to join us?
 - **Robert:**

3.4 Scoring Instruction

Each participant could earn a total score of 6 from the grammatical and pragmatic judgment test if all answers were correct and acceptable: one for error identification, two for error correction, and three for explanations to errors.

The grammatical and pragmatic awareness were scored separately. As for pragmatic inappropriateness correction, the participants were given a score of “2” if the accuracy of correcting is above 80%; a score of “1.5” is given, if it is between 50%-80%; the participants earn a score of “1” if it is between 30%-50%, and a score of “0” is given if it is under 30%. For grammatical incorrect and pragmatic inappropriate, the participants were given a score of “3” if the accuracy of explanation to error is above 80%; the participant can earn a score of “2”, if it is between 50%-80%; a score of “1” if it is between 30%-50%, and a score of “0” is given if it is under 30%.

4. Results

RQ 1: What is the relationship between grammatical and pragmatic awareness of multilingual learners with different proficiency levels?

In order to examine whether grammatical and pragmatic awareness develop simultaneously, correlation between grammatical and pragmatic awareness of Mongolian multilingual learners with different proficiency levels is tested.

Table 4. Correlation between grammatical and pragmatic awareness of multilingual learners with different proficiency levels

Grade	Language Background	Three layers of awareness	Correlation Coefficient	Sig.
1 st year	Trilinguals	Perception	-.485*	.007
		Noticing	-.072	.704
		Understanding	-.262	.162
5 th year	Multilinguals	Perception	.223	.345
		Noticing	.296	.192
		Understanding	.461*	.041

The results showed negative correlation between three layers of grammatical and pragmatic awareness of Mongolian multilingual learners with low proficiency levels, especially in the perception level, suggesting that grammatical and pragmatic awareness are not developing simultaneously. This result was consistent with the research finding of Xu et al. (2009) that the learners with lower proficiency levels are developing their pragmatic awareness at the expense of grammatical accuracy, leading to a marked imbalance development between grammatical and pragmatic knowledge.

However, there exists positive correlation between grammatical and pragmatic awareness of the multilingual learners with higher proficiency levels, indicating that in the stage of higher learning period, pragmatic awareness increases with the development of grammatical awareness, which is in agreement with the findings of some previous research on the effect of linguistic proficiency on pragmatic awareness that a higher proficiency correlates with a higher level of pragmatic awareness (He & Gong, 2020).

RQ 2: Does multilingual learners' English proficiency level influence different layers of grammatical and pragmatic awareness?

In order to explore whether there are any differences between grammatical and pragmatic awareness of levels of three layers of language awareness, grammatical and pragmatic awareness of Mongolian multilingual learners with different proficiency levels are compared and the results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Grammatical and pragmatic awareness of multilingual learners with different proficiency levels

Item Types	Three layers of awareness	Grade	Language Background	M	SD	Sig.
Grammatical awareness	Perception	1 st year	Trilinguals	3.333	1.688	.125
		5 th year	Multilinguals	4.250	2.236	
	Noticing	1 st year	Trilinguals	4.817	3.420	.320
		5 th year	Multilinguals	6.000	4.454	
	Understanding	1 st year	Trilinguals	5.833	4.800	.437
		5 th year	Multilinguals	7.125	6.206	
Pragmatic awareness	Perception	1 st year	Trilinguals	3.367	2.385	.047
		5 th year	Multilinguals	3.250	1.571	
	Noticing	1 st year	Trilinguals	5.200	4.230	.713
		5 th year	Multilinguals	4.750	3.256	
	Understanding	1 st year	Trilinguals	6.367	6.866	.005
		5 th year	Multilinguals	3.188	3.763	

In general, the results indicate that three layers of both grammatical and pragmatic awareness of multilinguals are comparatively low, and grammatical awareness of Mongolian multilingual learners with high proficiency level is higher than that of learners with low proficiency, informing that proficiency level plays a significant role in grammatical awareness development. On the contrary, pragmatic awareness of Mongolian multilingual learners with low proficiency level is higher than that of learners with high proficiency, indicating that learners with low proficiency pay much attention to pragmatic awareness rather than grammatical awareness. Specifically, on grammatical awareness, there is not a significant difference between multilingual learners with low and high proficiency levels in perception, noticing and understanding; on pragmatic awareness, in perception and understanding level, there are significant differences between multilingual learners with low and high proficiency levels; in noticing level, there does not exist a significant difference between them.

Mongolian multilingual learners with different proficiency levels were invited to rate the severity of grammatical errors and pragmatic inappropriateness, which was the indicator of their language awareness, and the results are shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Severity rating of multilingual learners with different proficiency levels

Item Types	Grade	Language Background	M	SD	Sig.
Grammatical awareness	1 st year	Trilinguals	3.588	1.007	.171
	5 th year	Multilinguals	4.023	1.016	
Pragmatic awareness	1 st year	Trilinguals	3.649	1.324	.747
	5 th year	Multilinguals	3.524	1.040	

The Table 6 showed that in grammatical and pragmatic awareness, there is not a significant difference between multilingual learners, suggesting that proficiency levels do not play an important role in developing grammatical and pragmatic awareness. This is not in agreement with the previous research findings on the effect of linguistic proficiency on grammatical and pragmatic awareness that a higher proficiency level correlates with a higher level of grammatical and pragmatic awareness (Cook & Liddicoat, 2002; Koike, 1996; Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei, 1998).

In order to further understand multilingual learners' grammatical and pragmatic awareness development, multilingual learners' grammatical and pragmatic awareness is compared with that of Han Chinese bilinguals. The result is shown in the Table 7.

Table 7. Comparison of grammatical and pragmatic awareness of Mongolian multilingual learners and Han Chinese bilinguals

Grade	Language Background	Item Types	Three layers of awareness	M	SD	Sig.
2 nd year	Multilinguals	Grammatical awareness	Perception	3.552	1.975	.384
1 st year	Bilinguals		4.000	1.840		
2 nd year	Multilinguals		Noticing	7.035	2.816	.250
1 st year	Bilinguals		6.111	3.124		
2 nd year	Multilinguals	Pragmatic awareness	Understanding	7.793	5.525	.563
1 st year	Bilinguals		8.593	4.693		
2 nd year	Multilinguals		Perception	3.655	1.675	.431
1 st year	Bilinguals		3.296	1.706		
2 nd year	Multilinguals	Pragmatic awareness	Noticing	4.793	3.668	.002
1 st year	Bilinguals		7.852	3.183		
2 nd year	Multilinguals		Understanding	4.138	4.381	.001
1 st year	Bilinguals		8.519	4.484		

The results of grammatical and pragmatic awareness test showed that there were not significant differences between 1st year Chinese bilinguals and 2nd year Mongolian multilinguals on grammatical awareness in perception, noticing and understanding as well as perceptual aspect of pragmatic awareness. This finding indicates that the learners' proficiency level does not influence learners' grammatical awareness, and

grammatical awareness of Mongolian learners with multilingual language background are higher than those of Chinese learners with bilingual language background, suggesting that language background plays significant roles in developing grammatical awareness. This result partially supports the research finding that multilinguals are superior to bilinguals in terms of linguistic awareness (Haukås, 2016), which is valuable empirical evidence to the area of multilingual awareness research.

RQ 3: Does multilingual learners' English proficiency level influence their pragmatic competence in production? How is learners' pragmatic awareness related to pragmatic competence?

The relevant research results show that higher pragmatic awareness does not necessarily guarantee the corresponding level of pragmatic competence since awareness is only a necessary, rather than a sufficient condition for the development of pragmatic competence (Schmidt, 1993; Kasper & Schmidt, 1996). However, few studies have touched how pragmatic awareness is related to corresponding competence by administering a production task, especially with multilingual learners with different proficiency levels in Chinese dominant EFL context.

Therefore, in order to examine pragmatic competence of multilingual learners with different proficiency levels in production, the participants were invited to finish a discourse completion task.

Table 8. Pragmatic competence of multilingual learners with different proficiency levels

Item Types	Grade	Language Background	M	SD	Sig.
Pragmatic competence	1 st year	Trilinguals	51.933	5.552	.024
	5 th year	Multilinguals	47.467	6.937	

The result in Table 8 showed that pragmatic competence of the Mongolian learners with lower proficiency level is higher than that of learners with higher proficiency level, and there is a significant difference between Mongolian learners with low and high proficiency levels, indicating that which might be closely related to the focus of instruction, emphasizing pragmatic aspect of language acquisition at the lower stage of higher education in a Chinese EFL context.

How pragmatic awareness is related to pragmatic competence in production of Mongolian multilingual learners with different proficiency levels are investigated and the results are presented in Table 9.

Table 9. Relation between pragmatic awareness and pragmatic competence of multilingual learners with different proficiency levels in production

Grade	Language Background	Level of awareness	Correlation Coefficient	Sig.
1 st year	Trilinguals	Perception	.142	.456
		Noticing	.072	.704
		Understanding	.113	.553
5 th year	Multilinguals	Perception	.216	.439
		Noticing	.173	.538
		Understanding	.256	.357

Table 9 shows the interesting results that there is a low positive correlation between pragmatic awareness of the three levels (perception, noticing and understanding) and pragmatic competence of Mongolian learners with low and high proficiency level, informing that higher pragmatic awareness of Mongolian learners of English can be translated into appropriate pragmatic competence. But there are not significant differences between pragmatic awareness and competence of Mongolian learners with low and high L2 proficiency.

To examine whether multilinguals exceed bilinguals in pragmatic competence in production, pragmatic competence of multilingual learners is compared with that of Han Chinese bilinguals, and the result is illustrated in Table 10.

Table 10. Comparison of pragmatic competence of Mongolian multilingual learners and Han Chinese bilinguals

Item Type	Grade	Language Background	M	SD	Sig.
Pragmatic competence	2 nd year	Multilinguals	47.867	10.833	.003
	1 st year	Bilinguals	49.276	6.824	

The result in Table 10 showed that pragmatic competence of 1st year Chinese bilinguals with higher proficiency level is higher than that of 2nd year Mongolian multilinguals with lower proficiency level, and there is significant difference between them. This indicates that multilinguals do not show any superior performance to bilinguals in pragmatic competence in discourse completion task, and proficiency level might influence the learners' pragmatic competence in production.

5. Discussion

The present research explored the relationship between grammatical and pragmatic awareness of multilingual learners with different proficiency levels, whether proficiency level influences the degree of learners' different levels of grammatical and pragmatic awareness, whether multilinguals are superior to bilinguals in grammatical and pragmatic awareness, and how learners' pragmatic awareness is related to pragmatic competence in production.

The results indicate that: (1) There exists positive correlation between grammatical and pragmatic awareness of learners with higher proficiency levels except perceptual level. However, there exists negative correlation between grammatical and pragmatic awareness between Mongolian learners with low proficiency levels except perceptual level of 1st year Han Chinese. (2) Grammatical awareness of Mongolian learners with high proficiency level is higher than that of learners with low proficiency, informing that proficiency level plays a significant role in grammatical awareness development. On the contrary, pragmatic awareness of Mongolian learners with low proficiency level is higher than that of learners with high proficiency, indicating that learners with low proficiency pay much more attention to pragmatic awareness than to grammatical awareness. Specifically, in grammatical awareness, there is not a significant difference between Mongolian learners with low and high proficiency levels in perception, noticing and understanding; On pragmatic awareness, in perception level, there is a significant difference between Mongolian learners with low and high proficiency levels; in understanding level, there is a significant difference between Mongolian learners with low and high proficiency levels. However, the results of comparison of grammatical and pragmatic awareness of learners with different L1's indicated that the learners' proficiency level does not influence learners' different levels of grammatical awareness, since grammatical awareness of Mongolian multilingual learners are higher than those of Chinese bilinguals whose proficiency level is higher than that of Mongolian multilinguals, showing that Mongolian multilinguals' grammatical awareness is superior to that of Han Chinese bilinguals. (3) There is a low positive correlation between pragmatic awareness and competence in production of Mongolian learners, informing that for Mongolian learners, the pragmatic competence increases with the development of pragmatic awareness. However, there is not a significant difference between pragmatic awareness and competence in production of Mongolian learners.

The results of the present research partially replicate the interesting contrasts found in original study of Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei' (1998), and some other replication research followed. And these mixed results suggest that more research needs to be conducted to provide further evidences to show how proficiency level influences grammatical and pragmatic awareness development, whether multilinguals exceed bilinguals in grammatical and pragmatic awareness, and how pragmatic awareness can be translated into corresponding appropriate pragmatic competence in production in wider EFL contexts.

The present study has the following three implications: Firstly, in general, grammatical and pragmatic awareness of the multilinguals in this research were not satisfactory. Therefore, developing learners' linguistic awareness should be one of the key teaching objectives of classroom instruction, and raising teacher language awareness should be one part of the teacher professional development (Lindahl, 2018; Andrew et al., 2018); Secondly, one of the findings indicates that English proficiency does influence pragmatic awareness of Mongolian learners with low and high proficiency level, showing that the students with lower proficiency level pay more attention to the pragmatic aspect of language development than the grammatical aspect because of the washback effects of pedagogical instruction, foreshadowing the current teaching approach, which emphasizes developing learners' communicative competence in an EFL context in China. In other words, EFL teaching focuses on raising pragmatic awareness more than grammatical knowledge in the lower English proficiency level stage, over

emphasizing pragmatic appropriateness at the severe expense of grammatical knowledge development. Although increasing pragmatic awareness should be one goal of classroom instructions in Chinese EFL context, grammatical awareness also needed to be strengthened in the future teaching; Thirdly, the result of TEM 4 test shows that there is a significant difference between Mongolian 2nd year students and Han Chinese 1st year students. However, there is not a significance difference between them in grammatical awareness, which suggests that Mongolian multilinguals' grammatical awareness surpassed that of Chinese bilinguals, indicating, to some degree, an essential role played by language awareness in target grammatical awareness development (Ellen et al., 2018) in the EFL context. In order to enhance multi-languages learning, learners are encouraged to be sensitive to cross-linguistic similarities and differences and make full use of prior linguistic knowledge as well as language learning strategies as positive resources. In the process of implementing multilingual education, language teachers' knowledge and beliefs about multilingualism and multilingual pedagogical approaches are playing a facilitating role. Therefore, the further development of language teacher education and training of multilingual teachers is a pressing need since teachers' language awareness is necessary for effective teaching and for developing learners' awareness (Otwinowska, 2014, 2017).

6. Conclusions

The findings of the present study reveal that to some degree, L2 proficiency plays a significant role in developing language awareness and grammatical and pragmatic awareness does not develop simultaneously, which is itself not a surprise at all since the original study by Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) and other related studies reached the similar conclusions. The imbalance development of grammatical and pragmatic awareness is partly due to the current pedagogical focus on pragmatic competence in EFL classroom, encouraging pragmatic competence at the expense of grammatical competence. In Chinese EFL contexts, in recent years, the focus of English teaching has shifted from overemphasizing the significance of grammar knowledge in foreign language teaching to developing learners' communicative competence. Teachers often over emphasized the significance of pragmatic competence development applying the communicative language teaching approach at the beginning stage of English majors to cultivate their communicative competence, ignoring the fact that pragmatic development does not guarantee a corresponding level of grammatical development.

However, the present study has the following attempts to extend the original study of Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) and related studies. Firstly, the EFL learners' grammatical and pragmatic awareness was analyzed from the perspective of levels of three layers of language awareness: perception, noticing and understanding, shedding more light on the particular aspects of language awareness, which could make a contribution to the area of interlanguage grammatical and pragmatic study as well as grammatical and pragmatic instruction in EFL contexts. Secondly, the pragmatic production task that was added to the original research provides a unique opportunity to examine the relation between learners' pragmatic awareness and competence in the real language use. Thirdly, the present study extends the scope of the study of grammatical and pragmatic awareness development in ESL and EFL contexts by comparing grammatical and pragmatic awareness of multilingual and bilingual learners of English in the same EFL context in China.

Despite its contributions of research design and analytical perspective, it has the following two major limitations. Firstly, the data was mainly collected through grammatical and pragmatic judgment test and discourse completion test. However, it could be more insightful to collect on-line data from learners' real conversations (Ren & Li, 2018), and analyze grammatical and pragmatic awareness development from dynamic perspective, which may have yielded different results. Secondly, the participants were not interviewed as soon as they finished the tasks. In-depth teacher interviews as well as interviews with learners of different proficiency levels together with classroom observation will be strongly recommended, which can provide more significant values to the results the data revealed.

In connection with methodological improvements and possible areas for further research, the following suggestions are proposed. One possible area is to collect data from retrospective perspective such as think-aloud protocols (Woll, 2018) and authentic recordings of conversations together with in-depth interviews to supplement the data collected through grammatical and pragmatic judgment test to reveal different levels of depth of grammatical and pragmatic awareness from the dynamic nature of pragmatic competence development (Ren & Li, 2018). A second interesting area for future investigation is how explicit instruction (Kim, 2017; Halenko & Jones, 2011) as well as teacher language awareness might influence the learners' grammatical and pragmatic awareness in an EFL context since teacher language awareness has crucial impact on mediating output from the learner (Kwon, 2018). A third potential topic could be the in-depth analysis of the factors affecting grammatical and pragmatic awareness development both in ESL and EFL contexts, including from macro

perspective of national and regional level multilingual education policy to micro perspective of cross-linguistic awareness in language awareness development, focusing on “awareness transfer” from previously learned languages of multilinguals. A final possible topic for future research can be multilingual education related language policy and its practice in IMAR, China since in the process of implementation of multilingual education according to new national and regional education policies, there will be various tensions and challenges for practitioners regarding how to implement multilingual education, and balance the relationships among Chinese, the minority language, and a foreign language(s). It is apparent that multilingualism can strengthen ethnical identity construction of a minority group within their Chinese national identity, and empower them to engage in the social, political and economic activities in China and abroad (Zhang & Adomson, 2020). But, in the process of multilingual education in IMAR with the new policy, acquisition and promotion of Chinese will be prioritized, and all the school subjects will be taught in Putonghua except for minority language literacy. In order to achieve additive multilingualism with a multilingual pedagogical approach, it is suggested to promote the multilingualism of Putonghua, foreign languages and minority language in a more balanced way in IMAR, China.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Acknowledgements

The present research was conducted with the assistance of Professor Rex. A. Sprouse from the Department of Second Language Studies, Indiana University and the fund of *China Scholarship Council* and *Inner Mongolia Normal University English Grammar Curriculum Construction Project* (19WY14).

References

- Andrew, S., Angel, M., & Lin, Y. (2018). Language awareness and teacher development. In *The Routledge handbook of language awareness*. New York, NY: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315676494-4>
- Andrews S. (1999). “All these like little name things”: A comparative study of language teachers’ explicit knowledge of grammar and grammatical terminology. *Language Awareness*, 8(3-4), 143-159. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09658419908667125>
- Andrews, S. (2007). *Teacher Language Awareness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511497643>
- Angelovska, T., & Hahn, A. (2014). Raising language awareness for learning and teaching grammar. In A. Benati, C. Laval & M. Arche (Eds.), *The grammar dimension in instructed second language learning* (pp. 185-207). London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Bardovi-Harlig, K., & Dörnyei, Z. (1998). Do language learners recognize pragmatic violations? Hange Pragmatic vs. grammatical awareness in instructed L2 learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32(2), 233-262. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3587583>
- Bardovi-Harlig, K., & Griffin, R. (2005). L2 pragmatic awareness: Evidence from the ESL classroom. *System*, 33(3), 401-415. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2005.06.004>
- Bardovi-Harlig, K., & Hartford, B. (1993). Learning the rules of academic talk: A longitudinal study of pragmatic development. *Study in Second Language Acquisition*, 15(3), 279-304. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0272263100012122>
- Bardovi-Harlig, K. (2013). Developing L2 Pragmatics. *Language Learning*, 63(S1), 68-86. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9922.2012.00738.x>
- Bourke, J. M. (2008). A rough guide to language awareness. *English Teaching Forum*, 1, 12-21.
- Ellen W. R. van den Broek, Helma W. Olbakkink-Marchand, Sharon Unsworth, Ans M. C. van Kemenade, & Paulien, C. Meijer. (2018). Unravelling upper-secondary school teachers’ beliefs about language awareness: from conflicts to challenges in the EFL context. *Language Awareness*, 27(4), 331-353. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09658416.2018.1523910>
- Gong, & He. (2017). The characteristics and developmental trajectories of the Chinese English learners’ grammatical awareness. *Foreign Language World*, 3, 65-71.
- Halenko, N., & Jones, C. (2011). Teaching pragmatic awareness of spoken requests to Chinese EAP students in the UK: Is explicit instruction effective? *System*, 39(2), 240-250. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2011.05.003>

- Haukås, A. (2016). Teachers' beliefs about multilingualism and a multilingual pedagogical approach. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 13(1), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2015.1041960>
- He, & Gong. (2013). An empirical study on language awareness of Chinese English learners: From the perspectives of PA and GA. *Modern Foreign Languages*, 3, 278-285.
- He, & Gong. (2020). A study of the characteristics and the trajectories of Chinese English learners' pragmatic awareness. *FLLTP*, (2), 29-35.
- He, & Gong. (2015). The developmental trajectory and contributing factors of grammatical awareness among Chinese English learners. *Foreign Language World*, 5, 52-59.
- Hiroyanaka, H., & Oki, N. (2015). An attempt to raise Japanese EFL learners' pragmatic awareness using online discourse completion tasks. *Jaltcall Journal*, 2, 143-154. <https://doi.org/10.29140/jaltcall.v11n2.189>
- Jessner, U. (2008). A DST model of multilingualism and the role of metalinguistic awareness. *The Modern Language Journal*, 92(2), 270-283. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2008.00718.x>
- Jin, Y., & Fan, J. S. (2011). Test for English Majors (TEM) in China. *Language Testing*, 28(4), 589-596. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265532211414852>
- Jung, Woo-hyun. (2019). L2 Learners Pragmatic Awareness in Comparison to Grammatical Awareness in Tertiary Education Settings. *Modern English Education*, 20(2), 19-32. <https://doi.org/10.18095/meeso.2019.20.2.19>
- Kasper, G., & Schmidt, R. (1996). Developmental issues in interlanguage pragmatics. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 18(2), 149-169. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0272263100014868>
- Kim, H. (2017). The effects of instruction on the pragmatic awareness and production of Korean university students. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 2, 371-380. <https://doi.org/10.17509/ijal.v7i2.8136>
- Kwon, J. (2014). The Role of Proficiency in Pragmatic Transfer: A Study of Refusals by Beginning, Intermediate and Advanced Korean EFL Learners. *Asian EFL Journal Research Articles*, 4, 6-56.
- Kwon, S. H. (2018). A Study on NNS Teachers' Language Awareness. *The Journal of Asia TEFL*, 15(1), 51-65. <https://doi.org/10.18823/asiatefl.2018.15.1.4.51>
- Leow, R. (1997). Attention, awareness, and foreign language behavior. *Language Learning*, 47(3), 467-505. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0023-8333.00017>
- Li, & Chen. (2007). Chinese English Majors' Grammatical and Pragmatic Awareness as Well as Their Respective Competence: An Empirical Study. *ELC*, 6, 35-41.
- Li, & Chen. (2009). The relationship between Chinese English majors' personality and their pragmatic and grammatical competence/awareness. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, 2, 119-124.
- Lindahl, K. (2019). Teacher Language Awareness Development and Its Implications for New Educators. *The New Educator*, 15(2), 85-100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1547688X.2018.1526356>
- Nieagoda, K., & Rover, C. (2001). Pragmatic and grammatical awareness: A function of the learning environment? In Rose, K. R. & Kasper, G. (Eds.), *Pragmatics in Language Teaching* (pp. 63-79). Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139524797.008>
- Nourhan, S. (2015). *Grammatical Versus Pragmatic Awareness: The Case of Egyptian Students in an English-medium University*. Thesis: The American University in Cairo.
- Otwinowska, A. (2014). Does multilingualism influence plurilingual awareness of Polish teachers of English? *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 11(1), 97-119.
- Otwinowska, A. (2017). English teachers' language awareness: away with the monolingual bias? *Language Awareness*, 26(4), 304-324. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09658416.2017.1409752>
- Ren, & Li. (2018). International study focus and trend of L2 pragmatic research. *Foreign Language Education*, 4, 18-21.
- Rining Wei, He Jiang, & Mengxia Kong. (2019). Attitudes toward trilingualism: a survey study of Chinese Mongolian university students. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 42(3), 291-306. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2019.1689245>
- Schauer, G. A. (2006). Pragmatic awareness in ESL and EFL contexts: Contrast and development. *Language Learning*, 56(2), 269-318. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0023-8333.2006.00348.x>

- Schauer, G. A. (2007). Finding the right words in the study abroad context: the development of German learners' use of external modifiers in English. *Intercultural Pragmatics*, 4(2), 193-220. <https://doi.org/10.1515/IP.2007.011>
- Schmidt, R. (1993). Consciousness, learning and interlanguage pragmatics. In G. Kasper & S. Blum-Kulka (Eds.), *Interlanguage pragmatics* (pp. 21-42). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schmidt, R. (1990). The role of consciousness in second language learning. *Applied Linguistics*, 11(2), 129-158. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/11.2.129>
- Sorour, N. (2018). Examining Egyptian ESL learners' grammatical and pragmatic awareness. *Arab Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 3(1), 78-104.
- Taguchi, N. (2018). Advanced Second Language Pragmatic Competence. In Paul A. Malovrh, & Alessandro G. Benati (Eds.), *The Handbook of Advanced Proficiency in Second Language Acquisition* (pp. 506-526). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119261650.ch26>
- Taguchi, N. (2011). The Effect of L2 Proficiency and Study-Abroad Experience on Pragmatic Comprehension. *Language Learning*, 61(3), 904-939. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9922.2011.00633.x>
- Woll, N. (2018). Investigating dimensions of metalinguistic awareness: what think-aloud protocols revealed about the cognitive processes involved in positive transfer from L2 to L3. *Language Awareness*, 27(1-2), 167-185. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09658416.2018.1432057>
- Xiao, & Li. (2017). The Development of English Pragmatic and Grammatical Competence of Chinese Tertiary-level Students. *ELC*, 3, 45-52.
- Xu, W., Case, E. Rod., & Wang, Y. (2009). Pragmatic and grammatical competence, length of residence, and overall L2 proficiency. *System*, 37(2), 205-216. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2008.09.007>
- Yamanaka, J. (2003). Effects of proficiency and length of residence on the pragmatic comprehension of Japanese ESL learners. *Second Language Studies*, 22, 107-175.
- Zhang, P., & Adamson, B. (2020). Multilingual education in minority dominated regions in Xinjiang, People's Republic of China. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2020.1850744>

Notes

Note 1. Multilinguals refer to those who speak three and more languages, distinguished from bilinguals who speak two languages.

Note 2. Listening was not used in this study because of limited class hour.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).