

# Relationship between Attitude toward Target Language Culture Instruction and Pragmatic Comprehension Development

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## Abstract

Familiarity with the cultural features of the target language society and interest in learning those cultural features are the key factors to determine language learners' level of pragmatic comprehension. To investigate this issue, this study attempted to assess the relationship between attitude toward incorporating target language culture into classroom instruction and the development of pragmatic comprehension. The data were collected through the administration of a Likert scale attitude questionnaire and two pragmatic comprehension tests one used as pre-test and the other used as post-test to 32 intermediate level language learners at a language academy in Malaysia. The findings suggested that a positive attitude toward learning target language culture leads to a higher level of pragmatic comprehension. Therefore, it was recommended to furnish foreign language course books as well as foreign language classroom instruction with cultural information.

**Keywords:** attitude, culture, pragmatics

## 1. Introduction

Pragmatics studies the way speakers and writers use context and shared information to convey information that supplements the semantic content of the expressions (Bianchi, 2004). It "concentrates on those aspects of meaning that cannot be predicted by linguistic knowledge alone and take into account knowledge about the physical and social world" (Peccei, 2000: 2). However, there are noticeable differences between the sociolinguistic aspects of the target language and the language learners' native language (Alptekin, 2002) which make comprehending written and oral expressions in the target language a burden for non-native reader/hearer. Therefore, pragmatic competence in a particular language is best achieved through exposure to the target language culture and access to authentic materials (Farashaiyan & Tan, 2012).

As the pragmatic features of the target language are often not salient for language learners, mere exposure to these features does not help language learners to notice them (Kasper & Rose, 2002) and many aspects of target language pragmatics either are not learned or are learned very slowly (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001). Understanding culture specific expressions requires directing learners' attention to the cultural features of the target language (Kasper & Rose, 2002). Consequently, language learners' interest to notice those cultural features plays an important role in their pragmatic development. Therefore, level of familiarity with the cultural perspectives of the target language community, on the one hand, and the learner's willingness to learn and apply those cultural features, on the other hand, are the key factors to determine language learners' level of pragmatic comprehension (Ran, 2007).

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Attitude toward Cultural Instruction

Culture has been an integral part of language learning since as early as the grammar translation method era, when language learners read literary texts which carried the cultural perspectives of the target language community (Thanasoulas, 2001). However, the crucial role of willingness to learn target language cultural features in language learning has encouraged scholars in the field of sociolinguistics to investigate the issue. This is due to the fact that motivation is the most significant variable in attracting language learners' attention to learn target language cultural perspectives (Takahashi, 2001). Research into learners' attitudes toward cultural learning

conducted so far has produced contradictory results. While some studies (e.g. Albirini, 2009; Saricoban & Caliskan, 2011) found language learners' positive attitudes toward learning target language culture, others (e.g. Jabeen & Shah, 2011) indicated language learners' negative attitudes.

In one study, Albirini (2009) explored attitude toward the incorporation of cultural components into classroom instruction. The participants in the study were 32 learners of Arabic as a Foreign Language at an intermediate level at a university in the United States. The data were collected through a 21-item Likert scale attitude questionnaire measuring the learners' affective, cognitive, and behavioral attitudes toward learning target language culture. The findings suggested that the participants had an overall positive attitude toward learning the cultural components of the target language community, which was evident within the affective, cognitive, and behavioral domains.

In another study, Saricoban and Caliskan (2011) investigated attitude toward the learning of the cultural perspectives of the target language community. The participants in the study included 95 students of English as a Foreign Language at a university in Turkey. The participants were all at an intermediate level of language proficiency. The data were collected through a 13-item multiple choice questionnaire in which the students' thoughts on the inclusion of cultural elements in their language classes were examined. The findings of the study revealed the positive attitudes of the students toward the learning of the target language culture.

However, the study conducted by Jabeen and Shah (2011) brought contradictory results. In their study, they explored attitude toward teaching the cultural features of the target language community in the language classroom. The participants were 94 Pakistani students from different departments of a university in Pakistan. The data were collected through a Likert scale questionnaire consisting of different aspects pertaining to students' responses to the teaching of cultural beliefs, customs, social organizations, speech acts, gestures, notions of personal space, and arts. The findings indicated that students had strongly negative attitudes toward the teaching of cultural features of the target language community in their language classrooms.

Most recently, Rafieyan et al. (2013) conducted a study to investigate the relationship between attitude toward target language culture and pragmatic comprehension development. The participants of their study included 63 Iranian postgraduate students of English as a Foreign Language at universities in Iran. The data for the study were collected through a 24-item multiple choice pragmatic comprehension test and a 22-item Likert scale attitude questionnaire. The correlation of findings obtained through the pragmatic comprehension test and the Likert scale attitude questionnaire indicated that a positive attitude toward target language culture leads to a higher level of pragmatic comprehension.

## *2.2 Pragmatic Comprehension*

The notion of pragmatics was first introduced by Charles Morris in 1971 and included in communicative competence by Bachman in 1990s. Since then research into the area of interlanguage pragmatics attracted the attention of a large body of scholars in the field of sociolinguistics. The majority of studies conducted so far have mostly explored the production aspect of pragmatics. Only few studies to date have investigated the comprehension aspect of pragmatics (Tan & Farashaiyan, 2012). In most of the latter group of studies, the researchers assessed language learners' ability to comprehend implied meanings underlying linguistic expressions which are considered to be culture specific.

For instance, Taguchi (2007) tried to find out whether or not the ability to comprehend implied meaning referred to as pragmatic comprehension improves over time. The participants of the study included 92 Japanese learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) studying English in Japan. The data were collected through a 60-item yes/no computerized pragmatic listening comprehension test consisting of indirect refusal items and indirect opinion items. The test was administered two times with an interval of seven weeks during the academic year. The findings of the study suggested that language learners' level of pragmatic comprehension developed significantly following a 7-week period.

In a similar study, with a longer time interval involved, and within an English as a Second Language (ESL) context, Taguchi (2008) investigated whether or not the comprehension of implied meaning develops over time. The study was conducted on 44 Japanese learners of English in a college in the United States. The data were collected through a 60-item yes/no computerized pragmatic listening comprehension test consisting of indirect refusal items and indirect opinion items. The test was administered three times over a 4-month period during the academic year. The findings indicated that language learners' level of pragmatic comprehension had insignificantly improved, following a 4-month period.

Contrary to the above-mentioned developmental studies, Alagozlu and Buyukozturk (2009) conducted a

cross-sectional study to scrutinize the degree to which language learners can comprehend implied meanings. The participants of their study included 25 learners of English as a Foreign Language in a university in Turkey. The data for the study were collected through a 10-item multiple choice pragmatic listening comprehension test. The test examined the recognition of speech acts and conversational implicatures, i.e. implied meanings, both of which were considered as instances of pragmatic comprehension. The results of the study showed that language learners' level of pragmatic comprehension was relatively low.

In another cross-sectional study, Manowong (2011) explored the extent to which language learners are able to interpret conversational implicatures in dialogues by native English speakers. The participants of the study were 40 Thai learners of English as a Foreign Language at a university in Thailand. The data were collected through a 15-item multiple choice pragmatic listening comprehension test. The test comprised different types of conversational implicatures such as criticism, relevance, and irony. The findings showed the rather poor performance of the language learners in interpreting conversational implicatures.

### 3. The Present Study

Studies conducted so far on attitude toward target language culture instruction and the level of pragmatic comprehension have yielded contradictory results which indicate the necessity of further exploration in these areas. Furthermore, the studies have explored either language learners' attitudes toward the incorporation of target language cultural components into classroom instruction or their ability to interpret implied meanings of expressions referred to as pragmatic comprehension. However, there is a dearth of research examining the relationship between language learners' attitudes toward the learning of target language cultural features and their ability to comprehend pragmatically implied meanings. Therefore, the current study seeks to investigate the following research questions:

1. Do language learners have positive attitudes toward the incorporation of target language cultural components into their classroom instruction?
2. Does the incorporation of target language cultural components into classroom instruction enhance language learners' level of pragmatic comprehension?
3. Is there a relationship between language learners' attitudes toward target language culture instruction and their level of pragmatic comprehension?

### 4. Methodology

#### 4.1 Participants

The participants of the study were 32 learners of English at two classes in a language academy in Penang, Malaysia. The participants' ages ranged from 22 to 28 with an average age of 24. Of all the participants, 19 were females and the remaining 13 were males. They all came from countries where English is spoken as a foreign language including Egypt, Algeria, China, Korea, Malaysia, Jordan, and Indonesia. They were all at an intermediate level of language proficiency, as established through the institutional placement test. Their classes were held twice weekly for 12 weeks, each session lasting for 2 hours, making a total of 48 hours of instruction.

The syllabus designed for the language learners in the above-mentioned language academy was based on *Top Notch* English book series, which include four books: *Top Notch Fundamentals*, *Top Notch 1*, *Top Notch 2*, and *Top Notch 3*. The participants were taught from *Top Notch* book 2, which is suitable for intermediate level language learners. The *Top Notch* English book series contain a wide range of topics and dialogues featuring the cultural and communicative features of American English. They are also supplemented with videos depicting those cultural features. Therefore, they are considered suitable materials to provide language learners with authentic cultural and pragmatic features of the Americans.

#### 4.2 Instruments

The instruments used to collect data for the current study included two pragmatic comprehension tests and one attitude questionnaire. The pragmatic comprehension tests used to assess the development of pragmatic comprehension in language learners through the administration of two distinct-but-similar-in-content tests one used as the pre-test and the other used as the post-test respectively at the beginning and end of the English language course. The attitude questionnaire assessed the language learners' attitudes toward the incorporation of target language culture into classroom instruction and was administered once at the end of the English language course.

##### 4.2.1 Pragmatic Comprehension Test

The items used in the pragmatic comprehension pre- and post-text tests were adopted from the items used in

previous studies by Taguchi (2007; 2008). Each pragmatic comprehension test contained 12 items. Each item featured a short dialogue between a male and a female native English speaker. The last sentence in each dialogue contained an implied opinion which was intended to test the language learners' ability to comprehend the implied speaker's intention. Each dialogue was followed by a multiple choice question consisting of four options: one correct answer and three distractor options. The participants had to listen to each dialogue and decide which option expressed the speakers' intention.

Before the actual study, the pragmatic comprehension tests used as the pre-test and the post-test were piloted on 30 non-participant learners of English at the same language academy. The split half reliability coefficients computed for the data obtained were equal to 0.81 and 0.84 for the pre-test and post-test, respectively. Therefore, both pragmatic comprehension tests were validated as reliable enough to be applied in the current study. Content related evidence of validity was also used to assess the validity of the pragmatic comprehension tests. Two lecturers from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), who were experts in the area of pragmatics, judged the appropriateness of the tests for the study.

#### 4.2.2 Attitude Questionnaire

The attitude questionnaire was a 12-item questionnaire in which all items were answered on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" with values 1 to 5 assigned to them respectively. The questionnaire was adapted from a study previously conducted by Albirini (2009) to fit the current study. The questionnaire consisted of three subscales including language learners' affective (items 1-4), cognitive (items 5-8), and behavioral (items 9-12) attitudes. These constructs referred to language learners' emotional reaction toward cultural instruction, their thoughts about cultural instruction, and their covert behavior toward cultural instruction (Zimbardo et al., 1977).

Before the actual study, the questionnaire was piloted on the same 30 non-participant learners of English at the language academy. The reliability coefficient obtained through the computation of Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient was 0.87 for the overall attitude and 0.88, 0.91, and 0.83 for affective, cognitive, and behavioral sub-scales, respectively. Therefore, the questionnaire was accepted as one with a level of reliability high enough for it to be used for the current study. To assess the validity of the questionnaire, the questionnaire went through the content related evidence of validity. Two lecturers from University Sains Malaysia (USM), who were experts in the area of sociolinguistics, judged the appropriateness of the questionnaire for the study.

#### 4.3 Procedure

At the beginning of the first session of the English course, the pragmatic comprehension test, used as the pre-test, was administered to the language learners in both groups. Language learners were asked to listen to the dialogues and select the one of the four options provided for each dialogue which they figured out to be appropriate. However, they were not informed of the purpose of the test. All the test slips were then collected. Immediately following the pre-test, regular classroom instruction began. During the course, the teacher provided language learners with detailed information on the cultural features of the United States contained in language learners' course books through videos and supplementary materials downloaded from internet.

At the end of the final session of the English course, the pragmatic comprehension test, used as the post-test, was administered to both groups. The learners were asked to listen to the dialogues and select the one of the four options provided for each dialogue which they figured out to be appropriate. Again, they were not informed of the purpose of the test. All the test slips were then collected by the researchers. Immediately upon the completion of the pragmatic comprehension test, used as the post-test, the Likert scale attitude questionnaire was distributed among all the 32 language learners participating in the study to elicit their self-reports regarding their attitudes toward the incorporation of target language culture into their classroom instruction. All the questionnaire slips were then collected to be analyzed, along with the pragmatic comprehension tests.

#### 4.4 Data Analysis

##### 4.4.1 Attitude toward Target Language Culture Instruction

To assess language learners' attitudes toward the incorporation of target language cultural components into their classroom instruction, the data derived from language learners' answers to the Likert scale attitude questionnaire were summarized in tabular form and presented through descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics consisted mainly of mean and frequency percentages. The attitude toward the cultural materials were represented by a mean score on a 5-point scale, where 1 (strongly disagree) represented the minimum score of the scale and 5 (strongly agree) represented the maximum score of the scale. A mean of 3 (neutral) was considered the borderline for the positive and negative attitudes. Therefore, a mean of above 3 expressed a positive attitude and

a mean of below 3 expressed a negative attitude.

The mean score and frequency percentages were calculated for all the items included in the Likert scale attitude questionnaire in general to assess language learners' overall attitudes toward the incorporation of target language cultural components into their classroom instruction. However, the mean score and frequency percentages were also calculated for each specific type of attitude including affective, cognitive, and behavioral attitudes to assess language learners' specific attitudes toward the incorporation of cultural components into classroom instruction. Also, polarity was reversed for items which expressed negative opinions (items 2, 4, and 10). All the computations were performed using the *Statistical Package for Social Sciences* (SPSS) Software, version 20.

#### 4.4.2 Development of Pragmatic Comprehension

To assess the development of pragmatic comprehension in language learners, the mean of the marks obtained through the language learners' answers to pragmatic comprehension tests used as the pre-test and the post-test were calculated. The mean of the pre-test and the post-test were then compared through a paired sample t-test, which is used when there is only one group of people and the researchers want to collect data from them on two different occasions (Pallant, 2010). The significance level was set at 0.05. In this respect, the difference between the scores obtained from the pre-test and the post-test was judged to be significant when probability value equaled 0.05 or less ( $p \leq 0.05$ ). The difference would also be judged to be insignificant for the probability value of more than 0.05. The analysis was performed using SPSS, version 20.

#### 4.4.3 Relationship between Attitude toward Culture Instruction and Pragmatic Comprehension

To assess the relationship between the language learners' attitudes toward the incorporation of cultural components into classroom instruction and the development of pragmatic comprehension, the mean score for the language learners' answers to the Likert scale attitude questionnaire and the pragmatic comprehension test used as the post-test were calculated. The obtained means for both tests were then correlated through the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient. Pearson  $r$  is normally a score between -1 and +1. Scores close to -1 indicate a significant negative relationship, scores close to +1 indicate a significant positive relationship, while scores close to 0 indicate an insignificant relationship between variables. The analysis was performed using SPSS, version 20.

## 5. Results and Discussion

### 5.1 Results

#### 5.1.1 Attitude toward Target Language Culture Instruction

Table 1 illustrates the mean and frequency percentages for language learners' affective, cognitive, and behavioral attitudes in particular as well as their overall attitudes in general toward the incorporation of target language culture into classroom instruction. In general, language learners expressed a positive attitude toward the incorporation of target language culture into classroom instruction (overall mean: 4.22). Of all the 32 participants in the study, 81 percent expressed a positive (39.3%) or highly positive (41.7%) attitude toward the incorporation of target language culture into classroom instruction, whereas only 0.8 percent expressed a negative (0.5%) or highly negative (0.3%) attitude. 18.2 percent of the language learners expressed a neutral attitude, however. In particular, language learners' positive attitudes were evident within affective (mean: 4.02), behavioral (mean: 4.07), and more significantly cognitive (mean: 4.55) domains.

Table 1. Distribution of Mean Scores on the Attitude Scale

Scale	Percent (%)					Mean	Standard Deviation
	SD	D	N	A	SA		
Affective	0.8	0.8	25.0	42.2	31.2	4.02	0.69
Cognitive	0.0	0.0	7.0	30.5	62.5	4.55	0.54
Behavioral	0.0	0.8	22.7	45.3	31.2	4.07	0.69
Overall	0.3	0.5	18.2	39.3	41.7	4.22	0.58

SD: Strongly Disagree, D: Disagree, N: Neutral, A: Agree, SA: Strongly Agree

Within the affective domain, most language learners agreed (42.2%) or strongly agreed (31.2%) that they

enjoyed the cultural components of the course (item 1), the cultural components of the course did not make their life in class very difficult (item 2), they were interested in learning cultural facts about Americans (item 3), and they preferred courses that include cultural components (item 4). Within the cognitive domain, the majority of language learners agreed (30.5%) or strongly agreed (62.5%) that the cultural components were useful learning experiences (item 5), the cultural information had provided them with a better understanding of the American culture (item 6), the course has had a positive impact on their attitudes toward American culture (item 7), and knowing target culture helped them better understand the context of target language (item 8). Within the behavioral domain, the majority of the language learners agreed (45.3%) or strongly agreed (31.2%) that some cultural components should be part of every language class (item 9), they tend to take classes that have cultural components (item 10), they would like to see cultural components in their future language classes (item 11), and the course has encouraged them to take future classes in American culture (item 12).

### 5.1.2 Development of Pragmatic Comprehension

Table 2 illustrates the results obtained through the computation of a paired sample t-test to evaluate the impact of teaching target language cultural features on the language learners' scores on the pragmatic comprehension test. The obtained probability value was 0.00, which was substantially smaller than the specified alpha value (0.05). Therefore, there was a significant difference between the scores obtained from the pre-test and the post-test. Reviewing the mean scores obtained for the pre-test and the post-test shows that there was a statistically significant increase in pragmatic comprehension test scores from the pre-test (mean: 0.47, standard deviation: 0.15) to the post-test (mean: 0.75, standard deviation: 0.11). In the pre-test, only 28.1 percent of language learners managed to answer more than half of the items correctly, whereas in the post-test, the percentage increased to 96.9. None of the language learners managed to answer all items neither in the pre-test nor the post-test.

Table 2. Paired Sample T-Test

Tests	Number	Mean	Standard Deviation	Correlation	Significance (2-tailed)
Pre-test	32	0.47	0.15	0.73	0.00
Post-test	32	0.75	0.11		

### 5.1.3 Relationship between Attitude toward Culture Instruction and Pragmatic Comprehension

Table 3 illustrates the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient, computed to assess the level of relationship between the results obtained from the pragmatic comprehension test used as the post-test and the attitude questionnaire. The mean score for the language learners' performance on the post-test was 0.75 and the mean score for the language learners' answers to the attitude questionnaire was 4.22. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient through a comparison of the mean scores obtained from both tests was 0.83. In general, the language learners who expressed a neutral attitude toward learning cultural aspects of target language presented the accurate answer for 6 to 8 items on the pragmatic comprehension test used as post-test. Language learners who expressed a positive attitude answered 8 to 9 items correctly. Finally, those who expressed a highly positive attitude answered 10 to 11 items accurately. This trend was evident for 94 percent of the respondents.

Table 3. Pearson Correlation

Tests	Number	Mean	Standard Deviation	Correlation	Significance (2-tailed)
Overall Attitude	32	4.22	0.15	0.83	0.00
Post-test	32	0.75	0.11		

## 5.2 Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that language learners have overall positive attitudes toward the learning of

target language culture. This positive attitude was evident within affective, behavioral, and more significantly cognitive domains. The focus of most items on the attitude questionnaire referring to affective and behavioral domains was the language learners' inclination toward the incorporation of culture into their curriculum, whereas the focus of most items referring to the cognitive domain was the significance of familiarity with cultural features of the target language society as well as language learners' interests in American culture in specific. Highly positive affective and behavioral attitudes imply that language learners accept allocating part of class instruction to cultural features and do not consider its allocation as being irrelevant and time consuming. Furthermore, higher positive cognitive attitudes imply that language learners are specifically interested in American culture and they not only accept culture as part of classroom instruction but also find it very useful in better understanding instructional materials. These findings are consistent with the findings obtained by Albirini (2009) and Saricoban and Caliskan (2011) who reported language learners' positive attitudes toward learning the cultural perspectives of the target language community.

The findings also suggest that familiarity with the cultural features of the target language community enhances language learners' level of pragmatic comprehension. Language learners' performance on the pragmatic comprehension test improved significantly following instruction in target language culture. It clearly indicates that familiarity with and awareness of the cultural features of the target language community and the awareness of the differences between source language and target language cultural features really facilitates learners' understanding of the target language. During the pre-test, the language learners were not familiar with the cultural perspectives involved in the test and they were not aware that the appropriateness of their answers was determined by the cultural norms of the target language society. However, instruction provided during the intervention sessions not only helped in familiarizing the language learners with the target language cultural features, included in the post-test, but also made them aware of the crucial role of cultural competence in choosing appropriate answers. Nonetheless, the few intervention sessions were not sufficient to contribute to the perfect performance on the pragmatic comprehension test. These findings confirm those obtained by Taguchi (2007), who reported the development of pragmatic comprehension in language learners over time.

The study results further suggest that there is a significant positive relationship between attitude toward the incorporation of the target language culture into classroom instruction and the level of pragmatic comprehension. Language learners enjoyed the cultural features which were integrated into the classroom instruction. This was clearly evident in the evaluation conducted through the attitude questionnaire. They also performed well on the pragmatic comprehension test, following intervention. Furthermore, in most cases, those who were more interested in learning target language cultural features performed better on the pragmatic comprehension test than the language learners who were less interested in learning the cultural features. All these indicate the crucial role of interest and motivation, as has been frequently mentioned by numerous scholars (e.g. Ran, 2007), in learning target language features. The results also support the findings obtained by Rafieyan et al. (2013), who reported the positive relationship between attitude toward target language culture and the development of pragmatic comprehension.

## 6. Conclusion

The major findings obtained from the analysis of the data collected from participants within the current study suggest that: (i) language learners have positive attitudes toward learning the cultural features of the target language community both from an overall perspective and from a specific (affective, cognitive, behavioral) perspective; (ii) incorporating cultural features of the target language community into classroom instruction enhances language learners' level of pragmatic comprehension; and finally (iii) a positive attitude toward the learning of the cultural features of the target language community increases language learners' ability to comprehend pragmatically implied meanings.

These findings indicate that familiarity with the cultural features of the target language society, on the one hand, and interest toward learning those cultural features, on the other hand, play a significant role in the development of pragmatic comprehension ability in English as a Foreign Language contexts. Therefore, foreign language course book designers are advised to incorporate cultural features of the target language society into instructional materials. Furthermore, language teachers should be encouraged to supplement foreign language classroom instruction with discussions about the cultural perspectives of the target language society.

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