

Chinese EFL Undergraduates' Pragmatic Competence in English Letter Writing

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Abstract

Pragmatic competence, as an essential part of communicative competence, plays a vital role in people's daily communication, especially cross-cultural communication. This study aims to investigate Chinese EFL undergraduates' pragmatic competence in English letter writing according to gender and faculty, and explore four EFL lecturers' perceptions on pragmatic competence, problems faced by their students and methods used by lecturers in teaching English letter writing. This research is a descriptive research design using QUAN-QUAL model. A letter writing test was employed as one research instrument. Stratified random sampling was adopted to select 450 samples (225 males and 225 females) from three faculties (150 from Chinese Language Faculty, 150 from Management Faculty, and 150 from Education Faculty) in Nanfang College, Guangzhou and Hunan City University. In the real study, students' writing was graded by one lecturer based on the scoring rubric adapted from Chen's scoring rubrics for pragmatic competence and IELTS writing scoring rubric in which 5 components were included: choice of vocabulary, grammar, syntax, organization, mechanics. The results of the letter writing test indicated that female students' pragmatic competence was better than male students', and the pragmatic competence of students from social science faculty (Chinese Language Faculty and Management Faculty) was better than those from natural science faculty (Education Faculty). Lecturers considered it necessary to teach pragmatic competence in class though only a small proportion of lecturers did it. It is suggested that some teaching approaches such as process approach, modeled writing, revise after writing could be used in class so that students' motivation is stimulated and better learning results could be achieved.

Keywords: Chinese EFL learners, Pragmatic competence, English letter writing

1. Introduction

With the rapid expansion of economic globalization, English has become the most widely used language all over the world. Many activities such as international conference, international trade are conducted through the medium of English language. To communicate with people in English language, nonnative English speakers should not only know the vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, but also have the ability of using English in specific situations to make communication go smoothly. Pragmatic competence is "the ability of language users to match sentences with contexts in which they are appropriate" (Bardovi-Harlig, 1992). There is no denying that pragmatic competence is essential to smooth communication in the era of economic globalization.

In 2018, China's Ministry of Education and the National Language and Writing Committee jointly released "China Standard of English" (CSE). CSE clarifies the standard of Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic competence for the first time, and defines it as the ability to understand and convey specific intentions in combination with specific contexts (Li, 2019). However, before the release of the CSE, improving learners' English pragmatic competence has been neglected in classroom teaching and pragmatic competence has never been an evaluation index in English proficiency tests (Liu, 2019). English pragmatic knowledge has been rarely addressed by teachers or teaching materials in China. Educators' negligence leads to Chinese EFL learners' poor pragmatic competence, which hampers their effective communications in real human interaction. Poor pragmatic competence makes foreign

language learners unable to appropriately express themselves and understand the intentions of others, which is a common problem among Chinese EFL learners (Dai & Zhang, 2015).

Writing is also a means of communication, but in the written form instead of the oral form. Good letter-writing requires appropriate use of language, good organization of content, appropriate style and tone. When the two sides of a communication, letter sender and letter receiver, reach resonance with each other, the desired effect will be achieved. Hence, high-level of pragmatic competence is extremely helpful in keeping communication go smoothly.

Until now, only a few studies involve learners' pragmatic competence in writing in the context of English as a foreign language in China. Hudson, Detmer and Brown (1995) proposed six measures (Written Discourse Completion Tasks, Multiple-choice Discourse Completion Tasks, Listening Oral Discourse Completion Tasks, Discourse Role-Play Tasks, Discourse Self-Assessment Tasks, Role-Play Self-Assessment) to evaluate cross-cultural pragmatic competence (Kasper & Rose, 2002). However, these often-used methods were not appropriate to evaluate learners' pragmatic competence in writing. Additionally, in spite of some research revolving around pragmatic competence in writing, most of them focus on pragmatic transfer (Tarone & Yule, 1989; Pan & Wu, 2006; Hu, 2009; Murray, 2012; Wen, 2014). On the other hand, some researchers (Zheng & Huang, 2010; Li, 2011; He, 2016) studied pragmatic failures in learners' writing, which cannot reflect learners' overall pragmatic competence. Therefore, a survey of investigating EFL learners' overall pragmatic competence in writing is of significance to second language acquisition.

This research furthers inter-pragmatic study by focusing on Chinese EFL undergraduates' pragmatic competence, which is limited in China and abroad. It addresses the gap in the existing literature current study and explores the difference in pragmatic competence of undergraduates according to gender and faculty. This study is an attempt of analyzing learners' pragmatic competence in a different way, which arouses concerns among lecturers and EFL learners to improve learners' English letter writing.

1.1 Research Questions

- Q1. Is there a difference in undergraduates' overall pragmatic competence in English letter writing according to gender?
- Q2. Is there a difference in undergraduates' overall pragmatic competence in English letter writing according to faculty?
- Q3. What are lecturers' perceptions of pragmatic competence and problems faced by their students in English letter writing?

1.2 Literature Review

Chomsky (1965) first proposed the concept of linguistic competence and made a distinction between competence and performance. Hymes (1972) questioned "linguistic competence" proposed by Chomsky (1965), believing that this concept ignores the social elements of language use, and therefore proposed the concept of communicative competence. Pragmatic competence evolved gradually out of the theoretical dispute about linguistic competence and communicative competence (Liu, 2019). Later on, scholars such as Canale and Swain (1980) and Bachman (1990) studied pragmatic competence under the framework of communicative competence. They believed that pragmatic competence was an important part of communicative competence, and their communicative ability model gradually became the theoretical framework of pragmatic competence research.

With the development of interdisciplinary research, instead of sticking precisely to study pragmatic competence in communicative ability model, more and more out-of-box interpretations of pragmatic competence were made by Chinese scholars from different perspectives, such as the study from the perspective of experiential cognition and social architecture (Chen, 2014). Additionally, there are studies on the expansion of Chen's pragmatic competence model (2014) based on social construction theory and interactive competence theory (Li, 2019), the problems to be solved on the basis of the ability analysis model through reviews of literature (Li & Xiao, 2012), and the interpretation of pragmatic competence based on foreign language teaching (Dai & Zhang, 2015; Ran & Yang, 2015).

1.2.1 Pragmatic Competence and Writing

Since Thomas' distinction of pragmatic failure into pragma linguistic failure and socio-pragmatic failure (1983), these terms have been widely accepted and used by researchers both in China and abroad to study pragmatic failure in second language (L2) writing, especially in e-mails. Muir and Xu (2011) investigated the pragmatic failures in L2 learners' writing, and found that most failures in L2 writings were pragma linguistic failures in the aspects of verbose

apposition, combination of two subordinate clauses, misunderstandings of words, independent subordinate clauses, whereas there were only a few socio-pragmatic failures. Biesenbach-Lucas (2006) examined L2 learners' e-mails and found that the absence of social context clues such as age, gender, location, status led to impoliteness and pragmatic failure in these emails. Similar to overseas research into pragmatic competence in writing, Chinese scholar, such as Yang and Zhai (2014), Hu and Li (2017), Qiao and Liu (2017) also analyzed pragmatic failures in students' English writing and further suggested ways of reducing pragmatic failures and improving pragmatic competence.

Some researchers studied L2 learners' pragmatic competence in L2 writings from the perspective of learners' sociocultural identities and politeness. Chen (2001) compared the request letters written by Taiwanese and American undergraduates and found that American students used more lexicon-syntactic adjustments which made their request more polite. Enconomidou-Kogetsidis (2011) found that the languages in English emails sent by Greek students were impolite when he analyzed the salutations, vocabulary, syntax, the degrees of directness of these letters. Enconomidou-Kogetsidis's findings was the same as Dainielwicz-Betz's research results (2013). Burgucu-Tazegu, Han and Engin (2016) found that Turkey EFL undergraduates ignored politeness strategy and adopted direct strategies instead of conventional indirect strategies in their letters to soften their requests which made their requests less polite.

1.2.2 Gender Difference and Pragmatic Competence

Gender difference as one aspect of individual differences is a common phenomenon in the process of foreign language learning and attracts continuous attention from researchers. The research on gender differences in language in the West began as early as the beginning of 20th century. Danish linguist Jespersen (1922) published a book "Language: Its nature, Development and Origin", which brought the relationship of language and gender to the attention of scholars. Jespersen (1922) pointed out in the book that women used more euphemisms and less curse than men.

Scholars (Hammett & Sanford, 2008; Tang, 2006, Li, 2012) found that female learners had an impressive advantage in language skills. In the past two to three decades, gender difference has become a focus of pragmatic competence research. Walters (1979) analyzed the request strategies used by male and female native speakers or nonnative speakers of English and found that female native speakers made a clearer distinction between polite and impolite expressions. However, another survey among Spanish speakers in Puerto Rican indicated that male and female did not show significant difference in the politeness strategies they adopted in Spanish requests. In Saudi Society, the degree of politeness in men's and women's language differs (Holmes, 1986), due to their different communication norms and different ways of interaction (Tannen, 1990). Tujoman (2005) investigated complimenting expressions among Saudi EFL learners and the findings showed that Saudi male learners performed better as male students had more chances to communicate with native speakers in a male-dominant society.

Tian (2014) conducted a Discourse Completion Test among 288 college students (142 girls and 146 boys). The test involved various speech acts that often occur in daily life, including request, rejection, apology, suggestion, invitation, complaint. The findings showed that in syntactic structure, female students used additional interrogative sentences more frequently than boys. In the speech act of invitation, 70% of girls used formal, standard and euphemistic sentences, while 65% of boys used casual and direct expressions. Cheng (2021) investigated 456 Chinese undergraduates' English proficiency and found that the pragmatic competence of female students' pragmatic competence was better than that of male students.

1.2.3 Faculty and Pragmatic Competence

Apart from gender difference, researchers also studied the difference in pragmatic competence among students from different faculties. Zhu (2012) investigated pragmatic competence of Chinese EFL learners through comparing the request strategies in Emails between English majors (EM) and non-English majors (NEM). The finding result showed that in accordance with NEM' lower English proficiency compared with the EM (Khamyod & Aksornjarung, 2011), NEM had lower pragmalinguistic competence than the EM. This result was the same as that of Peacock and Ho (2003), Biesenbach-Lucas' (2007) research. However, Zhu (2012) found that there was no significant difference in socio-pragmatic competence between the EM and the NEM.

Bardis, Silman and Mohammadzadeh (2021) conducted a questionnaire survey among 94 students of natural science and 106 social sciences from different continents to study EFL learners' cross-cultural pragmatic competence regarding cultural norms for effective interaction in English. They found that the students of social sciences performed slightly better than their natural science counterparts. Their research results were similar to what Daskalovska, Ivanovska, Kusevska, and Ulanska (2016) had found in the investigation of request strategies by EFL

learners in the Republic of Macedonia.

Ceyhun and Leyla (2014) investigated EFL prep-class students emotions in learning and taking tests according to faculties and gender. They found that students from Management Faculty scored significantly higher in the emotions of enjoyment, pride and hope than those from civil engineering, which was good for Management students to get better achievements in English learning.

1.2.4 Methods of Writing

In 1980s, British linguist, Leech, proposed Politeness Principle which included Tact Maxim, Generosity Maxim, Approbation Maxim, Modesty Maxim, Agreement Maxim, Sympathy Maxim. According to Leech (1983), polite expression is closely related to culture, and in different cultures the maxims of Politeness Principle held different positions of importance. Iiona (2007), Wu and Yang (2021) stated that letter writers should have a good command of polite expressions, and learn how to use some common, widely-used and polite language expression which were specific to the target language in which they writes.

Process approach to writing is considered as a revolutionary shift from the traditional product-oriented method of teaching writing (Farris, 1987). According to Nunan (1991), “process approach emphasized the process of creating a piece of writing and writers would get closer to perfection by producing, reflecting on, discussing and reworking successive drafts of a text”. It has been generally adopted by English teachers in classroom teaching of writing. The studies (Myles, 2002; Ana, 2005; Parastou & Zibakenar, 2013; Vega & Pinzon, 2019) of the impact of process approach on students’ writing ability indicated the positive effects since it not only offered students opportunities to receive feedback (Myles, 2002), but also allowed students to develop personal approach to writing.

Modeled writing, as an instructional strategy used to pre-teach and reinforce writing skills, provides conventions for purposed writing tasks while cultivating creativity (Hillocks, 1986). EFL learners were confronted with problems of organizing ideas, structure, vocabulary and grammar. Using essay models is helpful in addressing these problems (Rohiyatussakinah & Okataviana, 2018). Modeled writing could be integrated into the writing process to improve students’ writing skills (Saeidi & Sahebkhair, 2011). As an effective teaching tool, it is at the center of product-based approach and provides feedback to students so that it increases the writing accuracy of EFL learners (Parastou & Zibakenar, 2013).

Writing is regarded as a process that is divided into three stages: prewriting, writing and revising. According to Sommers (1982), revising was “a process of making changes throughout the writing of a draft, changes that work to make the draft congruent with a writer’s changing intentions”. Revision was a way of seeing and then re-seeing words, which made a difference in writing (Heard, 2002). Revising after writing was essential in writing, especially in EFL writing (Lam, 2013; Rollinson, 2005; Bloom, 2011). Shu and Zhuang (1997) introduced some learning strategy theories proposed by foreign linguists, such as the application of meta-cognitive strategy into monitoring, regulating and self-regulating learning behavior. Learners adopted monitoring strategy to find out errors in language such as pronunciation, vocabulary, spelling, grammar, and make correction accordingly. Some researchers (Horning & Becker, 2006; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005; Hasen & Liu, 2005; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009) demonstrated the positive impact of peer review on EFL students’ revision types and writing quality.

2. Method

This research is a descriptive study using both quantitative and qualitative data. Before the real study, a pilot test was conducted to get the reliability and validity of the instruments (a letter writing test and semi-structured interviews).

Quantitative data were collected through an English letter writing test which was conducted among 450 college students from two universities in China, Hunan City University and Nanfang College, Guangzhou, with 225 participants from each university. All the participants were second year college students, aged 18-21. They were from three faculties, that is, Chinese Language Faculty, Management Faculty and Education Faculty. Stratified random sampling was adopted to select 75 female college students and 75 male college students from each faculty. These participants were required to finish two English letters (a formal letter and an informal letter) with at least 150 words for each letter within 90 minutes. Their writings were rated by one experienced lecturer according to the rubrics adapted from Chen’s scoring rubrics for pragmatic competence (2014) and IELTS writing scoring rubrics in which 5 components were included: choice of vocabulary, grammar, syntax, organization, and mechanics. Independent sample t-test and One-way ANOVA were used to investigate participants’ pragmatic competence in English letter writing.

Qualitative research was conducted in natural conditions, so that researchers could observe the subjects in detail (Mohajan, 2018). The qualitative data were obtained from semi-structured interviews with four EFL lecturers from

Hunan City University. There were five questions in the interview revolving around the lecturers' perception of pragmatic competence, problems faced by students in English letter writing and methods used by lecturers in teaching English writing. The lecturers' responses were recorded, transcribed, translated and further analyzed through emerging themes.

3. Results

In RQ1. Is there a difference in undergraduates' overall pragmatic competence in letter writing according to gender?

Table 1. Comparing students' scores for the overall pragmatic competence in writing according to gender

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference	t-value	df
Male	225	62.36	8.963	-7.884	-9.971	439.146
Female	225	70.24	7.769			

Table 1 shows the difference in the mean score for pragmatic competence in English letter writing tests between the male and female students. It can be seen from the table that the pragmatic competence of the male students is lower (Mean=62.36; SD=8.963) than their female counterparts (Mean=70.24, SD= 7.769). The Independent Sample t-test reveals that the female students performed significantly better than the male students in the pragmatic competence (Mean difference=-7.88, t value=-9.97, df=439, p value=.000). As such, RQ1 is answered. These findings support the study by Hammett and Sanford (2008), which demonstrated that female learners had an advantage in language skills. Additionally, these findings are consistent with the study by Tian (2014) who found that performed better in speech acts than male students, and the study by Cheng (2021) which held that the pragmatic competence of female students was better than that of male students. Furthermore, the findings in the study are in line with the study of Ceyhun et al. (2014) who found that female students scored higher in the tests of emotion in learning than male students.

RQ2. Is there a difference in undergraduates' pragmatic competence in letter writing according to faculty?

Table 2. Comparing students' scores for the overall pragmatic competence in writing according to faculty

Faculty	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Chinese Language	150	67.86	8.419	.687	66.50	69.22
Management	150	68.35	8.859	.723	69.92	69.78
Education	150	62.69	9.448	.771	61.16	64.21
Total	450	66.30	9.261	.436	65.44	67.16

To know whether faculty is a key factor affecting learners' pragmatic competence, it is necessary to investigate the pragmatic competence of students from different faculties. The three faculties in this study are Chinese Language Faculty, Management Faculty and Education Faculty. As demonstrated in Table 2, the mean score of the Management Faculty is the highest (Mean=68.35) followed by the Chinese Language Faculty (Mean=67.86), and the lowest is the Education Faculty (Mean=62.69).

Table 3. ANOVA of students' scores for the overall pragmatic competence in writing according to faculty

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2951.791	2	1475.896	18.56	.000
Within Groups	35554.307	447	79.540		
Total	38506.908	449			

And the One-way ANOVA test in Table 3 displays that the differences of pragmatic competence between the faculties were statistically significant (F=18.56, p=.000).

Table 4. Results of Turkey HSD test comparing students' scores for the overall pragmatic competence according to faculty

(J) Faculty	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval		
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound	
Chinese Language	Management	-.487	1.029	.884	-2.91	1.94
	Education	5.173*	1.029	.000	2.75	7.60
Management	Chinese Language	.486	1.029	.884	-1.94	2.91
	Education	5.660*	1.029	.000	3.24	8.08
Education	Chinese Language	-5.173*	1.029	.000	-7.60	-2.75
	Management	-5.660*	1.029	.000	-8.08	-3.24

* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Similarly, results in Table 4 obtained by means of the multiple comparison in Turkey HSD, shows that the Chinese Language Faculty performed better in their pragmatic competence than the Education Faculty and statistically the difference is significant (Mean difference=5.173, p=.000). The Management Faculty performed better in their pragmatic competence than the Chinese Language Faculty but the difference is not significant (Mean difference=.486, p=.884). The Management Faculty did better than the Education Faculty and the difference is significant (Mean difference=5.660, p=.000). The performance of the Education Faculty is significantly lower than the Chinese Language Faculty (Mean difference=-5.173, p=.000) and the Management faculty (Mean difference=-5.660, p=.000). Thus, these answer RQ2. The findings support the study by Zhu (2012) who demonstrated that there was a significant difference in English proficiency among students from different faculties. It is noted that students from Chinese Language Faculty and Management Faculty are in the area of social sciences, whereby students from Education Faculty are in the area of natural sciences. Therefore, these findings support the findings by Bardis et al. (2021) who found that students of social sciences performed better than students of natural sciences in cross-cultural pragmatic competence. Furthermore, the findings are paralleled with the study of Peacock et al. (2003) who demonstrated that the frequency of strategy used among students of social sciences was higher than students of natural sciences. In addition, the findings which indicate that students from Management Faculty performed better in the writing are also in line with the studies done by Ceyhun et al. (2014).

4.1 Analysis of the Semi-Structured Interview

Semi-structured interviews were carried out by the researcher to find out the answers to Research Question 3 in this study, “What are lecturers’ perceptions of pragmatic competence and problems faced by students in English writing?”. There were 5 questions in the interviews. Four ELF lecturers’ responses in the interviews were analyzed through Emerging Themes as follows.

Q1. Do you know what pragmatic competence is? Can you explain it?

Table 5. Emerging themes from lecturers’ responses to Question 1

Lecturer 1	<i>Yes, I know, related to situation, contextual setting, speakers’ intentions and purposes</i>
Lecturer 2	<i>Know something about it, ability to use language, communicate smoothly, four language skills</i>
Lecturer 3	<i>Don’t know much about pragmatic competence, meaning in context, specific context, use language, used in communication</i>
Lecturer 4	<i>Didn’t study it systematically, used in communication, a good knowledge of language, excellent ability, used in speaking, listening, reading and writing</i>

The first interview question is about the lecturers’ perceptions of pragmatic competence. Only two lecturers said that they had a basic knowledge of pragmatic competence. They opined that pragmatic competence was essential in conveying speakers’ intentions and keep communication going smoothly. Even though the other two lecturers did not study pragmatic competence systematically, they expressed their ideas based on their knowledge in linguistics, especially pragmatics, that pragmatic competence is the ability of using language to communicate with people in specific contexts.

Q2. Do you think it is necessary to teach pragmatic competence in class? Why?

Table 6. Emerging themes from lecturers’ responses to Question 2

Lecturer 1	<i>Sometimes, when necessary, synonyms, inappropriate vocabulary, specific context</i>
Lecturer 2	<i>A necessary process, proper use of language, in different contexts, successful communication, rarely notice, rude or impolite expressions, without noticing it</i>
Lecturer 3	<i>Certainly necessary and important, vocabulary, easier to understand, in specific context</i>
Lecturer 4	<i>Necessary, limited time, difficult to spare time, improving communicative ability</i>

All the four lecturers were in broad agreement on the necessity of teaching pragmatic competence in English class. Lecturers pointed out that students might use impolite or even rude language to offend others without noticing it, if they did not have adequate pragmatic competence. They indicated that teaching pragmatic competence in class would help students use more proper expressions in specific contexts to make communication go smoothly. Lecturers also pointed out that students found it easier to understand vocabulary with the help of pragmatic competence. According to lecturers, politeness is a very important aspect in letter writing. Their views are in line with the perceptions of Wu and Yang (2021) that learners should have a good knowledge of some widely-used polite expressions. Furthermore, these views are also paralleled with Iiona’s (2007) study which showed the relationship

between politeness and clarity in letter writing.

Q3. What method do you use when teaching letter writing?

Table 7. Emerging themes from lecturers' responses to Question 3

Lecturer 1	<i>Process approach, a group discussion, put forward ideas, PowerPoint presentation, open up minds, outline learning, revising after writing and learn from each other</i>
Lecturer 2	<i>Teacher-centered approach, format of letters, choose appropriate vocabulary, formality of language, revising after writing, sort out errors, make explanation</i>
Lecturer 3	<i>Task-based methods, basic format, requirements of letter writing, group discussion, ideas from others, give feedback</i>
Lecturer 4	<i>Modeled writing, avoid mistakes, learn structure, sentence pattern</i>

It can be seen from the responses that lecturers adopted different ways while teaching letter writing, including process approach, teacher-centered approach, task-based approach, and modeled writing approach. All the lecturers stressed the importance of format in English letter writing. As such, they would explain the characteristics of letter writing before assigning writing tasks to students. Additionally, lecturers pointed out that the errors made by students could not be neglected. They would sort out errors in students' writing and made explanation in class to help students avoid the same errors next time. Lecturer 1 stressed on process approach to improve students' letter writing. The application of process approach in writing class is consistent with the views of Ana (2005) that process approach has positive impact on EFL learners' writing ability. These findings also supported the study by Vega et al. (2019) who found that process-product approach improved students' performance in content, organization, conventions and vocabulary in writing. Additionally, the method of revising after writing adopted by the lecturers is paralleled with the study by Hasen et al. (2005), Lundstrom et al. (2009).

Q4. What problems do your students encounter in English letter writing?

Table 8. Emerging themes from lecturers' responses to Question 4

Lecturer 1	<i>A lot of problems, misuse of pronouns, preposition, passive voice, subjunctive mood, part of speech, incoherence, errors in spelling and punctuation, neglect readers' identity</i>
Lecturer 2	<i>Problems in formatting, use of inappropriate language, ignoring readers' identity, impolite expressions, misuse of synonyms</i>
Lecturer 3	<i>Difficulty in conveying ideas, unsure about writing structure, diffident about making mistakes, trouble reading back, unable to differentiate spoken and written English</i>
Lecturer 4	<i>Difficulty in convey ideas, writing as the most challenging task, using colloquial language, unconventional grammar, organization of ideas,</i>

The lecturers pointed out many problems encountered by students in English letter writing, such as the problems in the use of vocabulary, coherence, formatting, organization. According to them, a common problem among the students was the difficulty in using appropriate expressions to express their ideas in English letter writing. The lecturers also indicated that students neglected the identity of letter receivers and they were not aware of the difference between spoken language and written English. It can be noted that some students complained that writing was the most challenging task. These views are consistent with the study of Seken (2017), Rohiyatussakinah, et al. (2018) that writing, as a productive skill is regarded as the hardest of all language skills, even for native speakers of a language.

Q5. How do you help them to address these problems?

Table 9. Emerging themes from lecturers' responses to Question 5

Lecturer 1	<i>Consolidate knowledge, expose students to lexical collocation, syntactic principles and textural organization, compare different cultures, learn from errors</i>
Lecturer 2	<i>Remember letter format, learn useful expression, explain synonyms</i>
Lecturer 3	<i>Offer opportunities to write, free writing, combine learning and writing, give positive feedback</i>
Lecturer 4	<i>Emphasize confusing tense, teach transitional words, read model writing, English books or materials</i>

Lecturers shared their different views on how to help students to address the problems in English letter writing. Lecturer 1 said she emphasizing consolidating students' language knowledge and exposing students to collocation, syntactic rules, textural organization. Lecturer 2 required her students to remember letter format and learn useful expression. She also said she would pick pairs of synonyms to differentiate and analyze. Lecturer 3 said she encouraged students to write whatever entered into their minds and combining learning and writing. Lecturer 4 said

she encouraged students to read model writing and taught common sense that often confused students, and transitional words in class. The view of using model writing in classroom teaching is paralleled with the ideas of Rohiyatussakinah et al. (2018) that modeled writing could be integrated into the writing process to improve the accuracy of students' writing. In addition, the view of using models in teaching writing is also consistent with the study by Parastou et al. (2013) who demonstrated that the writing errors of students were reduced if the students read a model text before the writing task.

4. Conclusion

The study investigated Chinese EFL college students' pragmatic competence in English letter writing according to gender and faculty and lecturers' perceptions on pragmatic competence, problems faced by their students, and methods in teaching English letter writing.

The results of Independent sample t-test indicates that female students performed better in their pragmatic competence than male students. The results of One-way ANOVA test show that the difference in pragmatic competence between students of social science and students of natural science faculty is significantly different. The findings from semi-structured interview questions show that the lecturers consider it necessary to teach pragmatic knowledge in English letter writing. Some lecturers have realized that some teaching approach such as process approach, modeled writing, and revise after writing could be used in writing class to improve students' letter writing skills.

This research has theoretical and pedagogical implications. Theoretically, this study is a promising attempt in studying EFL learners' pragmatic competence. Pedagogically, this study shed some light on educators the ways to improve students letter writing. Teaching pragmatic competence has not attracted sufficient attention from lecturers though they acknowledge its importance. Therefore, it is necessary to encourage EFL lecturers to teach pragmatic pragmatic competence and adopt proper teaching methods to improve students' pragmatic competence in letter writing.

In spite of the potential contribution of the study to pragmatic competence research, there are still some limitations of the study. First of all, the study only uses 450 samples from two universities in China, so that the representativeness of the findings is limited to some extent. This limitation suggests that larger sample can be used by future researchers. Secondly, this study investigates only two variables (gender and faculty) that might influence EFL learners' pragmatic competence. In order to have a better understanding of EFL learners' pragmatic competence, it is necessary to investigate the effects of some other variables such as learning environment, background of learners, which might affect learners' pragmatic competence in letter writing.

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