

A Comparative Study of Chinese EFL Undergraduates' Pragmatic Competence in English Letter Writing Between Urban and Suburban Universities

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Abstract

In this era of globalization, pragmatic competence plays a vital role in cross-cultural communication. The objective of this study is to investigate whether location is a key factor influencing Chinese EFL undergraduates' pragmatic competence in English letter writing by comparing urban and suburban universities. This study adopted a descriptive research design. The samples of the study were 450 Chinese college students, with 225 from a university located in an urban city (Guangzhou) and another 225 from a university located in a suburban city (Yiyang). All the participants in this study took an English letter writing test and their writings were analyzed from the perspectives of choice of vocabulary, grammar, syntax and organization. The findings from quantitative data indicated that the overall pragmatic competence of the students from an urban university was better than that of the students from a suburban university. Specifically, there was a significant difference in the overall pragmatic competence, choice of vocabulary, grammar, syntax between an urban university and a suburban university, whereas there was no significant difference in organization. Pedagogically, the findings suggest that pragmatic competence and learning environment should be taken into consideration and lecturers could adopt flexible and feasible approaches applicable to students living in different parts of the world.

Keywords: pragmatic competence, letter writing, Chinese EFL undergraduates, location, urban and suburban

1. Introduction

As the acceleration of globalization in the 21st century, people are confronted with more complicated problems such as the global outbreak of Covid 19, environmental issues, the growing gap between rich and poor, economic crisis, which require combined efforts of different nations. As a most widely disseminated and ubiquitous international language, English plays a crucial role in international exchange.

In order to promote better communication with foreign countries, the Chinese government have been working on improving people's English proficiency level. Most Chinese students start learning English from their primary school period, and continue through the university and beyond. However, although Chinese college students had been learning English for at least 9 years before being enrolled into universities, their ability to communicate with foreigners in English is still barely satisfactory (Dai, 2019). Compared with the big investment of time and effort, the attempts to improve people's English proficiency so that they can communicate with native English speakers without trouble have been less successful (Jiang & Fan, 2018). Communication breakdowns also occur when Chinese EFL learners interact with native English speakers even though they have acquired some lexical, phonological and grammatical rules (Qu & Li, 2016). This phenomenon provokes researchers' and educators' reflective thoughts about the primary objective of learning a foreign language. There is a growing sense among Chinese researchers and teachers that there must be some elements in communicative competence fallen into negligence. Pragmatic competence is one of them.

In recent years, research into pragmatics has been developing well, which promotes the study into pragmatic

competence. Pragmatic competence refers to people's ability to use language appropriately and effectively in specific contexts to complete communicative intentions and understand the corresponding communication intentions (Ren & Li, 2018). It plays a vital role in people's daily communication, especially cross-cultural communication. In China, though some college students are able to excellently analyze English linguistic structure, they find it hard to properly express their communicative intentions in English. Worse still, they unconsciously use impolite language, which is undoubtedly a manifestation of the learners' weak pragmatic competence. "If a non-native speaker appears to speak fluently (i.e. is grammatically competent), a native speaker is likely to attribute his/her apparent impoliteness or unfriendliness, not to any linguistic deficiency, but to boorishness or ill-will. While the grammatical error may reveal a speaker to be a less than proficient language-user, pragmatic failure reflects badly on him/her as a person" (Thomas, 1983, p97). The pragmatic competence of language learners should be attached more importance. However, it has always been neglected by teachers and students.

Chen (2017) pointed out that for a long time, people's evaluation of second or foreign language (L2/FL) proficiency often focuses on the language level such as language complexity, fluency and accuracy, ignoring the effect of language use. Moreover, the evaluation is separated from the communicative effect of language and only focuses on language form and meaning, which is against the fundamental purpose of language learning (Yang, 2016). Hence, to investigate EFL learners' pragmatic competence in writing is necessary theoretically and pedagogically.

Since the Reform and Opening up, China's economy has experienced a stage of rapid growth. At the same time, however, it has also been accompanied by significant imbalance in regional economic development. Corresponding to the difference in regional economic development is the gap in education development. Nowadays, different cities are unbalanced in aspects of school-running conditions, management standards, supply of teachers. In foreign language learning, there is also a certain relationship between language acquisition environment and learners' language proficiency. Influenced by learning environment, students in different cities show different levels of English language proficiency (Zhang, 2019).

Writing, as a written form of language, together with speaking, has become the basic form of human social interaction. Additionally, the acceleration of globalization leads to a frequent exchange of letters between different countries. In the process of writing letters, writers are expected to have a good command of vocabulary, grammar rules and to take into account the audience of the letters (Rohiyatussakinah & Okataviana, 2018; Seken, 2017), the latter of which, to a large extent, has bearing on pragmatic competence. As such, this study aims to investigate Chinese EFL college students' pragmatic competence in their English letter writing according to location. It compares students from an urban university and students from a suburban university and analyzes the difference between these two groups' overall pragmatic competence.

Research questions:

Six research questions were put forward and answered in this study.

RQ 1. Is there a significant difference in the overall pragmatic competence of Chinese EFL undergraduates in English letter writing between urban and suburban universities?

RQ 2. Is there a significant difference in Chinese EFL undergraduates' pragmatic competence of choice of vocabulary in English letter writing between urban and suburban universities?

RQ 3. Is there a significant difference in Chinese EFL undergraduates' pragmatic competence of grammar in English letter writing between urban and suburban universities?

RQ 4. Is there a significant difference in Chinese EFL undergraduates' pragmatic competence of syntax in English letter writing between urban and suburban universities?

RQ 5. Is there a significant difference in Chinese EFL undergraduates' pragmatic competence of organization in English letter writing between urban and suburban universities?

RQ 6. Is there a significant difference in Chinese EFL undergraduates' pragmatic competence of mechanics in English letter writing between urban and suburban universities?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Pragmatic Competence

Pragmatic competence is the ability to use language appropriately in a social context, involving the relationship between language competence and language use (Taguchi, 2009). Since Chomsky (1965) first differentiated "competence" and "performance", linguists have done a lot of research on the relationship between the two terms.

The concept of pragmatic competence was derived from Chomsky's dichotomy (Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972). In opposition to theoretical linguists' focus on abstract knowledge, Hymes (1972) put forward the concept of communicative competence, which involved the sociocultural factors in the process of language learning. Enlightened by Hyme's idea, many scholars (Canale & Swain, 1980; Widdowson, 1989) proceeded with the study of the meaning and components of communicative competence, during which pragmatic competence gradually obtained their attention. In the communicative language ability (CLA) proposed by Bachman (1990), language competence consists of organizational competence and pragmatic competence. This is the first time that pragmatic competence was singled out in the communicative ability model where pragmatic competence was further divided into illocutionary and sociolinguistic competence. Communicative-oriented approach has a great impact on the development of pragmatic competence research.

However, the past decade has seen the diversification of pragmatic competence research. Timple-Laughlin, Wain and Schmidgall (2015) studied pragmatic competence from functional perspective, with the emphasis on the interactions between pragmatics and grammar. According to Timple-Laughlin, et al. (2015, p.14), pragmatic competence was "the dynamic and interactive negotiation of intended meaning between two or more individuals in a particular situation". Mao (2021) stated that whether from communicative or functional perspectives, pragmatic competence involved linguistic and sociocultural knowledge, which was in accordance with Leech's (1983) classification of pragmatic competence into pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence. Pragmalinguistic competence refers to the ability to use linguistic elements to perform speech acts (Cenzo, 2007), while sociopragmatic competence is the ability to use various speech-act strategies based on the situational or social variables in communication (Harlow, 1990).

Besides the communicative and functional perspective, researchers also interpret pragmatic phenomena from cognitive stance. Schmidt's "Noticing Hypothesis" (1993) was the earliest attempt to explain the different stages of pragmatic development and learners' abilities (Lu, 2013). It involved the initial stage of input process and the noticing conditions required for the input to transform into "intake". Bialystok's "Two-dimensional Model" (1993) explained the development of two different cognitive parts (knowledge analysis and control of processing) of the acquired pragmatic knowledge in language learning. Chen (2014) proposed four dimensions of pragmatic competence: 1) pragmalinguistic competence; 2) sociopragmatic competence; 3) pragmacognitive competence; 4) discourse competence. Chen's framework employed the achievements in cognitive pragmatics represented by Relevance theory, and incorporated pragmatic cognitive competence into the framework of pragmatic competence analysis for the first time. However, this framework has yet to be supported by empirical research.

2.2 Pragmatic Competence in Writing

According to Common Europe Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2020), "pragmatic competence is concerned with actual language use in the (co-)construction of text" (p137). In writing, pragmatic competence is about language users' knowledge of the principles of language use, and involves discourse competence, functional competence and design competence (Council of Europe, 2020). Specifically, discourse competence is concerned with the ability to present ideas logically in a text, create coherent and cohesive text; functional competence is concerned with the ability to use appropriate linguistic form to reformulate thoughts in different situations; design competence is concerned with "the knowledge of interactional schemata treated under sociolinguistic appropriateness, general linguistic range and vocabulary range" (Council of Europe, 2010, p138-139).

There are some researches concerned with the pragmatic competence in writing. Faghih (2013) claimed that L2/FL learners with high-level pragmatic competence enabled them to write English articles in native-like ways and had good performance in the basic elements of writing such as the opening, vocabulary, grammar, syntax. Muhammad and Nair (2016) demonstrated that Nigerian ESL learners showed limited pragmatic competence in the use of grammar, structure and mechanics in English descriptive writings. Some scholars, such as Chang and Hsu (1998), Lee (2004), and Zhu (2012) investigated Chinese EFL learners' request e-mails. They found that the request strategies used by Chinese EFL learners were different from native English speakers and students were incapable of using appropriate linguistic forms and strategies to convey their intentions in their e-mails to professors.

As a basic element of writing, vocabulary has both linguistic and pragmatic meaning. The relationship between the choice of vocabulary and the quality of writing has been demonstrated by many researchers (Astika, 1993; Engber, 1995; Santos, 1988). Hyland (1994, 1998) and Myers (1989) claimed that the use of epistemic modal such as hedges or discourse markers revealed the pragmatic aspects in writings as these words could express one's doubt and show language users' sensitivity to the perceptions of readers. Additionally, Chen (2010) compared native speakers' use of modal words such as modal verbs, modal auxiliaries, epistemic adverbs, epistemic adjectives in writing with

nonnative speakers' and found that the use of modal words was an important indicator of L2 learners' pragmatic competence. The positive relationship between pragmatic competence and the use of sentence pattern can also be seen in writing. Wu and Yang (2021) investigated the business letters written by Chinese EFL learners, and found that the choice of sentence pattern also directly affected the pragmatic effect to some extent. They claimed that proper use of English sentence patterns such as subjunctive mood would enhance mutual communication.

Based on Thomas's (1983) theory of pragmatic failure, some researchers investigated learners' pragmatic competence through analyzing pragmatic failures in writing. Hu (2009) analyzed the pragmatic failures in vocabulary, syntax and organization in Chinese EFL learners' writings. According to Hu (2009), in vocabulary, students had difficulty in distinguishing between positive and negative words; in syntax, they made errors when producing variant sentences such as passive sentence, existential sentence, inverted sentence; in organization, they had problems in the arrangement of their ideas, coherence and cohesion due to the difference in thinking pattern between Chinese and the westerners. Xu (2021) analyzed the errors in the writings written by advanced English learners in China and found that pragmatic failures mainly occurred in grammar, vocabulary and mechanics.

2.3 ESL/EFL Acquisition and Location

In the past couple of decades, while there has been a large amount of research into L2/FL acquisition, insufficient attention has been given to the comparison of learners from different locations such as between urban and rural areas, between urban and suburban areas. Education is bound up with socioeconomic development which is influenced by geographical location (Wu & Tarc, 2021; Xie & Hong & Kuang & Posiglione, 2018). Language learning is no exception. Hadi and Gholam(2014) stated that EFL learners' cultures and places of living had impact on their learning and learners living in urban areas have more opportunities to do real-world tasks such as sending email, English reading, which was beneficial to learners. Kim (2014) investigated students' English proficiency in Zanzibar secondary schools and found that learning environment was crucial in learning process and it was difficult for rural or suburban students to perform well in English in poor physical environment.

Some empirical studies conducted by Chinese scholars (Fan & Cheng, 2015; Knight & Gunatilaka, 2010; Zhang & Zhao, 2014) who compared urban EFL learners and rural EFL learners found that urban students remarkably outperformed rural students in English tests, including English writing tests. Li and Ni (2013) explained that besides the major educational reform occurring in urban areas (Li, 2013; Rong & Shi, 2001; Xu, 2010), urban schools had more chances of adopting technology to connect English learning to authentic language tasks. Similar difference was found between urban students and suburban students. An and Zhang (2018) conducted a comparative research on Chinese EFL learners' motivation between a university in an eastern urban city and a university in a western suburban city and found that students in an urban university performed remarkably better than participants from a suburban university in cultural integration, interest in English culture, individual development. Another comparative study conducted by Fu (2020) revealed that although students from a provincial capital city (an urban city) and students from a suburban city held positive beliefs on English learning similarly, students from the urban city considered English learning easy whereas students from a suburban city considered English learning difficult.

Due to the negligence on pragmatic competence in previous research, although there has been some empirical studies on pragmatic competence, such as comparison between English majors and non-English majors, native English speakers and nonnative English speakers, advanced learners and lower-level learners, the research conducted to investigate EFL/ESL learners' pragmatic competence through the angle of dichotomy of urban/suburban, urban/ rural is very scarce (Hadi & Gholam, 2015). Wierzbicka (1985) claimed that "cultural norms reflected in speech acts different not only from one language to another, but also from one regional and social variety to another". The urban-rural, or urban-suburban distinction leads to significant differences in EFL learners' pragmatic competence (Li, 2019; Zubeyde & Ozlem, 2009). Andrzej, Syaful and Pratiwi (2019) found that students from urban schools scored higher in autonomous learning and English tests than participants from suburban schools. Genc and Tekyildiz (2009) studied the refusal speech acts performed by Turkish EFL students living in different places. Vinnaras and Robinson (2019) carried out a study on English learners in Lebanese French University and found that urban students made significantly less errors in English language speaking than suburban students in spelling, present tense, sentence pattern, voices. In order to find out whether the areas of living have effects on EFL learners' achievement, Hadi et al. (2015) compared Iranian rural, urban EFL learners and found that urban learners outperformed rural learners in language tests through real-world task such as e-mail, filing an application form and so on. Deepa (2021) claimed that rural learners were more easily influenced by negative transfer of mother language, resulting in making more errors in grammar and sentence formation, through studying the difficulties faced by Indian rural and urban learners in speaking and writing.

3. Methodology

This study is a descriptive research using a quantitative approach. The population of the study consisted of 225 college students who were studying at Nanfang College, Guangzhou located in an urban city, China and 225 college students studying at Hunan City University located in a suburban city, Yiyang, China. The sample was selected through purposive sampling according to faculty and gender. All the participants in the study were two-year college students (150 from Chinese Language Faculty, 150 from Management Faculty and 150 from Education Faculty). Half of the participants were males and another half were females.

The 450 participants took an English letter writing test which required them to finish two English letters (a formal letter and an informal letter) with at least 150 words for each letter in 90 minutes. The students' writings were graded by an experienced lecturer using the rubrics provided by the researchers. The writings were graded from the aspects of choice of vocabulary, grammar, syntax, organization and mechanics. To obtain the validity of the study, two associate professors with PhD degrees verified and accepted the writing test and scoring process. Prior to the actual study, a pilot study was conducted and proved the high reliability of the study. After the tests, the data were entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for the Independent Samples T-Test.

4. Data Analysis and Results

RQ 1. Is there a significant difference in the overall pragmatic competence of Chinese EFL undergraduates in English letter writing between urban and suburban universities?

Table 1. Difference in students' scores for the overall pragmatic competence in English letter writing between urban and suburban universities

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference	t-value	df	p-value
URBAN	225	67.33	9.367				
SUBURBAN	225	65.27	9.056	2.062	2.374	448	.018

Note: Level of significance is at $p < .05$

The findings in Table 1 show that in English writing test, the overall pragmatic competence of the students from an urban university located at an urban city (Mean=67.33; SD=9.367) is better than that of the students from a suburban university (Mean=65.27, SD= 9.056). Findings from the Independent Sample T-test indicate that the difference in pragmatic competence scores between URBAN students and SUBURBAN students is statistically significant (Mean difference=2.062, t value=2.374, df=448, p value=.018).

RQ 2. Is there a significant difference in Chinese EFL undergraduates' pragmatic competence of choice of vocabulary in English letter writing between urban and suburban universities?

Table 2. Difference in students' scores for choice of vocabulary in English letter writing between urban and suburban universities

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference	t-value	df	p-value
URBAN	225	14.01	1.968				
SUBURBAN	225	13.31	1.955	.702	3.895	448	.000

Note: Level of significance is at $p < .05$

The findings exhibited in Table 2 show the URBAN group's mean score for choice of vocabulary (Mean=14.01; SD=1.968) is higher than the SUBURBAN group's score (Mean=13.31; SD=1.955). Findings from the Independent Sample T-Test show that the difference in the mean scores for choice of vocabulary between the URBAN and SUBURBAN group in letter writing is significant and the pragmatic competence of URBAN group in choice of vocabulary is better than that of SUBURBAN group (Mean Difference=.702, t=3.895, df=448, p=.000).

RQ 3. Is there a significant difference in Chinese EFL undergraduates' pragmatic competence of grammar in English letter writing between urban and suburban universities?

Table 3. Difference in students' scores for grammar in English letter writing between urban and suburban universities

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference	t-value	df	p-value
URBAN	225	13.33	2.050				
SUBURBAN	225	12.71	2.049	.618	3.197	448	.001

Note: Level of significance is at $p < .05$

Findings from the Independent Sample T-Test in Table 3 indicate the URBAN group's mean score for grammar

(Mean=13.33; SD=2.050) is higher than the SUBURBAN group's score (Mean=12.71; SD=2.049). It shows that there is a statistically meaningful difference in the mean scores for grammar between the URBAN group and SUBURBAN group (Mean Difference=.618, $t=3.197$, $df=448$, $p=.001$).

RQ 4. Is there a significant difference in Chinese EFL undergraduates' pragmatic competence of syntax in English letter writing between urban and suburban universities?

Table 4. Difference in students' scores for syntax in English letter writing between urban and suburban universities

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference	t-value	df	p-value
URBAN	225	13.24	2.103				
SUBURBAN	225	12.66	2.094	.578	2.920	448	.004

Note: Level of significance is at $p<.05$

The findings in Table 4 indicate that the URBAN group's mean score for syntax (Mean=13.24; SD=2.103) is higher than the SUBURBAN group's score (Mean=12.66; SD=2.094). Findings from the Independent Sample T-Test show that there is a statistically meaningful difference in the mean scores for syntax between the URBAN and SUBURBAN group in the letter writing test and the URBAN students outperformed in syntax SUBURBAN students (Mean Difference =.578, $t=2.920$, $df=448$, $p=.004$).

RQ 5. Is there a significant difference in Chinese EFL undergraduates' pragmatic competence of organization in English letter writing between urban and suburban universities?

Table 5. Difference in students' scores for organization in English letter writing between urban and suburban universities

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference	t-value	df	p-value
URBAN	225	12.72	2.068				
SUBURBAN	225	12.69	1.878	.027	.143	448	.886

Note: Level of significance is at $p<.05$

The findings in Table 5 show that the URBAN group's mean score for organization (Mean=12.72; SD=2.068) is higher than the SUBURBAN group's score (Mean=12.69; SD=1.878). However, results of the Independent Sample T-Test show that there is no significant difference in the mean scores for organization between the URBAN and SUBURBAN group (Mean Difference=.027, $t=.143$, $df=444$, $p=.886$).

RQ 6. Is there a significant difference in Chinese EFL undergraduates' pragmatic competence of mechanics in English letter writing between urban and suburban universities?

Table 6. Difference in students' scores for mechanics in English letter writing between urban and suburban universities

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference	t-value	df	p-value
URBAN	225	14.04	1.895				
SUBURBAN	225	13.90	1.959	.138	.758	448	.449

Note: Level of significance is at $p<.05$

Findings from the Independent Sample T-Test in Table 6 indicate that the URBAN group's mean score for mechanics in English letter writing (Mean=14.04; SD=1.895) is higher than the SUBURBAN group's score (Mean=13.90; SD=1.959). However, the results from the Independent Sample T-Test show that the difference is not significant (Mean Difference=.138, $t=.758$, $df=448$, $p=.449$). As such, the findings clearly answered RQ 6: there is no significant difference in the mean scores for pragmatic competence in mechanics between the URBAN and SUBURBAN group.

5. Discussion

The findings from Table 1 answered RQ1 in the study that there was a significant difference in the overall pragmatic competence of Chinese EFL undergraduates between urban and suburban universities. The findings support the research by Hadi and Gholam (2015) which showed that culture and learners' places of living influenced their learning and urban EFL students' pragmatic competence was better than rural or suburban learners' because urban EFL learners had more opportunities to practice their English by doing real-world tasks such as writing e-mails, filling in application forms, making reservations for hotels and so on. These results also correspond to the study by Xie, et al. (2014) who claimed that education was inevitably bound up with socioeconomic development which is

influenced by geographical location.

The findings from Table 2 answered RQ 2 that urban students outperformed suburban students in the use of vocabulary such as modal words, hedges and discourse markers. The findings in this study are consistent with the findings by Li (2013), Knight and Gunatilaka (2010), which indicated that urban students performed better in choice of vocabulary than suburban or rural students due to the deficiency of target language environment in small cities. Besides, these findings support the study by Xie, et al. (2018) who proved that students scored higher in the accuracy and variety of vocabulary in English writing.

In parallel with the findings of Vinnaras et al. (2019), this study also indicated that urban students performed better in grammar than suburban students. These findings answered RQ 3 that there was a significance in students' grammar performance in English writing according to location. Additionally, the findings in this study are also consistent with the study by Fan, et al. (2015) who argued that EFL learners from different places showed different grammatical competence.

The findings in Table 4 answered RQ 4 that urban students outperformed suburban students in the use of sentence pattern in English writing. The results are paralleled with the study by Li (2019), Ren (2021) that students' performance in syntax in writing varies according to learners' language proficiency and learning environment. The results are also consistent with Deepa's (2021) study that rural English learners made more errors in sentence formation than urban students.

In addition, Table 5 answered RQ 5 that there was no significant difference in the way students organized their ideas. The results are in line with the study by He (2016) who showed that coherence and cohesion was a common problem for EFL learners from different places because of the different thinking pattern between the East and the West. Chinese adopted a spiral way in writing whereas native English speakers use a linear style (Hoey, 1983).

In terms of RQ 6, the findings in Table 6 indicated that there was no significant difference in college students' pragmatic competence in mechanics. These findings are inconsistent with the study by Vinnaras and Robinson (2019) who demonstrated that urban students performed better than suburban students in spelling and punctuation. However, the results of this study resemble the study by Zhang et al. (2014), and He (2016) who showed that errors in mechanics were often neglected by Chinese EFL students no matter where the students were from. The findings are also in line with the study by Xu (2021) who claimed that even for advanced English learners, there were pragmatic failures in mechanics in English writing.

It can be seen from the finding results that there are significant differences in students' the overall pragmatic competence in urban and sub-urban universities. Though there is no significant difference in organization and mechanics, the difference in choice of vocabulary, grammar and syntax is significant. Various reasons contribute to the difference, with economy believed to be the primary one (Alejo & Piquer-Piriz, 2016; Munoz, 2008). Compared with the suburban universities, most urban universities could receive more funds from local government or enterprises. The better-funded universities are more competitive in attracting outstanding lecturers. Lecturers' language ability, teaching approaches, and social and cultural knowledge influence learners' language acquisition and learning (Wu & Tarc, 2021). Additionally, students studying in urban cities enjoy the benefit of learning English on campus equipped with audio-visual learning facilities, self-learning facilities, coupled with additional learning materials (Li, 2016; Qu & Li, 2016; Xie, et al., 2019).

Apart from the economic factor, humanistic environment contributes to the difference in English proficiency of students from different locations. Urban cities, to some extent attract more foreigners with its flourishing economy, convenient transportation, and its unique open and inclusive characters. Therefore, college students in urban cities have more opportunities to engage in intercultural communication and expose themselves to English environment in and out of campus, during which their language competence is enhanced through learning, practicing and critical thinking (Jin & Ball, 2020; Li, 2016; Sun, 2007; Wu & Tarc, 2021).

6. Conclusion

The present study attempted to examine Chinese EFL undergraduates' pragmatic competence in English letter writing by studying the differences in the overall pragmatic competence, choice of vocabulary, grammar, syntax, organization, mechanics in an urban university and a suburban university. The results of the quantitative research indicated that the overall pragmatic competence of undergraduates studying in an urban city was better than that of the students studying in a suburban city. Specifically, students in an urban university performed better significantly in choice of vocabulary, grammar, syntax than students in a suburban university, whereas no significant difference could be seen in organization and mechanics.

There are some implications in this study. Theoretically, it arouses people's concern about the EFL learners' pragmatic competence and the English proficiency development of learners living in suburban or even rural areas. Pedagogically, the findings suggest that lecturers should attach importance to learners' pragmatic competence in English letter writing and adopt flexible approaches applicable to learners in different environments.

It is also needed to be noted that there are limitations in the study. The study only investigated two universities from thousands of universities and colleges in China, which hardly represent the mass of China's institutions of higher learning. Additionally, this study only investigates undergraduates' English letter writing and rules out other types which also occupy important places in writing. In order to have a comprehensive idea of students' pragmatic competence, it is suggested that studies be conducted on EFL learners' skills in speaking in the future. Moreover, it is also hoped that quasi-experimental studies would be conducted in order for lecturers to find out teaching approaches tailored to students in urban cities or suburban cities.

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