A Study on Chinese English Learners' Use of Emotion Words

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Most educated Chinese take English as an important communication tool and the language has been increasingly frequently used in all walks of life in the country. This paper is to examine the use of English emotion words on the target group of English learners in China. The study is designed to find out the relationship between the use of emotion words and such relevant variables as language proficiency, gender, and age. The results demonstrate that the use of emotion words is significantly linked to the level of proficiency as well as gender. Age is found to have slight effect on the use of emotion words. The study also reveals that more positive emotion words are produced than negative ones in the speech. Based on the major findings, some implications and suggestions are offered: Firstly, English learners in China are expected to improve their language proficiency, particularly that of listening and speaking. Secondly, they are supposed to enhance their culture awareness of English by means of exposing themselves to as much authentic language as possible.

Keywords: emotion words, Chinese English learners, production

Introduction

Although the number of English learners in China is on the rise, few of them express their emotions in English. Most English learners in China have learned this language for at least 10 years. They have a good command of grammatical rules and a large reservoir of vocabulary. They have no problem in receiving information. But when it comes to expressing themselves, especially their inner feelings and affections in English, most of them feel it rather hard. They may choose to conceal their emotions or switch to their mother tongue for help. This paper intends to find out the reasons why English learners in China fail to use emotion words properly and what factors have impact on the reception and production of these words.

Emotion and Language

Language and emotions seem to be two completely unrelated terms studied respectively in the domains of linguistics and psychology. However, our everyday life experience constantly reminds us that the two are closely interrelated with each other. Language is one of the best means to reveal our mood. For another, language may sometimes influence our emotions in that proper language puts us in good mood while improper language makes us feel bad. In addition, to a bilingual, the choice of different languages might prompt or constrain the expression of his or her emotions. Hence, the interrelationship and the interaction between language and emotions have

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caught the attention of both linguists and physiologists who have made a lot of observations and investigations. A case in point is the study on emotion vocabulary.

Review of Literature

Research on emotion words is mostly carried out in the domain of psychology for the purpose of measuring emotions. More often than not, emotions are depicted as subjective, personal, and intangible and are therefore difficult to define and measure. However, verbalization of emotions has provided researchers with a simple, direct but very effective and efficient way to carry out various empirical studies on emotions. Adjective checklists—a series of adjectives, such as *calm*, *nervous*, *fearful*, or *bored*—are frequently used by researchers to identify or measure emotional states in human adults (see Plutchik, 1989). Another way of measuring emotions is by means of the dictionary of emotions in language. Davitz compiled his dictionary of emotional meanings with only 50 emotion words in 1969. Whissell brought us a more elaborate one in 1989, which he entitled the *Dictionary of Affect in Language* including approximately 4,000 emotion words or common English words with affective connotations. It can be generalized that language, usually words, has been used as a means for the research of emotions. However, few researchers have come up with the idea of researching on emotion language itself in the domain of linguistics until 1980s, when Rintell (1984) did a couple of pioneering experiments on it. In these studies, he examined perception and expression of emotion in the speech of second language learners and users and found that language proficiency, linguistic and cultural background played an important role in the subjects' performance, whereas age and gender did not. Still, a thorough breakthrough did not occur until the late 1990s, when Dewaele commenced a sequence of studies on emotion words in the domain of linguistics and second language acquisition. The linguistic as well as cultural variations of emotion words have allowed researchers to expand the focus of their research to investigate the acquisition and use of emotion language, especially emotion vocabulary. The results of their studies suggest that language proficiency level, topic, extraversion, and gender are linked to the use of emotion words, whereas socio-cultural competence is not.

From what has been reviewed above, clearly, few researches have been done on the target group of Chinese English learners, except that Rintell (1984) mentioned a word in his research that "when learners of three major language groups were compared to each other, it was found that Chinese students had more difficulty with the task" (p. 262). Chinese and English belong to different language families with quite different linguistic characters. And moreover, different culture background between the East and the West may have great impact on English learners' choice of emotion vocabulary. Therefore, it is interesting and challenging for researchers to conduct a research on this target group. Furthermore, most researches have recruited university students as the subjects, who, to some extent, cannot represent other populations in terms of age, linguistic background, ability, etc. Therefore, a more varied sample may make the findings more valid.

Methodology

The purpose of the research is to find out how much impact the relevant variables such as age, gender, and language proficiency have on the use of emotion vocabulary for learners of English in China. An experiment with multiple variables is conducted to fulfill this purpose. There are 32 subjects taking part in the experiment. Data collected from the subjects are analyzed afterwards.

Research Design

These subjects are asked to describe eight pictures to their friends in English. While describing the picture, the subject is required to answer the following three questions: (1) What can you see in the picture? (2) How does each person feel in the picture? and (3) Could you please describe your feelings after you have seen the picture? The subject is asked to describe the content of the picture to the best of his/her ability. After the subject fully understands the experimental process, s/he is left with her/his friend in the classroom with the recorder on to record her/his description. The pictures are not randomly described but rather orderly. They are prearranged in a certain order for the subject.

Subjects

The target group is made up of 32 subjects. Sixteen subjects are non-English major first-year students in Shanghai Institute of Technology, eight males and eight females, ranging from 18 to 20 in age. They have taken English at a high school level (about four to five hours a week) for up to six years, and then at the university level for about one year. Some of them even began to learn English at an earlier age. The other 16 subjects, aged between 27 and 55, are composed of 11 English teachers (seven females and four males) teaching College English in Shanghai Institute of Technology, and five post-graduates majoring in English in East China Normal University (one female and four males). All of the teachers have got a master degree of English and have been teaching English for at least nine years, some even for up to 30 years. The five postgraduates except one had previously been an English teacher for at least four years in certain colleges or universities. None of the 32 subjects have ever paid a visit to an English-speaking country or had any long-term contact with native speakers of English.

Procedure

These pictures are concerned with four topics: lovely babies, weddings, disabled people, and funerals. These four groups of pictures are intended to elicit five basic emotions: happiness, love, anger, fear, and sadness. These visual tools help the subjects to immerse themselves in a certain emotional condition and then produce some emotion expressions accordingly. With the consideration that culture is very likely to have some impact on subjects' production of emotion words, each topic comprises two pictures of different cultures. One is of Chinese culture and the other is of Western culture. In this way the impact is supposed to be reduced to minimum. All these eight pictures are searched from the Internet with the searching tool: Google and downloaded afterwards. The other instrument used in the study is a questionnaire which is used to get some background information about the subjects such as age, gender, educational background, etc. All the descriptions are tape recorded and transcribed afterwards. The transcripts are double checked to ensure the accuracy. The length of the descriptions is varied ranging from about 10 minutes to almost an hour.

Results

The methods of handling the dependent variable in this study are adopted from Dewaele and Pavlenko (2002). Words with emotional value are singled out manually using lists of emotion words presented in Davitz (1969), Plutchik (1994), and Dewaele and Pavlenko (2002). Words with a value on the dimension of valence and arousal greater than zero are categorized as emotion words in the corpus of the descriptions. Although we have found criteria in judging whether a word belongs to the group of emotion words or not, it is still of little

possibility to eliminate the subjective nature of this categorization. The number of emotion word tokens and the total number of word tokens used by each subject are listed. In addition, the length of the speech extracts varies from about 10 minutes to nearly one hour so that the proportion of emotion word tokens in the total number of word tokens produced by every subject is also calculated beforehand. The use of English emotion words includes 91 lemmas and 709 word tokens.

Table 1

Number of Emotion Word Tokens

Subjects	Number of emotion word tokens	Number of total tokens	Proportion	Subjects	Number of emotion word tokens	Number of total tokens	Proportion
F1	18	399	4.51%	M1	32	326	9.82%
F2	18	245	7.35%	M2	25	344	7.27%
F3	21	289	7.27%	M3	22	243	9.05%
F4	19	275	6.91%	M4	21	370	6.22%
F5	22	359	6.13%	M5	14	332	4.22%
F6	25	359	6.96%	M6	17	351	4.84%
F7	30	575	5.22%	M7	16	376	4.26%
F8	13	278	4.68%	M8	8	233	3.43%
F11	43	634	6.94%	M11	13	548	3.83%
F12	51	927	5.50%	M12	15	156	9.62%
F13	26	284	9.15%	M13	25	474	5.27%
F14	22	632	3.48%	M14	11	423	2.60%
F15	26	433	6.00%	M15	19	299	6.35%
F16	14	207	6.76%	M16	18	297	6.06%
F17	28	749	3.74%	M17	8	216	3.70%
F18	36	546	6.59%	M18	24	466	5.15%

Data is analyzed through the statistic software SPSS 13.0. Mean proportions and the standard deviation (SD) are determined for all the participants. Standard multiple linear regression is used to examine the relationship and predictive power of the independent variables. The regression of gender, age, and language proficiency is highly significant. All three variables are significant predictors. Among them, gender is comparatively more significant. The effect of language proficiency and that of age are moderate. The three independent variables explain more than 90% of the variance, also suggesting a large effect size. The mean values and SD for the different groups are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Means and SD in the Proportions of Word Tokens According to Gender, Proficiency, and Age

Independent Variables	N	*M* Proportion Emotion Word Tokens	SD
Gender			
Female	16	6.08%	1.47
Male	16	5.97%	2.19
Proficiency Level			
Advanced	16	6.28%	1.98
Intermediate	16	5.78%	1.70
Age			
20-30	22	6.28%	1.74
30-40	7	6.05%	1.93
above 40	3	4.08%	1.74

Another finding in the survey is that positive emotion words produced by the subjects outnumber negative emotion words. The result is clearly shown in the absolute number of positive versus negative emotion words produced by every participant. Table 3 presents their mean numbers and the standard deviation.

Table 3

The Preponderance of Positive Emotion Words

	Mean	Max	Min	SD
Positive emotion word tokens	11.88	37	4	6.09
Negative emotion word tokens	10.81	27	3	5.06
Positive emotion lemmas	9.59	30	3	4.72
Negative emotion lemmas	8.5	20	3	3.82

This result is also supported by the findings of Kancko and his colleagues (2004). They find that Chinese students use positive emotional expressions the most frequently among the three learner groups (Japanese, Chinese, and French). The reasons for Chinese people's preference of uttering positive emotion words may vary from situation to situation. Some basic elements can be sorted out, namely, Chinese culture and the illocutionary force of negative emotion words. It is traditionally believed in China that it is preferable for people to report events of happiness rather than those of sadness. This belief leads directly to such a result that people learn to constrain their emotions especially negative ones. Moreover, negative emotion words might make the listener feel ill at ease or threaten the listener's negative face, as Rintell (1990) argues that "to express one's feelings—especially strong or negative feelings—to another person is either an imposition on that person, or causes loss of face to the speaker (and possibly the hearer as well), or both" (p. 78). Therefore, the speaker must use any linguistic device to minimize or moderate the expression of those feelings.

Discussion

The results of the experiment demonstrate that different variables may have different impacts on the use of emotion words in different contexts. Gender influences greatly the use of emotion word tokens in the corpus of English. Age has a slight predictive power over the use. Level of proficiency also has some influence.

Gender is one of the key variables which determine the number of emotion words used in speech. It is found that gender plays a significant role in the use of emotion vocabulary. The presence of a gender effect in bilinguals' first as well as second language corpora can be partly accounted for by different ideologies of gender within different cultures (Dewaele & Pavlenko, 2002). Different cultures have different ideologies of gender and attribute different values to emotion talk. In the case of the Chinese culture, women are thought to be more emotionalized and are supposed to talk more about emotional topics (HOU & YU, 2006). A speech of high emotionality might be considered to be more typical of a female speech. Thus, it is not surprising that narratives produced by these Chinese females display a larger number of emotion words than those produced by Chinese males.

Language proficiency has a great impact on the frequency of use of emotion word tokens, with more advanced speakers having a better utilization of emotion words in their speech both quantitatively and qualitatively. The finding further confirms Rintell's view that speakers at lower levels of proficiency are likely to encounter the problem of lacking sufficient lexicons to express themselves, particularly when it comes to emotional topics (Rintell, 1984; 1990).

Age plays a moderately significant role in the use of emotion word tokens. Psychologists have established that emotions keep changing over our lifespan and that self-regulation of emotion is enhanced with age (Troll & Fingerman, 1996). People of older age might produce less emotion words than those of younger age. It is also the case under the circumstance of a foreign language.

Conclusion

This study explores Chinese English learners' production of emotion vocabulary. A couple of findings have been achieved. For one thing, gender, language proficiency, and age all have some influence on the frequency of use of emotion words. For another, positive emotions are more readily expressed in comparison to negative ones.

As is established in the study, language proficiency is crucial to the production of emotion expressions in a foreign language. The better command of a language the speaker has, the easier he/she might feel in expressing emotions. Hence, the most urgent thing for a Chinese English learner to do is to improve his/her language proficiency at all aspects, particularly that of listening and speaking. However, a good command of the language does not necessarily guarantee the speaker's good performance in expressing his/her emotions. Even speakers with high language proficiency can not perform as well as native speakers do (Rintell, 1990). The reason for such a disparity may partly result from the Chinese English learners' inadequate "social-cultural competence" (Dewaele & Pavlenko, 2002). Therefore, the second pedagogic implication is that measures should be taken to enhance speakers' social-cultural competence in a foreign language. Culture awareness of this language needs to be enhanced in the class in addition to basic skills training, which, fortunately, has recently caught the attention of many educators in China. There may be different ways to improve speakers' ability in this aspect. One such method is through the use of authentic material such as film extracts and record extracts. Authenticity of the language should be ensured in our language teaching. Another approach is through a stay in an English-speaking country, which unfortunately, is not affordable for all foreign language learners.

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