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Effects of Process-Genre Based Pragmatic Instruction on Chinese EFL Learners' Pragmatic Ability and Metacognitive Strategy Use in Letter Writing

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Abstract: This study investigated the effects of process-genre-based pragmatic instruction on Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic ability and metacognitive strategy use in letter writing. Thirty-four intermediate-level students received pragmatic instruction within a process-genre framework. Data were collected using multiple-choice tests (MCTs), written discourse completion tasks (WDCTs), a metacognitive strategy questionnaire (MSQ), and interviews. Results indicated significant improvements in pragmatic comprehension and expression abilities, with post-test scores substantially exceeding pre-test performance. Analysis of MSQ responses and interview data revealed increased use of planning strategies as learners became more attentive to genre-specific pragmatic features and more deliberate in structuring their letters. This study bridges theoretical frameworks and practical pedagogy, offering actionable insights for EFL educators in teaching written pragmatics.

Keywords: Chinese EFL learners, process-genre-based pragmatic instruction, pragmatic ability, metacognitive strategies, letter writing

Introduction

In today's digital era, effective written communication such as formal letters and emails—is essential for global professional and academic engagement. For EFL learners, mastering letter writing involves not only grammatical accuracy but also the pragmatic ability to understand and convey intentions appropriately (Nguyen, 2018; Lin & Wang, 2022). China's Standards of English Language Ability (Ministry of Education & National Language Commission, 2018) has established pragmatic ability as a core proficiency component, emphasizing communicative intentions in both writing and speaking. However, pragmatic ability is often neglected in classroom instruction (Zhilan et al., 2022). Despite years of English education, many Chinese university students struggle with letter writing, particularly with expressing and understanding intentions effectively (Zhilan et al., 2022). Research highlights widespread pragmatic failures in student letters, such as excessive directness, lack of mitigation, inappropriate address forms, missing greetings/closings, and inadequate acknowledgment of imposition (Wu, 2021; Qin et al., 2024). These issues frequently stem from insufficient explicit instruction in letter etiquette and are more pronounced in written than spoken communication (Pourmousavi et al., 2020). To address these challenges, effective teaching strategies are needed to foster pragmatic ability in various written contexts (Chen & Wu, 2022). While research increasingly explores L2 pragmatic development in writing, most studies focus either on process-based or genre-based instruction (Nguyen, 2018; Ren, 2018; Tardy et al., 2020), rarely integrating both or examining

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the impact on metacognitive strategies. Recent studies advocate genre-based pedagogy for its clear guidance on conventions and the contextual factors that shape pragmatic choices (Bhowmik, 2021). Additionally, process-based writing techniques, such as feedback and collaborative tasks, show promise in enhancing pragmatic ability across proficiency levels (Chen & Wu, 2022). Still, the impact of combining process and genre approaches on pragmatic ability, especially in letter writing, remains underexplored.

The process-genre approach, grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), provides a robust framework for linking communicative intent with linguistic structure in written communication (Dong & Lu, 2020; Huang & Zhang, 2019). In the context of letter writing, this approach is particularly valuable because it enables teachers to operationalize pragmatic instruction in a structured yet flexible manner. Letter writing frequently involves performing speech acts such as making requests, complaints, or suggestions acts that require not only linguistic competence but also an understanding of the social and contextual appropriateness of language use. By integrating pragmatic theory, particularly Speech Act Theory, with SFL, teachers can guide students to produce speech acts that are both contextually and socially appropriate in their written communication.

Despite the promise of this integrated approach, empirical research examining its effectiveness for developing pragmatic ability in letter writing remains limited, with most existing studies focusing on other genres such as emails or essays. Moreover, little is known about how process-genre-based pragmatic instruction influences learners' metacognitive strategies including planning, monitoring, and evaluating which are essential for effective communication and learner autonomy.

This study seeks to address these gaps by implementing process-genre-based pragmatic instruction in the teaching of letter writing to Chinese EFL learners. Specifically, it investigates how this integrated instructional approach enhances learners' ability to comprehend and express communicative intentions in formal letters and how it shapes their use of metacognitive strategies throughout the writing process. By combining process genre based pedagogy with explicit pragmatic instruction, the research aims to offer practical insights for EFL educators and contribute to the development of effective written communication skills among language learners.

Review of Literature

Studies on Pragmatic Ability in Writing

Pragmatic ability is essential to communicative competence, covering both oral and written contexts (Konstantinidou & Perrin, 2021). This ability plays a pivotal role in engaging readers, conveying messages clearly, and navigating cultural norms, transforming writing into a powerful communicative tool. Huck emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach to writing instruction that prioritizes pragmatic ability alongside traditional linguistic competencies.

Previous research focused mainly on spoken English pragmatic ability (Derakhshan, 2019; Kentmen et al., 2023). However, recent studies underscore the growing importance of written pragmatic ability, particularly in academic and professional settings (Krishnan et al., 2021). This shift acknowledges the need to explore the unique challenges and instructional approaches related to pragmatic ability in writing. In the ESL/EFL context, while several studies demonstrate the positive impact of teaching pragmatics on learners' awareness and proficiency (Alemi & Khanlarzadeh, 2016; Derakhshan, 2019), there remains a need for further investigation into the specific strategies that enhance written pragmatic ability among language learners.

Studies on Pragmatic Ability in Letter Writing

Letter writing is a distinctive genre that requires writers to establish clear communicative purposes and perform appropriate speech acts, such as requests or complaints, in contextually appropriate ways (Dombi, 2020). Studies show that even proficient EFL students often struggle with pragmatic appropriateness, displaying issues such as over-directness and insufficient mitigation (Wu, 2021; Nguyen, 2018). These problems are often linked to insufficient use of syntactic and lexical modifiers (Chen, 2015; Rodríguez Velasco, 2022) and a lack of awareness of genre conventions like openings,

closings, and appropriate forms of address (Chen, 2015). Cultural norms further shape letter-writing strategies, emphasizing the need for explicit, context-sensitive instruction (Chen & Wu, 2022).

Effectiveness of Explicit Instruction

Explicit pragmatic instruction has been shown to improve learners' pragmatic ability in written communication, particularly in composing requests and polite emails (Nguyen, 2018; Economidou-Kogetsidis et al., 2018; Ishihara & Cohen, 2021; Lin & Wang, 2022). Some research emphasizes the integration of pragmatic instruction with genre knowledge. For example, corpus studies have identified genre-specific features and pragmatic errors in English request emails written by Japanese learners, offering insights for educators to address these issues (Roshid et al., 2022). Huang & Zhang (2019) explored the effectiveness of genre-based pedagogy, finding that while such instruction can enhance pragmatic competence, teaching the subtleties of email communication remains a challenge. Further investigations into collaborative writing tasks and reformulation as a feedback strategy reveal positive impacts across various proficiency levels (Chen & Wu, 2022).

Despite these advances, much existing research focuses narrowly on process-based feedback or explicit instruction in emails, limiting broader applicability to other letter genres. Furthermore, most studies emphasize pragmatic expression, with less attention given to comprehension. Expanding research to diverse letter genres and combining process- and genre-based instruction could provide a fuller understanding of how to develop pragmatic ability in written communication.

L2 Learners' Metacognitive Strategies in Pragmatic Performance

Metacognitive strategies, encompassing planning, monitoring, and evaluating, are essential for learners' development in pragmatic ability. Compared to research on L2 pragmatic production, studies on L2 learners' metacognitive processes in written pragmatic performance are still limited. Most rely on retrospective reporting and focus on challenges like limited pragmalinguistic knowledge (Beltrán-Palanques, 2016). Although there is some evidence that pragmatic instruction can foster metacognitive strategy use (Chen, 2015; Levkina, 2018), few empirical studies have examined how process-genre-based instruction affects these strategies in letter writing. Existing literature highlights several gaps, including Limited focus on written pragmatic ability compared to oral pragmatic ability; Insufficient research on the instructional effects of the process-genre approach on developing learners' pragmatic ability in letter writing; and a Lack of empirical studies exploring the influence of pragmatic instruction on metacognitive strategies in letter writing. Addressing these gaps, this study explores the effects of process-genre-based pragmatic instruction on developing Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic ability and metacognitive strategies in letter writing. The findings aim to provide actionable insights into enhancing EFL learners' written pragmatic ability while informing written pragmatic instructional practices in college English courses. The primary research questions are: RQ1: How does the instruction influence Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic comprehension ability in letter writing? RQ2: How does the instruction influence Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic expression ability in letter writing? and RQ3: To what extent does the instruction influence Chinese EFL learners' use of metacognitive strategies in letter writing?

Methodology

Research Site and Participants

This study was conducted at a public university in China and focused on second-year, intermediate-level EFL learners who were non-English majors. Using simple random sampling, one intact class of 34 Business Administration undergraduates from the Faculty of Business Administration was selected. All participants had intermediate English proficiency (CSE Level 5) and reported no prior experience in writing English emails or formal letters.

Instructional Materials and Method

The course was based on New Horizon English: An Integrated Course and supplemented with custom-designed materials aligned with the China Standards of English Language Ability (Ministry

of Education & National Language Commission, 2018). Five major letter types were covered: complaints, suggestions, sympathy, negotiations, and proposals. Materials were reviewed and revised with feedback from applied linguistics experts and in-service English teachers. The instruction for the class closely adhered to the process-genre instructional framework (Huang & Zhang, 2019), which includes the stages of Developing Context, Modelling & Deconstruction, Joint Construction, and Individual Construction at both the genre and process levels. A strong focus on pragmatic information enabled learners to develop autonomous control over form-function-context mappings and to produce contextually appropriate and effective letters, following the recursive process of prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing (Deng et al., 2014). At the genre level, instruction was informed by Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and pragmatic theory, emphasizing analysis of context, communicative purpose, and language strategies. Through modeling and deconstruction of authentic texts, students identified key rhetorical moves and adapted their language to specific social situations. At the process level, a scaffolding framework supported students as they progressed through planning, drafting, revising, and editing. Writing activities began collaboratively, with the teacher modeling expert strategies and providing feedback, then gradually shifted to independent writing as students became more autonomous.

Instruments

Multiple-Choice Test (MCT): The 15-item test, developed by experienced English teachers and aligned with CSE Level 5, covered aspects such as subject lines, formal salutations, implied meanings, and appropriate closings. The reliability score was .815.

Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT): Participants wrote formal letters or emails based on real-world scenarios (e.g., complaints, recommendations), with tasks adapted from CET-4 exams. Each pretest and posttest scenario (150–180 words, 30 minutes) was translated into L1 for clarity. Paired scenarios ensured comparable difficulty for reliable measurement of instructional effects. Scripts were evaluated using a 5-level holistic rubric (content and form), modified from Chen (2015), with the context broadened from student-professor to community settings.

Table 1. Description of each scenario in the WDCT

Scenarios	Pre-test	Post-test
Scenario 1	Suppose you are going to write a proposal letter to your school library for improving its service. You are to write about its current problems and possible solutions to these problems.	Imagine you are preparing a proposal for your school library to improve its services. Discuss the current challenges it faces and suggest practical solutions to address these issues.
Scenario 2	Suppose you are going to write a proposal letter to your school clinic for improving its service. You are to write about its current problems and possible solutions to these problems.	The school clinic has received feedback about declining student satisfaction with its services. As a student representative, you are tasked with writing a formal proposal to the cafeteria management team.

Metacognitive Strategy Questionnaire (MSQ): Adapted from Huang & Zhang (2022), the 22-item MSQ (α = .943 overall) measured self-reported use of metacognitive strategies (planning, audience awareness, monitoring, evaluation). The instrument was administered in Chinese for clarity and had high reliability across subscales.

Semi-structured Interviews: participants were randomly interviewed to explore the participants' application of metacognitive strategies during the writing process: planning, audience considerations, monitoring, and evaluation. This process aimed to increase the reliability of the production data from the WDCTs and MSQ (Beltrán-Palanques, 2016; Taguchi & Roever, 2017).

Procedure

Pre-test: MCT, WDCT, and MSQ were administered in two 45-minute sessions. Post-WDCT interviews were conducted in L1.

Instruction: Over 2 weeks, participants underwent 4 sessions, with each treatment session lasting 50 minutes for instruction and 50 minutes for collaboration and individual writing. The topics for letter writing were sourced from level five of the College English syllabus, which focuses on pragmatic

ability (understanding and expressing intentions) in written English for undergraduate EFL learners. This trial study specifically targeted the formal letter addressing complaints and offering suggestions or recommendations.

Post-test: The same instruments and procedures as the pre-test were repeated to assess learning outcomes. All data collection was completed within one week per phase.

Data Analysis

To address RQ1 (effects on pragmatic ability in letter writing), paired-sample t-tests were conducted to compare participants' pre-and post-test scores on the Multiple-Choice Tasks (MCTs).

To address RQ2, i.e., effects on pragmatic expression ability, analysis of 34 letter scripts from Written Discourse Completion Tasks (WDCTs) was conducted using quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative analysis involved two trained non-native English teachers who rated the scripts using a holistic rubric adapted from Chen (2015). The ratings were averaged for the final scores, with high interrater reliability observed (.85 for the pre-test and .90 for the post-test). A paired-sample t-test was performed to compare the mean scores, providing statistical evidence of the instructional impact. To complement the quantitative findings and gain deeper insights into learners' pragmatic development, students' letters were coded according to Martin's (2001) SFL framework, focusing on genre structure (opening, body, closing), field (content clarity and relevance), tenor (pragmatic strategy, politeness, supportive moves, audience awareness), and mode (cohesion, grammatical accuracy, and organization).

To address RQ3 (effects on metacognitive strategies), the Metacognitive Strategy Questionnaire (MSQ) measured changes in strategy use across pre- and post-tests. Paired-sample t-tests evaluated the significance of score changes, supported by qualitative insights from interviews exploring how students applied these strategies during the writing process.

Findings and Discussion

Effects on Pragmatic Comprehension Ability

To address the first research question, paired-sample t-tests were conducted on MCT scores. Results revealed a significant improvement in participants' pragmatic comprehension ability following the instructional intervention (pre-test $M = 4.70$, $SD = 2.10$; post-test $M = 8.60$, $SD = 2.20$; $t = 9.23$, $p < .001$; Cohen's $d = 1.5$). Significant improvements in learners' pragmatic comprehension ability were observed after instruction, as shown by MCT results. This substantial gain indicates the effectiveness of explicit process-genre-based instruction in enhancing learners' ability to interpret intentions, pragmatic strategies, and context-specific conventions in letter writing, echoing findings from previous studies (Alcón-Soler, 2018; Chen, 2015, 2016; Levkina, 2018; Huang & Zhang, 2019).

Table 2. Scores of MCTs in the pre-and post-tests

Pre-test		Post-test		Gain	t	P	Cohen's d
M	SD	M	SD				
4.70	2.10	8.60	2.20	3.80	9.23	.000	1.5

Effect on Pragmatic Expression Ability

The second research question focused on learners' pragmatic expression ability as measured by WDCTs. As is shown in Table 2, significant gains were observed across both writing scenarios. (Scenario 1: pre $M = 1.46$, $SD = 0.77$; post $M = 2.21$, $SD = 1.05$; $t = 4.71$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.80$; Scenario 2: pre $M = 1.38$, $SD = 0.70$; post $M = 2.19$, $SD = 0.98$; $t = 5.48$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.93$).

Table 3. Mean Scores of WDCTs in pre- and post-tests

Scenarios	Pre-test		Post-test		Gain	t	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD				
1	1.46	0.77	2.21	1.05	0.75	4.71	.000	0.80
2	1.38	0.70	2.19	0.98	0.81	5.48	.000	0.93

In addition to the quantitative gains, a qualitative analysis of participants' letter scripts revealed improvement in both the pragmatic content and linguistic structure of their writing. Specifically, improvements were observed across the three metafunctional dimensions of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)—Field, Tenor, and Mode—demonstrating the learners' enhanced ability to construct socially and contextually appropriate texts.

Participants showed significant improvement in composing openings and closings, and in expressing communicative intentions using more contextually appropriate pragmatic strategies. These framing elements became more aligned with genre expectations of formal correspondence, reflecting greater audience awareness and control over textual staging (Chen,2015; Nguyen,2018). For instance, in Student A's pretest letter, the opening—*"Dear teacher, with the development of our school..."*—was vague and overly general, lacking both clarity of purpose and appropriate salutation. In contrast, the posttest opening—*"I hope this email finds you well. I am writing to share my suggestions for improving library services..."*—exhibited a polite tone, a clear rhetorical purpose, and adherence to institutional norms.

At the ideational level (Field), learners demonstrated more specific and relevant suggestions, supported by clearly articulated reasoning and reduced reliance on vague or minimal content. Posttest responses included concrete proposals, such as improving signage to help new students locate the library or increasing seating during exam periods, indicating greater awareness of context and communicative purpose. At the interpersonal level (Tenor), the tone of messages shifted from informal or neutral to appropriately respectful and polite, employing conventionally indirect requests (e.g., *"I was wondering if you could..."*) and supportive moves (e.g., *"I understand you may be busy, but..."*), while avoiding aggravators such as blunt commands (Economidou-Kogetsidis et al., 2018). At the textual level (Mode), letters became more organized, with logical progression supported by cohesive devices (e.g., *"therefore," "in addition," "however"*) and improved use of theme–rheme structures, resulting in greater clarity and fluency.

These developments suggest that the process-genre-based pragmatic instruction not only improved participants' scores but also fostered their awareness of genre conventions, interpersonal positioning, and cohesive language use, confirming the approach's effectiveness in promoting pragmatic ability in written communication. These findings are consistent with previous studies (e.g., Alcón-Soler, 2017, 2018; Chen, 2015, 2016; Levkina, 2018), which emphasize the importance of genre-sensitive instruction in developing L2 learners' pragmatic performance.

Although the instructional treatment had overall positive effects, further analysis revealed that 8.8% of participants (three learners) showed no improvement in the WDCTs. These learners tended to provide overly simplistic responses, such as using "better service is wanted" as the main content of their letter scripts. Their lack of progress is linked to their relatively low L2 proficiency, as their English test scores matched the class average. Follow-up interviews provided further insight into their challenges. All three students acknowledged that their limited L2 proficiency made it difficult to compose letters with the expected structure, tone, and detail. They expressed greater confidence in explaining suggestions verbally or in their L1, which suggests that while the instruction enhanced their cognitive awareness of pragmatic strategies, such as grounders, politeness, and softeners, they lacked the linguistic resources to realize these strategies effectively in English. This supports prior findings (Xiao, 2015; Yang, 2017), which argue that the effectiveness of pragmatics instruction is partially mediated by learners' linguistic proficiency. As these learners could describe various suggestion-making strategies in L1 interviews but failed to implement them in L2 writing, it may be inferred that instructional gains in pragmatic knowledge do not always transfer into successful production, especially for learners with lower L2 control.

Effect on Metacognitive Strategies in Letter Writing

The third research question examined the effects of process-genre-based pragmatic instruction on students' metacognitive strategy awareness, assessed with a 7-point Likert-scale Metacognitive Strategies Questionnaire (MSQ) and interviews. Results indicated a significant improvement in

participants' planning processes (Table 4), though no notable changes were observed in considering the audience, monitoring, or evaluation—likely due to already high pre-test awareness in these areas.

Table 4. Effects of Instruction on Metacognitive Strategies (Pretest vs Posttest)

Factors	*SE*	*p*
Planning	0.201	0.000**
Considering the audience	0.142	0.360
Monitoring	0.134	0.990
Evaluation	0.178	0.905

Notes. ** $p < .001$

Specifically, the process-genre approach enabled participants to develop macro-level planning skills, focusing on overall letter structure and enhancing their awareness of audience needs. These improvements were supported by interview findings, which suggested that participants applied genre-based pragmatic knowledge purposefully. Their increased awareness of genre-specific elements—such as audience, communicative purpose, language choices, style, and structure—was evident in their planning, monitoring, and consideration of the audience during letter writing.

Before instruction, participants were primarily concerned with generating random ideas or addressing issues related to time and text length, with little consideration for structuring letters based on task-relevant content. These strategies, commonly associated with low-proficiency writers, were also noted in Huang & Zhang's (2022) study. Despite some metacognitive attention during L1 and L2 writing, most students focused on *what* to say rather than *how* to organize their ideas or achieve their communicative purpose. While they incorporated "opening-body-closing" and pragmatic strategies elements in their writing process, these concepts were not meaningfully implemented in their letters.

After the intervention, students demonstrated more detailed planning, greater audience awareness, and a clearer sense of communicative purpose in their writing, aligning with findings from Deng et al. (2014). Process-genre-based instruction thus fostered systematic planning and genre-based awareness—skills characteristic of more proficient writers (Manchón & Larios, 2011)—even though improvements in other metacognitive areas remained limited, likely due to due to high initial awareness among participants.

Conclusion

This study adopts a triangulated approach, employing multiple instruments and SFL-based genre analysis to examine how process-genre-based pragmatic instruction fosters both pragmatic ability and metacognitive strategies in EFL writing. The findings confirm that such instruction significantly enhances learners' pragmatic competence, including contextual appropriateness, use of indirect strategies, supportive moves, and genre-appropriate discourse organization. These results underscore the value of teaching genre-specific pragmatic features—openings, closings, request strategies, and politeness markers—to improve communicative competence. Additionally, integrating metacognitive strategy training in planning, monitoring, and evaluation promoted greater learner reflection and self-regulation in writing.

Educators can implement this approach by combining explicit instruction of genre-based pragmatic conventions with scaffolded tasks such as model analysis, collaborative drafting, and peer review. Utilizing frameworks like Rothery's Teaching and Learning Cycle or real-world writing scenarios (e.g., complaint letters, proposals) can further reinforce pragmatic strategy acquisition.

Nevertheless, the study's limitations include a small, culturally homogenous sample. Future research should involve more diverse populations and larger samples, as well as explore the impact of process-genre instruction across varying letter types and social distances. Longitudinal studies using delayed posttests or follow-up interviews are also needed to assess the durability of instructional effects.

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