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## CHAPTER 13

# **The role of instruction in developing pragmatic competence in L2 Chinese: A review of empirical evidences**

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### **1. Introduction**

Pragmatic competence, the ability to interpret and convey meaning correctly and appropriately in social communication (Thomas, 1995), is recognized as one of the key aspects of second language (L2) competence among researchers in foreign/second language teaching and learning. This construct has been theorized in a number of influential models of communicative language competence (e.g., Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Palmer, 1996, 2010; Canale & Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983) and has been investigated over three decades by researchers in interlanguage pragmatics (ILP), a subfield of second

language acquisition (SLA) research. However, L2 pragmatic competence is not easily acquired, particularly for those adult learners in a foreign language learning environment. As Bardovi-Harlig (2001) summarized, empirical evidences have shown that the development of grammatical competence, which has been emphasized in foreign/second language education, does not naturally lead to a comparable level of pragmatic competence. Because pragmatics is usually given very limited attention in teaching materials (e.g., Vellenga, 2004), researchers have examined the effectiveness of promoting L2 pragmatic competence through focused instruction (see Taguchi, 2011a; Takahashi, 2010a, 2010b, for the most recent reviews). Collectively, empirical findings have shown that a variety of pragmatic features can be taught, and that various instructional approaches can be effective under certain conditions.

In the case of Chinese-as-a-second-language (CSL) research, pragmatics instruction is a very recent topic. In fact, as Ke (2012) noted in his comprehensive review of empirical CSL studies, learners' acquisition of pragmatics in general has been a severely under-researched area. This lack of empirical effort does not mean that Chinese pragmatics can be naturally acquired by learners, because the

existing research findings have shown that even learners with advanced-level proficiency still demonstrate marked differences from native speakers in terms of performing speech acts, with such differences leading to potential misunderstandings in communication (e.g., Hong, 2011; Li, 2008; X. Li, 2010). Therefore, more research is needed for examining the role of instruction in promoting learners' pragmatic competence. This chapter aims to summarize and review the very small body of empirical studies in this particular area within the broader context of L2 pragmatics instruction. I will start with a discussion of the construct of pragmatic competence, followed by a brief discussion of the gaps in the research literature in L2 pragmatics instruction. The existing studies on teaching Chinese pragmatics will be summarized and reviewed afterwards. This chapter concludes with a discussion of implications for teaching L2 pragmatics and for future research.

## **2. Pragmatic Competence in a Second Language**

Based on theories of pragmatics (Leech, 1983; Thomas, 1983), L2

pragmatic competence has been conceptualized to include pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge (e.g., Kasper, 1992; Kasper & Roever, 2005; Kasper & Rose, 2002). Pragmalinguistic knowledge refers to the understanding of the mappings between linguistic forms and their pragmatic functions. For instance, Chinese routines such as *对不起* (*duibuqi*, sorry, to apologize) and *不好意思* (*buhayisi*, sorry) can both function as apology expressions, and patterns such as *能不能...?* (*nengbuneng...?* Can or cannot...?) and *可以不可以...?* (*keyibukeyi...?* May or may not...?) can be used to make requests. Sociopragmatic knowledge, on the other hand, refers to the understanding of the socio-cultural conventions governing language use. For instance, although *对不起* (*duibuqi*) and *不好意思* (*buhayisi*) can both be used to convey one's apologetic intention, the issue of whether to apologize in a particular situation and which form to use in case apology is needed is related to one's sociopragmatic knowledge regarding the impact of contextual factors such as power, social distance, and imposition (Brown & Levinson, 1987), as well as the effects of rights and obligations prescribed in a particular social context. To be pragmatically competent, therefore, requires the mastery of both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge as well as the

intricate connections of the two. In other words, one needs to know which form(s) to use in a particular context of communication in order to appropriately convey intended function(s), that is, the form-function-context mappings. This understanding is compatible with the various concepts proposed by researchers to articulate the pragmatic component of language competence, such as “pragmatic knowledge” (Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Palmer, 1996, 2010), sociolinguistic competence (Canale, 1983), and declarative pragmatic knowledge (Faerch & Kasper, 1984).

More recently, pragmatic competence is conceptualized as including both knowledge and processing components (e.g., Bialystok, 1993; Kasper, 2001; Taguchi, 2007b, 2012). The knowledge component refers to the integration of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge illustrated above. The processing component, on the other hand, refers to the ability to efficiently control one’s cognitive resources for accessing relevant pragmatic knowledge in real-time communication. For example, in a given situation that necessitates an apology, a person needs to draw on pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge so as to select the form(s) appropriate for that situation (contextual analysis and planning). After this planning

stage, he also needs to transform the pragmatic knowledge into speech and be able to verbalize the actual apology (verbalization). Moreover, given the time pressure of communication, it is critical for the person to execute the above-mentioned procedures quickly. Clearly, fluent pragmatic performance is equally important as appropriate performance. Hence, a high level of processing capacity, which supports fluent performance by enabling fast access to relevant knowledge for communication, is as critical as refined pragmatic knowledge. Essentially, this pragmatic processing capacity deals with cognitive fluency, which, according to Segalowitz (2000, 2003, 2007), can be developed through repeated activation and application of relevant linguistic and non-linguistic information (i.e. practice).

To summarize, L2 pragmatic competence is currently understood as consisting of pragmatic knowledge and processing capacity, which together enable accurate and fluent pragmatic performance. A series of studies have shown that pragmatic knowledge (as indicated by measures of performance accuracy) and processing capacity (as indicated by measures of performance speed) exhibit distinct developmental patterns among L2 learners (Taguchi, 2005, 2007a, 2008, 2011a, 2012). It is therefore critical to examine both knowledge



and processing components in instructional environments in order to gain the full picture regarding the role of instruction on L2 pragmatic development.

### **3. Issues in L2 Pragmatics Instruction**

Since early 1980s, the field of L2 pragmatics instruction has developed from researchers working to prove the teachability of L2 pragmatics to the current focus on how to effectively teach L2 pragmatics (Taguchi, 2011a). Meanwhile, the target of pragmatics instruction has expanded to include a wide range of features such as various speech acts (e.g., Fukuya & Clark, 2001; Kondo, 2008; Martinez-Flor & Fukuya, 2005; Pearson, 2006; Takahashi, 2001; Takimoto, 2006a, 2006b, 2008; Tateyama, 2009), discourse markers and particles (e.g., Hernández, 2011; Ishida, 2007; Kakegawa, 2009; Narita, 2012; Vyatkina & Belz, 2006), routines (e.g., House, 1996; Tateyama, et al., 1997), hedging devices (e.g., Wishnoff, 2000), pragmatic comprehension skills (e.g., Bouton, 1994; Kubota, 1995), speech style (Ishida, 2009), and overall interactional competence (Barraja-Rohan, 2011). Meanwhile, a variety

of SLA theories have been utilized to understand the processes involved in and the effects of pragmatics instruction, including, for instance, explicit and implicit learning (e.g., Alcón-Soler, 2005; Rose & Ng, 2001; Takimoto, 2008), processing instruction (e.g., Takimoto, 2009), theories of noticing and consciousness raising (e.g., Kondo, 2008; Takahashi, 2001), form-focused instruction (e.g., Fukuya & Zhang, 2002; Martinez-Flor & Fukuya, 2005), and socio-cultural theories (e.g., Van Compernelle & Williams, 2012a, 2012b). Among the topics discussed in the field, the effects of explicit and implicit instruction have received considerable attention. This topic has been revisited in several review articles (e.g., Kasper, 1997; Kasper & Roever, 2005; Kasper & Rose, 1999; Rose, 2005; Takahashi, 2010a, 2010b). Research in this respect has generally shown that explicit instruction is more effective than implicit instruction in promoting appropriate pragmatic performance (Jeon & Kaya, 2006).

When it comes to why explicit instruction tends to be more effective than implicit instruction, researchers generally resort to Schmidt's (1990, 1993) Noticing Hypothesis. This hypothesis posits that noticing target features is a necessary condition for SLA to occur. Since a defining feature of explicit instruction is the provision of

metapragmatic information to learners (Rose, 2005), learners are guaranteed to notice target pragmatic features in this instructional condition. Alternatively, since metapragmatic information is withheld in implicit instructional condition, learners need to discover pragmatic rules by themselves; they may not always be successful in doing so, especially when sociopragmatic rules (which typically involve delicate manipulations of pragmalinguistic forms shaped by contextual variables) are at play (e.g., Rose & Ng, 2001). Moreover, although noticing target pragmatic features is crucial for L2 pragmatic development, this process remains only the very first step toward a full mastery of target pragmatic features. Lacking in the existing literature is how to promote the gradual internalization of a noticed pragmatic feature through instructional activities.

An additional issue worth consideration is what counts as indicators of L2 pragmatic development. The common practice in the field is to compare learners' pragmatic performance before and after instruction. Pragmatic performance has typically been conceptualized as *pragmatic performance accuracy*, which is the manifestation of underlying pragmatic knowledge (discussed above). *Pragmatic performance speed*, which is considered as an indicator of underlying

processing capacity (e.g., Taguchi, 2005, 2007a, 2008, 2011b, 2012), is usually left unexamined. Because appropriate and fluent performance is a desirable goal for L2 learners, it is critical to understand the role of instruction in promoting the development of pragmatic knowledge *and* processing capacity. In this sense, most previous studies have only examined the effectiveness of instruction on the development of pragmatic knowledge alone, and it is an empirical question as to whether the existing research findings can be generalized to the domain of processing capacity development. This means that examining the development of performance speed, in addition to performance accuracy, can offer a unique perspective in understanding instructed L2 pragmatics acquisition.

Another under-researched area is the role of amount of instruction in L2 pragmatic development. In interlanguage pragmatics, a closely related research topic is the effects of instructional length. This topic has only been examined in a recent meta-analysis (Jeon & Kaya, 2006) and the findings suggest that instruction lasting for more than five hours have led to more pragmatic gains (as indicated by the associated effect size) than instruction lasting for less than five hours. Among instructional studies, however, huge variations in length of intervention

exist and there does not seem to be a clear relationship between length of instruction and pragmatic gain. For example, pedagogical intervention can be as brief as 20 minutes capsulated into one session (e.g., Salazar-Campillo, 2003) or as extensive as a total of 26 hours over one semester (e.g., Alcón-Soler, 2005). Regarding the effects of instructional length, a 35-minute intervention resulted in substantial gains in the accurate use of Japanese sentence-final particles (Kakegawa, 2009), whereas an interventional package that spanned four 50-minute sessions over eight days only led to negligible gains in making appropriate English requests (Fukuya, Reeve, Gisi, & Christianson, 1998). These somewhat contrasting findings thus call for alternative means to operationalize the focal construct (i.e., amount of instruction). As L2 pragmatic development entails learning new form-function-context mappings (i.e., pragmatic knowledge) and being able to access these mappings fluently in communication (i.e., processing capacity), instruction can be seen as providing opportunities for learners to gradually acquire these mappings and their implementation through practice activities that allow repeated use of certain linguistic forms for conveying functions in applicable contexts. In this sense, the quantity of practice opportunities for processing the

target form-function-context mappings becomes critical for L2 pragmatic development. Hence, quantity of practicing target features can be an alternative means for investigating the effects of amount of pragmatics instruction.

I have thus far addressed three issues related to L2 pragmatics instruction: the need for investigating how a noticed pragmatic feature is gradually integrated into learners' interlanguage system, the need for measuring the development of pragmatic competence in terms of knowledge (as indicated by performance accuracy) and processing capacity (as indicated by performance speed), and the need for examining the effects of different amount of instruction. These three issues can be investigated under the framework of skill acquisition theory (Anderson, 1993; DeKeyser, 2007, 2009, 2010). The theory holds that the development of complex cognitive skills starts with conscious learning of declarative knowledge (i.e., factual knowledge, such as grammatical rules). Declarative knowledge can be accessed under different skill domains (e.g., comprehension, production). An example is that knowledge of a grammatical rule can be accessed and used in both comprehension and production tasks. Yet a drawback is that performance utilizing declarative knowledge is typically slow and

erroneous. The next stage involves the development of procedural knowledge through repeated activations of declarative knowledge in specific skill domains (e.g., using a grammatical rule in language comprehension). In this proceduralization process, the declarative knowledge can be gradually refined. Meanwhile, the procedural knowledge developed in this process can enable fast access to the refined declarative knowledge, thereby contributing to fluency of performance. A drawback, however, is that procedural knowledge is committed to specific skill domains and cannot be used to enhance performance of a different skill domain. For instance, the procedural knowledge associated with comprehension can hardly improve performance in production. The final stage of skill development is the automatization process, which involves a large amount of practice under specific skill domains. Performance at this stage is accurate, fast, and stable.

The skill acquisition theory has been used to guide L2 grammar teaching and to explain the observed learning trajectories (e.g., Byun, 2009; DeKeyser, 1996, 1997). In interlanguage pragmatics, research addressing the effects of L2 pragmatics instruction from a skill acquisition perspective is very limited. Yet the explicit instructional

approach (mentioned above) clearly fits well with the skill development theory: learners first learn target pragmatic knowledge (i.e., form-function-context mappings) via metapragmatic instruction, they then engage in instructional activities to practice using the learnt pragmatic knowledge in communicative situations. Through repeated practice, processing capacity can gradually be developed through proceduralization and automatization. What is in need is theory-informed empirical effort to investigate the issues mentioned above in the area of L2 pragmatics instruction. The few recent studies focusing on teaching L2 Chinese pragmatics (Li, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, in press) can be considered as initial explorations in the field. The studies are summarized and reviewed below.

#### **4. Summary and Review of Empirical Evidences**

In the first of a series of studies, Li (2012a) investigated the effects of input-based practice on the development of accuracy and speed in recognizing and producing request-making forms (for producing request head acts) in L2 Chinese.<sup>1</sup> Thirty learners of Chinese enrolled



in intermediate level classes were randomly assigned to three groups: an intensive training (IT) group, a regular training group (RT), and a control group. The three groups all received explicit metapragmatic instruction at the beginning, but they differed in amount of computerized input-based practice provided afterwards. The amount of practice was operationalized as the frequency of processing target form-function-context mappings through structured input activities. The structured input activities were adapted from Takimoto (2009) and were informed by the theory of processing instruction (VanPattern, 2004; Wong, 2004). Over two consecutive days, the IT group had eight instances for processing each target mappings, the RT group had four instances, and the control group did not practice. A listening judgment task (LJT) and an oral discourse completion task (ODCT) were used as outcome measures. The two instruments were administered immediately before, immediately after, and two weeks after the practice sessions. The findings revealed a complex pattern. In terms of LJT accuracy, none of the groups made significant improvement over time. This was likely due to a ceiling effect, as the learners already had relatively high accuracy scores after receiving the metapragmatic instruction. In terms of LJT response times, only the IT group made

significant gains over time, without outperforming the control group. In terms of ODCT accuracy, both the IT and RT groups made significant improvement, with only the IT group outperforming the control group. Finally, there was no significant improvement in ODCT speed (i.e., planning times, speech rates) for any of the groups.

Several interesting points emerged from the findings. First, it can be argued that the magnitude of pragmatic gain is related to amount of practice, since overall the IT group demonstrated the most gains, the RT group showed moderate gains, and the control group did not improve at all. This is in line with the skill acquisition theory, which posits that performance (in terms of accuracy and speed) gradually improves as a function of repeated practice. Second, with the same amount of practice, the magnitude of improvement is larger for pragmatic knowledge (as indicated by accuracy measures) than for processing capacity (as indicated by speed measures). For example, the IT group demonstrated a solid effect of practice on ODCT accuracy but no effect on ODCT speed (i.e., planning times, speech rates). According to the skill acquisition theory, declarative knowledge needs to be learnt first before it can be proceduralized. Since pragmatic knowledge is declarative and processing capacity is procedural (as

discussed above), when the total amount of practice is limited (i.e., a maximum of eight instances of processing in the study), it can be expected that pragmatic knowledge develops before processing capacity. Third, there might be a cross-modality effect of practice on the development of pragmatic knowledge but not on the development of processing capacity. For example, the IT group, after receiving input-based practice, gained in ODCT accuracy but not in ODCT speed. Because pragmatic knowledge is declarative, it is not committed to one specific skill domain and can be refined by engagement in the practice of a different skill. On the other hand, processing capacity is procedural and thus its development requires skill-specific practice.

Li's results showed the effectiveness and limitations of input-based practice in promoting L2 pragmatic development. However, the study's exclusive focus on the input-based practice modality restricts the generalizability of the findings. This restriction arise particularly from the observed precedence of pragmatic knowledge development over processing capacity development, as well as the possible cross-modality effect on pragmatic knowledge development and the lack of such effect on processing capacity development. These elements call for additional research examining the effects of practice

belonging to different task modalities. Finally, in terms of target pragmatic features, Li's study focused on request head acts only, and left out other components such as internal and external modifications that also play crucial roles in determining the appropriateness of a request utterance. It is therefore desirable to expand the scope of target pragmatic features.

In response to the above issues, Li (2011) conducted another project that included both input-based and output-based practice conditions. The target pragmatic features were expanded to include forms for producing internal modifications and request head acts in Chinese. The participants were 49 learners of Chinese recruited from intermediate-level Chinese classes in a study-abroad context. After a metapragmatic instruction session on Day One, the learners were randomly assigned to an input-based practice group (input group), an output-based practice group (output group), and a control group. Over the next four days (Day Two to Day Five), the groups engaged in their respective pedagogical activities delivered through computer programs. The input group received input-based practice which consisted of a grammaticality judgment task (i.e., judging whether a given request utterance is grammatical) and a dialogue reading task (i.e., selecting

the request utterance that is both accurate and appropriate for a given dialogue). The output group engaged in output-based practice which included a translation task (i.e., translating an English request utterance into Chinese by using the target forms) and a dialogue completion task (i.e., producing request utterances for a given dialogue). In terms of amount of practice, each session offered two opportunities to use each target form in applicable contexts. Thus the overall amount was eight instances of practice for both input and output groups. The control group completed Chinese reading exercises that did not contain the target features. A listening judgment test (LJT) and an oral discourse completion test (ODCT) were used to measure pragmatic gains. These two computerized instruments were administered four times, immediately before practice (Day One), in the middle of practice (Day Three after practice), immediately after practice (Day Five), and two weeks after practice. The data were analyzed in terms of accuracy (i.e., LJT accuracy scores, ODCT accuracy scores) and speed (i.e., LJT response times, ODCT planning times, ODCT speech rates) of performance. Two research questions guided the project: (1) Is there any difference between input-based and output-based practice in their effects on the development of accurate and speedy recognition and

production of target request-making forms? (2) Does more practice lead to more accurate and speedier recognition and production of target request-making forms?

To answer the first research question, the performance of the three groups on both outcome measures was compared on pretest, immediate posttests, and delayed posttests. The results were reported in Li (2012b) and showed the following patterns of development: (1) Concerning LJT accuracy, the input group demonstrated significant gains and outperformed the output group and the control group on immediate and delayed posttests. The output group did not show overall significant improvement. However, it did improve significantly in the learners' ability to recognize request utterances that were appropriate and accurate.<sup>2</sup> (2) Regarding LJT response times, only the input group gained significantly over time. However, it did not outperform the other two groups at any time point. (3) With respect to ODCT accuracy, both input and output groups exhibited significant improvement. They also both outperformed the control group on the immediate posttest. On the delayed posttest, however, the output group performed significantly better than the control group but the input group did not. (4) Concerning the two speed measures of the ODCT, the output group

gained significantly over time but the input group did not. However, the output group did not outperform the other two groups at any time point. Generally, the above findings confirmed a cross-modality effect of practice on the development of pragmatic knowledge and the lack of such an effect on the development of processing capacity: the input group improved in ODCT accuracy but not in ODCT speed, and the output group gained in LJT accuracy but not in LJT speed. These findings can be explained by the difference between declarative and procedural knowledge as discussed above.

To answer the second research question regarding the effects of amount of practice, the input and control groups were compared for their performance on the LJT across pre-, mid-, and immediate posttests; parallel comparisons were also made between the output and control groups for their performance on the ODCT. The results were presented in Li (in press) and were summarized below: (1) In terms of LJT accuracy, the input group improved significantly from pre- to mid-tests and there was no significant difference between mid- and immediate posttests. The input group also outperformed the control group on mid- and immediate posttests. (2) Regarding LJT speed, the input group showed significant improvement from pre- to immediate

posttests, and no other significant difference was found. The input group, however, did not perform significantly better than the control group at any time point. (3) Concerning ODCT accuracy, the output group gained significantly from pre- to mid-tests, and no significant difference was found between mid- and immediate posttests. Meanwhile, the output group scored significantly higher than the control group on both mid- and immediate posttests. (4) Finally, the output group showed significant improvement in ODCT speed (planning times, speech rates) from pre- to immediate posttests, and there was no other significant difference. The output group never outperformed the control group. Collectively, these findings echoed those reported in Li (2012a) and further suggest that, regardless of practice modality, the development of pragmatic knowledge precedes the development of processing capacity. Specifically, four instances of practice (offered between pre- and mid-tests) enabled pragmatic knowledge (of request-making) to be refined to a fairly high level and an additional four instances of practice (offered between mid- and immediate posttests) did not result in further gains; in terms of processing capacity, however, even eight instances of practice (offered between pre- and immediate posttests) were not sufficient to bring



about solid gains (i.e., to demonstrate significant improvement over time *and* to outperform the control group).

Overall, the series of studies reviewed above have shown the theoretical and methodological advantages of investigating the effects of pragmatic instruction in accuracy *and* speed dimensions of performance: the effectiveness of instruction can and should be evaluated against its role in developing pragmatic knowledge and processing capacity. Moreover, the skill acquisition theory, which have been employed by SLA researchers to describe and explain the processes involved in learning L2 grammar, can also inform research on L2 pragmatic development in instructional conditions.

## **5. Implications for Teaching and Directions of Future Research**

The empirical studies summarized and reviewed above have implications for L2 pragmatics teaching. The design of the studies can help us to understand the unique contribution of practice, in addition to pragmatic rule explanation, to L2 pragmatic development. While language teachers typically design and provide practice activities

following some kind of rule explanation, the findings of these studies can help refine this common practice by providing precise information about what kind of practice activity and how much practice are needed for promoting different aspect(s) of pragmatic performance. This piece of information can further inform the choice of instructional activities in relation to the course/lesson objectives. For example, if the goal is to promote learners' competence to use L2 pragmatic features in receptive tasks (e.g., comprehending implied meanings), implementing input-based practice would be more helpful than providing output-based practice. If the goal is to promote accurate pragmatic performance, a smaller amount of practice is needed than if the goal is to promote accurate *and* fluent pragmatic performance. To summarize, precise information about the cause-effect relationship between practice activities and aspects of pragmatic performance can allow teachers to make informed decisions in implementing the most effective strategies for fulfilling specific instructional goals.

The studies reviewed in this chapter should be seen as the very first step towards an informative understanding of how L2 pragmatic competence can be developed through instruction. For instance, as these studies have generally showed a very limited effect of instruction

and practice on the development of processing capacity, how to promote this aspect of pragmatic competence through instructional activities remains an empirical question. Since the amount of practice was rather small in these studies, one direction would be to increase the quantity of practice. Alternatively, one might also consider quality of practice, in addition to quantity of practice, as a potential factor that influences the development of processing capacity. For example, since Li (2011, 2012b, in press) examined input-based and output-based practices in a very general sense, it will be helpful to refine our investigation within each modality of practice, such as to compare different types of input-based instruction (e.g., Takimoto, 2007, 2012).

Another direction for future research is to explore the various factors that influence L2 pragmatic development under instructional conditions. One might wonder, for instance, to what extent the findings summarized here can be generalized to a learner population with different proficiency, or to other pragmatic features. In addition, since it has long been recognized that learners differ in their cognitive, social, and affective profiles and thus are differentially responsive to specific instructional approaches/methods (e.g., Dornyei, 2005; Robinson, 2001, 2002, 2005; Skehan, 2002), it would be a promising endeavor to

examine how the effects of instruction are mediated by the various individual difference factors.

### **Notes**

1. A request head act is the minimum unit of a request sequence that realizes the request intention independent of other elements (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989).
2. The learners' ability did not improve in recognizing utterances that were either appropriate but inaccurate or inappropriate but accurate.

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