

The Sociocultural Aspects of Successful Language Learning
Jianhua Bai
Kenyon College

1. The definition (正名)

The ultimate goal of learning a language is to obtain the communicative competence, i.e. being able to successfully understand and use the target language in the process of communication: Addresser→(message) →addressee. Some of the elements of being successful learners of any foreign language include: 字正腔圆，合乎语法，联贯流畅，达意，得体。

2. What does research say about language and language learning?

In addition to foreign language learners and educators, scholars from many disciplines such as linguistics, psychology, anthropology and etc. have been interested in and contributed to the field of foreign language acquisition. Let us start with some general review of the relevant issues and then devote the major part of our time to the focus of today's talk: the sociocultural aspects of learning a foreign language. Most of the specific examples will be given in Chinese or English but the general principles will be applicable to language learning in general.

2.1. Language learning as a linguistic process

Language is a system of symbols by which people of a social group communicate, and language is based on syntax (rules of sentences), phonology (rules of sounds), morphology (rules of word formation), semantics (how symbols and meanings are related), and words. Linguistic behavior involves innovation and formation of new sentences and new patterns in accordance with the rules of great abstraction. In teaching and materials development we often make use of the information provided from the field of linguistics. For instance, grouping words in terms of their parts of speech or in terms of their semantic similarities, the explanation of word order and grammatical structures and the description of sounds and phonological rules all help facilitate the learning process. (SVO as the basic word order. The order of big to small of the time phrase. The order of first-happen first-come as the organizing principle of word order.)

2.2. Language learning as a cognitive process

According to the information processing theory of cognitive psychology, two stages are involved in the process of acquiring language skills: controlled and automatic processing. Controlled processing is a temporary activation under attention control and it is capacity-limited and requires more time for the activation. At this stage the learners have to spend much of their attention to integrate the pieces of information. Controlled processing necessarily intrudes on the ability to perform simultaneously any other task that also requires a capacity investment. Automatic processing involves the activation of certain nodes in memory every time the appropriate inputs are present. This activation is a learned response that has been built up through the consistent mapping of the same input to the same pattern of activation over many trials. Controlled processing requires

attention and takes time, but through practice, subskills become automatic and controlled processes are free to be allocated to higher level of processing. It is controlled processes that regulate the flow of information from working memory to long-term memory. Learning involves time, but once automatic processes are set up at one stage in the development of a complex information-processing skill, controlled processes are free to be allocated to higher levels of processing. This suggests that repeated practice is essential for successful learning of a language. McLaughlin (1990) argues that practice can lead to improvement in performance as sub-skills become automated and it is also possible for increased practice to create conditions for restructuring.

2.3. Language learning as a pedagogical process

Psychology, linguistics and other disciplines may provide insights useful to language teachers, but it is the language teachers and learners themselves who must validate or refute any specific proposals from others instead of accepting them on faith. Some of the pedagogical research studies indicate that: 1) the language learner should focus on the meaning and treat the form of the language as means not ends of language learning. 2) The ability to speak fluently cannot be taught directly, but develops independently in time after the learner builds up linguistic competence through sufficient practice in various meaningful contexts. 3) Learning should be sequenced in order of difficulty and students acquire the language best by understanding input that is slightly beyond their current level of language competence. 4) In teaching and learning, we need to highlight one particular skill at a time although we teach the skill in a holistic context, because our memory is limited to processing a certain amount at one time.

2.4. Language learning as an educational process

The most obvious benefit of learning a foreign language lies in its practical aspect, i.e. the ability of using the language to communicate when one goes to travel or to do business in a foreign land. However it seems to me that the most significant aspect of learning a foreign language is its role as part of an intellectual training. To paraphrase what the late Professor Jackson Baily said, no matter what you do, be it anthropology, art, philosophy or even science, you would miss something important without knowing a language that is completely foreign to you. Moreover, as our workplace and living space become more and more global and multicultural it becomes even more important for us to know the language and the culture of others in order to be fully functional. The world is becoming bigger and we need to know more about others and ourselves.

2.5. Language learning as a sociocultural process

Successful learning of a foreign language requires the development of linguistic and strategic competence and it also requires socio-cultural and pragmatic competence. The development of sociocultural and pragmatic competence requires an understanding of the sociocultural and contextual forces upon the choice of linguistic form. For the remaining part of my talk I would like to focus on the core tenets of pragmatics such as the speech act theory, the politeness theory and their implications on the teaching and learning of foreign languages.

3. The socio-cultural and pragmatic aspects of learning a foreign language

Let us start with some examples that illustrate the possibility of misinterpretations of certain messages and see what causes the misinterpretation. As you read or hear the following you might find yourself asking, “what on earth are you talking about? Why don’t you say what you mean?”

- A) You are invited to give a talk (like what I am doing) and think of a good opening. If you hear the following in Chinese how would you respond? (notice the effect of cultural background upon the understanding of utterances.)

... 我研究这个问题还是刚刚开始，水平不高，恐怕会耽误各位很多时间 ...

Talking about opening remarks remind me of two phrases used by presidential candidates (both Allen Keys and Ross Perot): who am I and why I am here? Do you think that people might misinterpret the message? Why was there laughter and why there are different kinds of interpretations? (Does this have anything to do with the effect of the relationship between the addresser and the addressee upon the interpretation of the utterances?)

- B) The following are some phrases that often used to describe a person. What is your mental image of the person? (Notice how shen3-mei-guan affects understanding of utterances.)

一笑脸上就有两个酒窝，双眼皮 ...

- C) One time, one of my students came to me after reading the following passage and asked, “Bai laoshi, when was the first Cultural Revolution?”

...有反右，过了几年是四清，六六年又发生了文革运动。

- D) The following is part of a paragraph that describes the newly-elected college president. (Notice both c) and d) requires the reader/listener to be well acquainted with the necessary background knowledge.)

当了校长，还是骑自行车上下班。

- E) The following is what you hear when a gift was presented to the hostess. (Without knowing the cultural customs you might be puzzled or offended because you are likely to totally misinterpret the latter part of the utterances.

真不好意思，让你破费了，拿回去自己用吧，我有的是。

- F) The following is what you hear when you leave a friend’s home after dinner.

天黑了，慢点儿走。

By now I think you know what I am trying to say. When you are not aware of the sociocultural or pragmatic contextual factors, you are very likely to be puzzled with the above utterances. Another example is that the word “postpone” as “no” was not successfully transmitted in the 1989 correspondence between the Peace-Corp leaders and those from the Sichuan provincial government. The leaders at Peace-Corp could not recognize that the word postpone is just a polite way of saying no for that particular time (right after June 4th of 1989). The lack of knowing the nature of the context can inhibit adequate understanding of the message, and it can also create misfires. (Chi’s story of “kick the bucket at a friend’s funeral is a good example of misfire because of his lack of

full understanding of the expression, kick the bucket). Other examples can be easily found when we read our students essays. For instance, the sentence “他们消灭了很多无辜的学生。” shows that she lacks the full knowledge of the verb 消灭 (to kill with the right to kill or to kill those who deserve to die). The following is a prepared speech by a Japanese businessman who was planning to attend his friends' funeral (from Wall 1990): “I am so sorry honorable father has died (Go shu sho sama de gozaimasu). He was my friend. I admired him very much. I can find no words to say to you. I hope his spirit is happy in heaven (Go meifuku...)” How does this sound to you? According to Wall (1990) Americans avoid using the word “die” or death on this occasion. They would say something like “I was truly sorry to hear of your father's passing, or even drop the word passing since the context is clear enough. This kind of misfires or failure to get one's message across happens even within one's native language. For instance, the caller says to the operator of a da-ge-da salesperson: what is the meaning of life? The response is “Eh” without realizing the previous ad that says “life-time guarantee.” I am sure everyone has the bitter experience of being misunderstood/misinterpreted in both his or her native language or second language. Comprehending is to choose the most likely meaning appropriate to the context.).

All the above examples illustrate that the social cultural context plays an important role in the interpretation of messages. You have to be fully aware of the contexts in which the message is transmitted. Students have to be trained to develop the ability to understand or generate messages with precise accuracy in accordance to the communicative contexts that can be social, cultural or situational. Linguistic accuracy is not enough. The development of linguistic competence alone does not guarantee social cultural and pragmatic competence. The development of sociocultural and pragmatic competence requires an understanding of the sociocultural and contextual forces upon the choice of linguistic form. In the recent years some informative books and articles have been published on the sociocultural and pragmatic issues of the Chinese language (Liao, 1994; Chang 1995; Qian 1997; Hong 1998 to name a few). For instance, Liao's research findings on Chinese refusal strategies and Chang's (1995) studies on the cultural forces underlying Chinese vocabulary are both valuable sources for us to make informed pedagogical decisions. Other valuable resources include (Austin, father of the pragmatics), Grice and Searle (both are Austin's students at Oxford), Canale and Swain (1980) and McKay and Hornberger (1996). In the remaining part of this talk I will present a summary of some of the relevant theories and see how they can help us identify ways of developing sociocultural and pragmatic competence in learning a language.

3.1. Context, Parameters of Context and the Meaning of Meaning

One of the students of Austin, Grice (1975) came up with the theory of implicature that deals with how a hearer gets from what is said to what is meant. Grice distinguishes two different sorts of implicature: conventional and conversational implicature. Conversational Implicature refers to the non-conventional meaning, a particular meaning in a particular context of utterance. In other words the same utterance can have different meanings depending on the context. When we hear the word context we often think of the word as textual context, i.e. what occurs immediately before or after the particular utterance in question. However, in this paper, “context” is used to refer to circumstances in which the utterance is used. Utterances refer to both spoken and written segments of a

language. In the remaining part of this section we will discuss the parameters of context and see how the contextual factors affect the meanings of an utterance.

Time. Certain utterances may contain different implicatures during different time periods. For instance *xin1dong4xiang* used to mean *jiejidouzheng* (scared people during the cultural revolution), but now can be used to refer to “new progress during dating. Another example is the use of *xiangsheng* and *xiaojie* which have been used differently from different historical periods. Greetings such as “*chi le ma?*” and small talk like “*fang1ling3 ji3he* (asking ages of young women)” “*gongzi duoshao3*” are in the process of disappearing among many social groups such as in the cities, among intellectuals and etc, although senior people still enjoy being asked “*nin gaoshou4 le*”. The new expression people use for asking young women’s age has become indirect, “*ni shi shenme shihour daxue biye de?* Or *ni shi shu3 shenme de?*. For the income question, Now it is something like *你那儿待遇还行吧? 对薪酬方面满意吗?* The implication for us teachers and learners is that we should be aware that, in reading articles of different time periods, we should notice the particular implicature of certain utterances for the particular time of the event. In speaking we should be aware of what is appropriate or not appropriate for the time of speaking.

Place. Geography is an obvious contextual factor that affects the meaning of certain utterances. The most striking difference occurs between Taiwan Guoyu and Mainland Putonghua because of the long period of separation. Words like *ai4ren2* refer to quite different things; words such as *gan4* and *gao3* are ordinary verbs, but contains strong sexual connotations in Taiwan Guoyu. If you are interested in the systematic differences between the varieties of Chinese in Taiwan and mainland China you may find the following dictionary useful: *大陆和台湾词语差别词典*, 邱质朴主编。 Even within Mainland China or Taiwan, one can easily find that certain utterances mean different things as she or he travels across the region. For instance you may hear the following when you are in the Beijing area, which are not used elsewhere: *白话* (*bai2huo0*), *土老帽儿*, *拔尖儿*, *土坷拉* and etc. What we need to decide is how to deal with this issue in teaching and learning and in materials development. It seems to me that learners of Chinese need to be able to understand the different meanings at different places so that they can get our message across effectively when we communicate people from different places.

Situation. (*chang3suo3*) For the same time and same place, the same person may talk differently because of the different situations such as during a lecture, in a dorm room, at a student center, in a department store, at a farmer’s market and etc. A good example is to listen to the presidential candidate, al Gore, who calls the cnn new anchor Mr. Moderator at the Harlem Debate and Bernie elsewhere. Things like *我得颠儿了。明儿见。* are highly colloquial for departure expressions and can be inappropriate in many situations whereas *zai4jian4* can be kind of too formal when you leave your spouse. Stop for a moment and think how you would greet your friend. What are some of the likely expressions you would use for the dorm room? In the dining hall? In a lecture hall? In a church?

Relationship. (or the relationship one wants to maintain during a speech event) The relationship between the addresser and addressee (the continuum of a stranger to an intimate friend) affects the choice of certain utterances. For greetings we have *jiu3yang3*, *jiuwen daming* (*nali nali, wo ye muming yijiu le*), *ni hao*, *jian dao ni zhen gaoxing*

(wajiao ciling that is getting widely used), state the most obvious such as mang zhe ne? mang shenme ne? chuqu mai cai a? 臭东西。你还活着阿？ which is used between very close friends.

Notice how the presidential candidates shift calling each other by first name, by title plus last name or call each other names etc. The way people address and greet each other can tell us a lot about their relationship. The other side of the coin is that you need to use utterances appropriately in accordance with the kind of relationship between you and the listener or the kind of relationship that you want to maintain. It might be interesting if you try and observe how two people talk to each other at different phases of their relationship such as getting acquainted, becoming close, breaking up and etc.

Age is another contextual factor that affects linguistic choice. I am sure that you are aware that we use different expressions to express the same idea when we talk to people of different age. What are some of the common expressions that are exclusively used by college students nowadays? The following are some of the different ways of asking people of different ages about their ages:

几岁了？
多大了？
芳龄几何？
gui4geng1
您多大年纪了？
您高寿了？

Gender is also a factor that affects the choice of certain utterances. The expression fang-ling jihe is only for young women. It is said that gorgeous is not often used by men. Can you think of ways that distinguish men and women in terms of different ways of expressing themselves?

Medium. Whether it is face to face, on a phone, or on the Internet also affects the way people choose their ways of expression. For instance, a friend of mine (20 years older) address me as xiong when he writes me, but would address me by first name in a face-to-face context. Utterances like ‘chi1-le ma’ never occurs in a letter.

Language. Whether people speak their native or second language may affect their way of communication. Notice how speakers of Chinese change their way of addressing their colleagues (Jim vs Du laoshi) when using a different language. The topics of their conversations can be a force of their code switching. Why? Certain topic are taboos in Chinese, but can be accepted in American culture and therefore people switch naturally between the two languages as the conversation moves from topic to topic.

Background knowledge is another contextual factor that affects the understanding of certain utterances. Without knowing the background knowledge one can never fully understand the meanings of certain utterances. The following is an example:

二楼三楼 --- 厂长书记
四楼五楼 --- 亲属‘关系’
工人阶级 --- 顶天立地
知足常乐 --- 咱不生气

Here is another example which requires the background knowledge related to shen3mei-guan1 一笑脸上就有两个酒窝，双眼皮 ...

Profession/Occupation. Certain words and expressions are only used by a particular group of people. The word morphology, for instance, is used to mean one thing in

linguistics, but something else in biology (my experience in taking GRE). I have just learned, while watching a TV program from Taiwan, what wo-bao gongzhu means; the producers of the program went out and interview people in the street corner and found many interpretations of the phrase. The most interesting example is the xiao-tou1's language. In the last decade many dictionaries have been published that deal with specific areas of Chinese usage such as 秘密语行话词典, 体育词典, 政治词典, 医学词典, 会计词典, 外贸词典, 企管词典, 经济词典, 音乐词典, 电脑词典。

The discussion of the proceeding sections illustrates that communication, getting-the-meaning-across, is a complex process. Grice's theory of implicature helps us understand that our utterances (spoken and written messages) often contains non-conventional meanings, i.e. specific to the particular context, only known to the people who are aware of the contextual force upon the utterance. Successful communication requires that both the sender and the receiver of the message be aware of the implicature, or the contextual implied meanings, of the message (one of the maxims of Grice's Cooperative Principle).

3.2. The "overlapping" complexity in cross-cultural communication

The process of cross-cultural communication becomes even more complex. One of the contributing factors to the complexity is that two seemingly identical linguistic forms often contain different implicature, which can lead to misfire in the communicative process. In other words any sense or implicature of a particular utterance cannot be counted on to be the same as those of the words given as glosses. For instance, an American tourist goes to a Chinese department store. One shop assistant approaches the American customer and says, "what do you want?" How does the customer react? Puzzled? Offended? Why? The linguistic forms of "what do you want?" is the direct translation of "ni yao shenme?" which contains the implicature that is known to all native speakers of Chinese as a friendly "can I help you."

Therefore the notion of implicature is applicable in the analysis of misfires that occurs during cross-cultural communication. The pedagogical implication is that teachers and learners need to be aware of what contextual messages an utterance conveys. Students of Chinese should be aware that "ni yao shenme?" is not an offensive intrusion. Instead, in the context of a dept. Store, it is a friendly greeting and expresses the shop assistant's willingness to help. (A side note: another thing that you may notice when you are shopping in China is that you don't hear that "I" don't have XYX.)

The reason that some of us had the misfire experience is that our teaching and learning of a foreign language has been heavily influenced by the linguistic model, i.e. we tend to gloss our words solely in terms of their denotations and forget their the social and communicative functions. In the process of teaching and learning a foreign language, in addition to the questions of 1) Is this grammatically correct? 2) Is the pronunciation acceptable? We should also add the question: Is this socially and culturally appropriate to the particular context? Theories of Speech Act and Politeness may be of help to us.

3.3. Speech Act Theory and Cross-cultural Communication

Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) is informative and significant for teachers and learners because, in addition to analyzing linguistic forms, it classifies

verbal messages according to their communicative function by looking at “how we do things with words?” So when we encounter the sentence “ni yao shenme?” we learn what this sentence can do? Some of the elements within the framework of Speech Act are “how to request, how to give a command “mai youtiao2 de (meaning, come over here, I want to buy your youtiao2), how to open and close a conversation? How to take turns in a conversation? How to petition/request? The formula of visiting, good speech manners and what constitutes esthetic speeches are all elements of successful communication. Lu shuxiang’s idea of cishi cidi dui ciren shuo ci hua⁴. Let us examine a few examples within this framework.

How do people compliment each other on a daily basis? The Please Theory is what I have just coined. People want to please other people. The way of expression is conditioned by the cultural and social customs. What is appropriate for one particular group of people might not be so for others. Chinese way of responding to compliment is different. It is often a verbal decline, or very vague low-spirit agreement. One says to the other, ni taitai/nu pengyou zhen piaoliang, the other says, bu/bu/bu hai guo de qu ba? Or buxing, buxing. One of the Chinese greetings is to ask “ni zai zuo shema (what are you doing)?” or just “stating the obvious (bai laoshi, nin shang jie a?). (The story of one person approaching a lost American tourist in a park and wanted to help by saying, “what are you doing?”)

What do people say at a funeral? The Japanese example in the proceeding section. A Chinese example. How do Americans behave both verbally and non-verbally for this occasion?

How do people agree/disagree with their clients politely? How do people express disapproval? The paralinguistic sssssssssssss? Da ha1qie4? Buuuuuuuuuuu? How do people verbally deal with rude comments or unpleasant events?

For expressing refusal in Chinese Liao’s (1994: 63) studies identified 22 ways: 1. Silence, hesitation, lack of enthusiasm, 2. Offering an alternative, 3. Postponement, 4. Putting the blame on a third party or something over which that you have no control, 5. Avoidance, 6. General acceptance without giving details, 7. Diversion and distraction of the addressee, 8. General acceptance with excuse, 9. Saying what is offered or requested is in appropriate, 10. External yes, internal no, 11. Statement of philosophy, 12. Direct no, 13. Lie, excuse, reason, or explanation, 14. Complaining ore appealing to feelings, 15. Rationale, 16. Joke. 17. Criticism. 18. Conditional yes, 19. Questioning the justification of the request, 20. Treat, 21. External no, internal yes, and 22. A composite of strategies.

Qian’s (pp182-206) 12 pragmatic strategies for effective communication in Chinese is a very useful resource for both teachers and students of Chinese. Yamashita (1996) is a good starting point if you want to look for similar information for the teaching and learning of Japanese.

The discussion in this section deals with research findings of Speech Act and shows that, by looking at the communicative functions of the linguistic forms, i.e. how we do things with words, we can become better informed and therefore more accurate and precise in the communication process. In addition to knowing how to do things with words it is also necessary to be aware of another aspect of successful communication: how to say things without words.

3.4. How to get the message across without any words?

Some of people's behaviors are culture-specific and may convey different messages in different cultures. For instance, handshaking among Chinese tend to be longer and firmer to show respect; some people also believe that the senior often initiate the handshaking. When people hand each other their name cards the hold the card with both hands to show respect to the other person. Students are considered rude to put their feet on the desk during class. When people applaud after a speech, the speaker join in the hand clapping to thank the audience. Do the above acts carry the same message in another culture? Should we be aware of the messages that those acts convey? There are many other nonlinguistic acts that may affect the communication process, what time (later or earlier or on time) to arrive at a party? What should one wear for various occasions? What presents/gifts are appropriate for various occasions? How far should one stand away from the other person during a face-to-face conversation (the example from Seinfeld)? In short, paralinguistic factors such as gestures, body languages and etc do inhibit the process of communication. However, the opposite can be true sometimes, i.e. paralinguistic factors may compensate for what gets lost in the process of communicating. For instance a smiling face may reduce the degree of possible rudeness of a particular utterance.

4. Conclusion

The teaching and learning of foreign languages has been mostly based on or influenced by the linguistic theoretical framework. Teaching and learning of Chinese, like many other foreign languages, are structured and sequenced according to the parameters of linguistic inquiry: sounds, lexicon, syntax. Although the advancement of the linguistic theories has played a valuable role in helping us make informed decisions in learning and teaching, they do not provide enough information with regard to the development of cultural and pragmatic competence. Bouton (1988) found that even quite proficient NNS in English interpret implicatures differently from the way they interpreted by American NS some 23% of the time. We need to take into account the social cultural aspects of learning a foreign language in order to ensure successful and effective communicating in the target language. Students need to 1) be aware of the non-conventional implicatures that a certain utterance may have for a particular context, 2) delearn the acquired stereotypes and 3) learn how to do things with words. Students need to learn to produce utterances with sociocultural appropriateness, i.e. fit (precision to) the context. (Lu Shuxiang) cishi cidi dui ci ren shuo cihua⁴. All this will contribute to the success of effective communication. It takes time, effort, patience and sometimes ridicule/face-losing for us to acquire the sociocultural and pragmatic competence. But take it as a challenge, not as a burden in the process of learning a foreign language. Consider the learning process as an exciting trial and learn experience.

Closing of the Presentation: 耽误乐大家很多宝贵的时间，报告很不成熟，但希望能起到抛砖引玉之作用。

Reference:

Austin, J. L. 1962. *How to Do Things with Words*. London: Oxford University Press.

- Canale, M. and M. Swain. 1980. Theoretical basis of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics*, 1: 1-47.
- Chang, Jingyu. 1995. *Hanyu Cihui yu Wenhua*. Beijing: Beijing Daxue Chubanshe.
- Cole, M. 1996. *Cultural Psychology, a once and future discipline*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Grice, H. 1975. Logic and conversation. In P. Cole and J. Morgan (eds), *Syntax and semantics*, Vol. 3: Speech acts. New York: Academic Press.
- Haslett, Beth. 1987. *Communication, strategic action in context*. Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum Associates.
- Hoffman-Hicks, S. 1992. Linguistic and pragmatic competence: their relationship in the comprehension of the language learner. *Pragmatics and Language Learning*, Vol. 3.
- Hong, Wei. 1998. Politeness strategies in Chinese business correspondence and their teaching implications. *Foreign Language Annals* 31: 315-325.
- Leech, G. 1983. *Principles of Pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- Liao, Chao-chih. 1994. *A study of the strategies, maxims, and development of refusal in mandarin Chinese*. Taipei: The Crane Publishing Co.
- Qian, Lianguan. 1997. *Pragmatics in Chinese Culture*. Beijing: Qinghua Univ. Press.
- Searle, J. 1969. *Speech Acts: an essay in the philosophy of language*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Thomas, Jenny, 1995. *Meaning in interaction : an introduction to pragmatics*. New York: Longman.
- Wall, A. P. 1990. Saying it naturally. *Pragmatics and Language Learning*, Vol. 1.
- Wierzbicka, Anna. 1991. *Cross-cultural pragmatics : the semantics of human interaction*. by Anna Wierzbicka. New York : Mouton de Gruyter.
- Yamashita, S. 1996. *Six measures of JSL pragmatics*. University of Hawaii Press.