

## Developing Pragmatic Competence

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### 1. Introduction

Research has shown that linguistic, strategic and pragmatic competencies are all essential elements of successful communication and a level of linguistic competence is a prerequisite to pragmatic competence. Our students need sufficient practice in order to obtain the necessary sociocultural competence for successful and effective communication. The development of linguistic competence alone does not guarantee pragmatic competence. 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. Significant progress has been made with the research in pragmatics in recent years (Liao, 1994; Chang 1995; Qian 1997; Hong 1998; Zuo, 2000). 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 when we consider helping our students develop pragmatic competence. Other valuable resources include Austin (1962), Grice (1975), Searle (1969), Levinson (1983), Leech (1983), Thomas (1995), and Canale and Swain (1980) and McKay and Hornberger (1996). There is also the journal of Pragmatics and Language Learning. However, when we examine our pedagogical practice, either textbooks or classroom practices, we notice that there is much need to integrate the research findings in pragmatics into the curriculum design. This article will start with an overview of the core tenets of pragmatics and then deal with the pedagogical implications.

### 2. Linguistics, Sociolinguistics and Pragmatics

Linguistics deals with the study of syntax (rules of sentences), phonology (rules of sounds), morphology (rules of word formation), and semantics (how symbols and meanings are related). Sociolinguistics is the study of the linguistic characteristics of various social groups. Pragmatics, a relatively new field of research, refers to the study of meaning in interaction or meaning in context, exploring how linguistic utterance could be interpreted differently as a result of different contextual forces and communicative goals. According to Leech (1983) "meaning in pragmatics is defined relative to a speaker or user of the language, whereas meaning in semantics is defined purely as a property of expressions in a given language, in abstraction from particular situations, speakers, or hearers." He also pointed out that "grammar (the abstract formal system of language) and pragmatics (the principles of language use) are complementary domains within linguistics. We cannot understand the nature of the language without studying both these domains."

One of the contributions to the understanding of pragmatics is Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). It 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?" Searle (1976) classified speech acts into six categories: representative, directive, question, commissive, expressive and declaration. Some of the elements within the framework of Speech Act Theory are "how to request, how to give a command, how to open and close a conversation? How to take turns in a conversation? How to petition/request? For instance, a Chinese way of responding to compliment 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?*). In some contexts the phrase, "*mai youtiao de*" could be used for a request, meaning, "come over here, I want to buy some youtiao". 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 or 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 also a very useful resource for both teachers and students of Chinese as a foreign language.

The proceeding section clearly shows that, by looking at the communicative functions of the linguistic forms, i.e. the verbal acts or performances in particular situations, we can become better informed and therefore more accurate and precise in teaching our students the principles of conversation as well as the rules of grammar.

Cooperative Principle and Theory of Implicature (Grice, 1975) are also important in helping us understand how a hearer/reader comprehend the precise meaning of a message. The Cooperative Principle consists of four conversational maxims: quantity (enough information), quality (truthful information), relation (relevant information) and manner (clearly stated information). When these maxims are violated an implicature arises, i.e. a proposition implied by an utterance. An implicature can be understood only if the addresser and the addressee share the common understanding of the contextual forces. 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 regard it as textual context, i.e. what occurs immediately before or after the particular linguistic form in question. Context, within the framework of pragmatics, is defined as "any background knowledge assumed to be shared by s (addresser) and h (addressee) and which contributes to h's interpretation of what s means by a given utterance (Leech, 1983:13). The next section of this article is devoted to the discussion on some of the contextual factors that affect the meanings of utterances in Chinese.

### 3. Contextual Factors and their Effect on the Meaning of Utterances

3.1. Situation. (场所) 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 can be drawn from the expressions of leave-taking. Is 再见 too formal for some situations? How about 我得颠儿了。明儿见。 Is this highly colloquial? Response to a compliment also differs from contexts: 哪里，哪里。您过讲了。蒙您夸奖，真是不胜荣幸。 Another example: 你现在在哪里工作？先生何方高就？ 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?

3.2. 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 久仰、久闻大名。(哪里，我也慕名以久)你好，见到你真高兴。 Or state the most obvious: 忙着呢？忙什么呢？出去买菜啊？ Or 臭东西。你还活着啊？ As a native speaker we are fully aware of the appropriate choice according to the relationship between the addresser and addressee. The way people address and greet each other can tell us a lot about their relationship. In order to communicate effectively we need to use utterances appropriately in accordance with the kind of relationship or the kind of relationship that we want to maintain between the addresser and addressee. 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, and breaking up.

3.3. Time. Certain utterances may contain different implicatures during different time periods. For instance, 新动向 used to be related to 阶级斗争, which could scare people during the cultural revolution. But now it can be used to refer to "new progress during dating." Another example is the use of 先生 and 小姐, which have had differently connotations from different historical periods. Greetings such as "吃了吗?" and small talk like "芳龄几何? (asking ages of young women)" "工资多少?" 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 "您 高寿了? 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? And the responses are interesting in that they tend to be vague such as "还行"、"过得去". The implication for us teachers and learners of Chinese as a foreign language 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.

3.4. 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 爱人 refer to quite different things; words such as 干 and 搞 are ordinary verbs in Mainland China, but may contain sexual connotations in Taiwan Guoyu. If one is interested in the systematic differences between the varieties of Chinese in Taiwan and mainland China the following dictionary is 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 one 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.

3.5. Age is another contextual factor that affects linguistic choice. We use different expressions to express the same idea when we talk to people of different age. 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?  
您多大年纪了?  
您高寿了?

3.6. 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. 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。

3.7. 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, people tend to choose more formal terms in writing than they would be in a face-to-face context. Utterances of greeting like '吃了吗?' never

occur in a letter. Other expressions are more likely in written form:  
倘、则、而、仍、如此、兹、欣悉 欢迎阁下光临、请勿+V、切记+V.

3.8. Sociocultural 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

Another example was that 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。

The following is part of a paragraph that describes the newly-elected college president.

当了校长，还是骑自行车上下班。

Notice it requires the reader/listener to be well acquainted with the necessary background knowledge in order to obtain the connotative meaning that the college president is upright, honest and uncorrupted.)

Following are more examples which show that an adequate understanding of them requires the sociocultural background knowledge or understanding of the value concepts in the Chinese culture.

孝、宁为玉碎，不为瓦全。为朋友两肋插刀。宁叫身受苦，不叫脸受热。  
打棍子、扣帽子、揪鞭子、插洋队、喇叭亏、红眼病、万元肚、窝包公主

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 implied meanings, of the message.

#### 4. Pedagogical Implications

Research indicates that a level of linguistic competence is a prerequisite to pragmatic competence (Hoffman-Hicks, 1992). We cannot de-emphasize the importance of developing a solid foundation of linguistic competence. However, the discussion thus far clearly shows that the successful communication, understanding and being understood effectively by others, requires that learners of Chinese as a foreign language develop pragmatic competence. Research findings from the various areas of pragmatics can help us make informed decisions to maximize effective learning and teaching such as the following four phases of the Chinese curriculum: 1) materials selection and development. 2) Presentation and explanation of the selected materials. 3) The design and implementation of learning activities that engage our students in developing strategies and tactics of interacting with Chinese culture, and 4) Out-come based assessment of how well students can interact with aspects of Chinese culture appropriately.

For the first phase, material selection and development, we should try to include materials that are meaningful and informative and useful for the students to comprehend the language and to develop productive language competencies that are pragmatically appropriate. For the second phase, presentation and explanation of the materials, we should examine whether or not pragmatic information and cultural contexts are utilized appropriately for making the new

materials more clear and more meaningful to the students in terms of what is appropriate to say to whom and when and where, both socially and culturally. When we present new materials such as new vocabulary or grammatical patterns or discourse structures to our students, in addition to explaining the linguistic information and restrictions upon the new content, we should also provide pragmatic information to help clarify meaning. For instance the cultural information within the use of *nin* instead of *ni* or the appropriate discourse structure or speech act of asking teachers for help. The utterance of “*wo wen ni*” upon arrival to the teacher’s office is not an appropriate way of starting to ask a question. The question we need to ask at this phase of the curriculum is: “why the utterance is said the way it is said.” At the presentation/teaching level we should provide notes that aim at enhancing accuracy in terms of pragmatic competence for various levels. For instance, the nominalization structure *V N + de* is not as respectful as the *N* such as *chushi1* (vs *zuofande*) and *jiaoshi1* (vs *jiaoshude*).

For the third phase of our curriculum, the design and implementation of learning activities, we need to remember that fact that the development of pragmatic competence is a cognitive process. We need to examine whether or not aspects of pragmatic competence are considered. For instance are social registers taken into account in the design of learning activities? Are scenarios created for students to practice interacting with people in a culturally appropriate manner? Are students provided with opportunity of developing cultural awareness of various kinds of discourse and narrative structures? Various media such as multimedia stimuli are helpful for this purpose.

As discussed above, research has shown that learners develop communicative and pragmatic competencies as a result of communicating (not merely knowing about the culture) with others in a rich cultural environment. Students need sufficient function-based and process-oriented instruction in order to develop the necessary pragmatic competence. There is a continuum from controlled to automatic processing stage in terms of performing appropriately pragmatically. We have to take into consideration of the pragmatic component when we implement the principle of recycling or spiraling in our curriculum. For the final phrase, we should consider whether the questions raised above are considered in assessing students’ achievement? Pragmatic component should be integrated in the process of out-come based assessment.

#### 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 pragmatic competence. 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 be aware of the non-conventional implicatures that a certain utterance may have for a particular context. In other words, students need to learn to understand and produce utterances that are appropriate to the various contexts. 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 pragmatically appropriate to the particular context?

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