

Floor-holding/ retrieving strategies by non-native speakers of Chinese

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Discourse analysis informing Chinese-language pedagogy

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Currently, the demand for teaching/learning Chinese in Japan has mushroomed (Endo, 2002), and consequently, the focus of inquiry has been the communication-oriented teaching approach. In this regard, Aihara (2002b) emphasized the necessity of employing ethnography of communication in the advanced study of the Chinese language. By the same token, Oka (2004) explained that the non-native oriented approach is one of the most crucial ways to do so. This study attempts to describe how Chinese communication is conducted, particularly focusing upon non-native speakers' use of communication strategies to realize effective communication. This is based on a 20-minute teacher-learner dialogue with Chinese as the predominant linguistic code in Japan.

本研究は中国語の母語話者而非母語話者間で行われた会話を分析し、そこから非母語話者が使用するコミュニケーション方略、特に発言権を保持するための方略を仮想することを目的とする。近年、中国語学習へのニーズは著しく高まりを見せており、コミュニケーション中心の教授アプローチの必要性も指摘されている。本研究は実際の中国語のコミュニケーションを分析することによって、非母語話者が使用するコミュニケーション方略を分析し、結論としてこれからの中国語教育の方向性に対して示唆を与えることを目指した。

In 2002, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) addressed the needs for a communication-oriented language teaching approach in Japan. This paradigm shift underpinned some huge concerns that a large number of Japanese students of English, no matter how long they study English, do not acquire adequate communicative proficiency. At the same time, the teaching of Chinese received similar kinds of demands (Aihara, 2002a, 2002b; Zhao, 2002). In particular, Aihara (2002a) underlined a drastic curriculum change in Chinese pedagogy from an approach focused heavily upon isolated lexico-grammatical training to a more communicative approach.

Up to now, there have been several studies conducted to explore the potential of a communicative approach in Chinese teaching (Banba & Hoshino, 2009; Hu, 2009; Sato & Sato, 2010;



Zhang & Sato, 2009). Many of them contributed to promoting a communicative approach toward Chinese teaching by drawing on theories of Chinese-speaking discourse.

Based upon these, this study attempts to tackle how Chinese discourse is constructed through an interactional sociolinguistic approach. By doing so, it aims at postulating some communication strategies specific to Chinese language discourse. Implications of the research on the transferability of the findings toward communication-oriented Chinese teaching will be proposed.

Research question

Teaching Chinese in Japan: Status quo

One of the critiques of current conventional Chinese language teaching is its tremendous reliance on a teacher-based approach and decontextualized lexico-grammatical exercises (Aihara, 2002b; Hu, 2009; Zhao, 2002). It should be noted that the exploration of the knowledge of language in Chinese has been done both internationally (Huang & Li, 1996; Li & Thompson, 1981; Sun, 2006) and domestically within Japan (Aihara, 1985; Furukawa, 2006; Koshimizu, 2005; Takahashi, 2009). However, ethnography of communication in Chinese has yet to be considered. Tao (2005), in this regard, emphasized the necessity for such studies in Chinese, as the discrepancy between the perception of discourse in teaching materials and natural speech hinders Chinese learners from acquiring communicative competence. Zhao (2002) also criticizes Chinese teaching materials designed for initially teaching lexico-grammatical knowledge. Similarly, Aihara (2002b) delineated that, for further exploration of pedagogical studies of Chinese, attention should be paid not only to conventional lexico-grammatical analyses, but also to sociolinguistic and pragmatic studies of Chinese that investigate communication strategy use by both native and non-native speakers.

Non-native speaker approaches to second language acquisition

Researching non-native speakers' communication strategies has a long history in the realm of second language acquisition (SLA) and sociolinguistics (Oka, 2004). For example, Tarone (1977) insisted that the use of communication strategies is an indispensable factor in considering non-native speakers' competencies. Dörnyei (1995), explored the teachability of communication strategies, demonstrating they are not only applicable to English, but also to other languages such as Spanish (Lafford, 2004), French (Raupach, 1983), and Portuguese (Cohen, 1989). When it comes to Chinese, however, discourse where the Chinese language regulates non-native speaker communication as the predominant linguistic code has not been broadly tackled. Likewise, even though Sato and Sato (2010) legitimized the applicability of the concept of communication strategies to Chinese teaching, their argument is constrained to the possibility of transplantation of English-based communication strategies. Thus, they recommend research into communication strategies specific to Chinese discourse.

This orientation has provided the basis for the following research questions: 1) How do non-native speakers of Chinese overcome their lack of proficiency in communicating in their second language? (the term second language will be used throughout this paper for learning Chinese in order to refer to second language literature); 2) How do they negotiate (hold and retrieve) the floor in Chinese; and 3) What implication can the findings of these research questions make to Chinese learning in Japan? In order to answer these questions, I will conduct a discourse analysis of a Chinese speech event.

Methodology

This study focuses on a preparatory meeting for the Chinese course on the Meisei Summer School Project (MSSP) 2009 as

its research context. So far, this research context has generated several studies on foreign language teaching (Tanaka & Fukada, 2004). MSSP refers to a summer intensive foreign language teaching project (English and Chinese) held at Meisei University in Tokyo during the summer vacation period annually since 2002.

The meeting lasted for 20 minutes and there were four participants. This meeting was audio-recorded on June 10, 2009. Zhou (labeled as Z) is the supervisor of the Chinese team and an experienced Chinese native-speaker teacher (female). She attempted to explain the outline of MSSP 2009 to Dan (D), who is interested in participating as a native-speaker volunteer (female). Shun (S), a student team leader (male) and a non-native speaker of Chinese, also attended the meeting to encourage Dan; so did Nobita (N), who was another leading student in the team (male). The communicative proficiency of Shun and Nobita was intermediate. The analysis of this study concentrated only on the dialogues of the non-native speakers to discover their floor-holding/retrieving strategies. All the data analyzed in this study were obtained during this meeting, and I was there as a participant observer. The research context of this study consists of the teacher-learner dialogue. To protect privacy, all participant names have been written as pseudonyms so they cannot be identified.

In analyzing the data, this study employs conversation analysis (CA). CA identifies communication as a joint activity of talk-based interactions (Firth, 1995; Hutchby & Woofit, 1988; Sacks & Shegloff, 1979; Sacks, 1972; Sacks, Shegloff, & Jefferson, 1989). Moreover, CA transcriptions, such as showing line numbers, labeling speaker names, and providing very detailed prosodic features of the conversation enable us to capture and trace the process of communication, including the use of communication strategies.

Lastly, as a philosophical/epistemological stance, I will define myself as a “learner researcher” of Chinese. Generally speak-

ing, most academics position themselves as teachers rather than learners. Nevertheless, I am currently in a situation where I am involved with the study of the Chinese language as a learner rather than as a teacher. Thus my positioning will allow me to present some ideas on communication strategies in Chinese from a learner perspective.

Data analysis

The discourse analysis was interested in how non-native speaker participants employed floor-holding/retrieving strategies in Chinese, regulating the right to talk during the meeting. Their use of communication strategies was coded and taxonomized into the following four categories: 1) the use of filler *neige*; 2) statement of time; 3) back-channeling; and 4) information-adding. In order to ease reference for general readers, equivalent English translations are shown as parenthesized and italicized in the speech transcript. The translation was verified by a native speaker of English who is familiar with Chinese linguistics.

Strategy 1: The use of filler *neige*

The first strategy identified in this discourse is the use of filler, or *neige*. Sato (2009) discovered that *neige* (that) functions to show some kind of hesitant attitude. However, the following analysis provides evidence that the filler was used as a floor-holding strategy by the non-native Chinese speakers.

Table 1. Transcription conventions

(1.0) pause	(.) pause shorter than 0.2 seconds
[] overlap	[[simultaneous speech starting
a:: sound stretch	. falling intonation
? raising intonation	(()) paralinguistic element
= latching	[...] incomprehensible
... incomplete sentence	<u>abc</u> notable point underlined

Excerpt 1. Schedule negotiation I

- D zheyangzi ma? [[hee (*Is that right?*)
 S [[yingwei (*Because*)
 N [[wo juede nimen neige: xiake yihou (.) lai neige: duomozhongxin chifan. (*I feel you all eat out in Tama-center after school*)

This interaction was obtained while the participants were negotiating the suitable time and place for their meetings. In doing so, Shun and Nobita simultaneously attempted to tell their opinions on lines 2 and 3, both of which began with simple phrases for self-disclosure: *yingwei* (because) and *wo juede* (I feel). Nobita retrieves the floor by producing a relatively long sentence, which blocks Shun's speech. In this regard, his redundant employment of the filler with this utterance should be taken into consideration. This helps him activate his floor until he finishes fulfilling his communicative responsibility. A similar use of filler was also observed in another excerpt as follows.

Excerpt 2. How to utilize the MSSP I

- D yanjiu jihua hee. (*research plan? I see*)
 S yanjiu jihua biyelunwen ranghou henduo yanjiusheng de... (= *research plan, graduation thesis and many postgraduates...*)
 N =neige meige xingqi san you neige::= (*hmm every Wednesday we have hmm...*)
 S =huodong?= (*activity?*)
 N =huodong huodong neige julebu de... (*activity activity hmm... of the club*)
 Z zhongwen (*Chinese*)
 Chinese club (*Chinese club*)

On lines 1 and 2, Dan asked Shun about the academic benefit of the MSSP. Shun answered *yanjiu* (research) and *biyelunwen* (graduation thesis). Frustrated by their topic-shifting, Nobita swiftly retrieved the floor and attempted to hard-line the discussion. To begin with, he mentioned his undesirable date, including the redundant filler. In particular, the prosodic feature of *neige* at the end of his utterance is markedly extended representing his lack of proficiency. Shun, who is also a non-native speaker of Chinese, offers Nobita *huodong* (activity) to assist him by interpreting *neige* as a signal calling for assistance. Likewise, excerpt 3 provides a similar episode using *neige*.

Excerpt 3. Distributing announcement I

- Z neige tamen de chirashi meiyou women da hua bijiao... (*If the announcement doesn't contain any information about our course, then...*)
 S women zujizuo neige: guangao ranghou jijie fa neige: yijing canjia guo de::

neige:: (We make the packets ourselves and send them to the repeaters and...)

D yaoqing (.) yiqian canjiaoguo de zai guolai? (invite the repeaters to come back?)

Shun attempts to answer Zhou who asks about the announcement of the Chinese course (line 2). Despite his lack of proficiency in Chinese, Shun was moderating this meeting as a student leader, a role which encouraged him to employ the floor-holding strategy to fulfill his communicative responsibility.

These three excerpts indicate that the employment of the filler, *neige*, helped Shun and Nobita to express themselves when they felt it necessary to hold or retrieve the floor.

Strategy 2: Statement of time

Another noteworthy discursive strategy is a statement of time emerging at the beginning of utterances. The following excerpts clearly depict the floor-taking negotiation strategies associated with time-stating phrases. In excerpt 4, Zhou and Nobita had a tussle over when to have a meeting. Zhou claimed, with some frustration, that Wednesday was not suitable because of conflicting schedules; meanwhile, Nobita persisted in scheduling it on Wednesday. The relatively quick turn-taking and Zhou's two second silence on line 5 illustrates how face-threatening acts repeatedly occurred in this conversation.

Excerpt 4. Schedule negotiation 2

Z qian liangge libai women dou qu le danshi menyoun ren souyi wo zou le= (We went there the last two weeks but nobody was there, so we also left)

N =shang xingqi wo neige zhao gongzuo de neige shuominghui suoyi wo...= (last week I hmm had a

job-hunting explanatory meeting, so I...)

Z =liang ge xingqi wo dou qu le= (last two weeks we went there)

N =liang ge xingqi wo dou you gongsi de shuoming hui. (for these two weeks I had explanatory meetings)

Z (2.0)

N xianzai (.) xianzai women mei huodong a. (now (.) now we have no activity)

Both of them state the time to retrieve the floor, such as 1) *qian liangge libai* (last two weeks); 2) *shang xingqi* (last week); 3) *liangge xingqi* (for these two weeks); and 4) *xianzai* (now). At this discussion is topic-initiated (they are trying to decide when to hold their meeting), frequent turn-taking occurred. And reference to the time prompted the smooth floor-taking negotiating during the course of discussion. A similar phenomenon repeatedly emerged during this meeting as shown in excerpt 5.

Excerpt 5. Distributing announcement 2

D aa: (2.0) nimen xianzai you mei you fa duanxin?= (Ah... Have you guys emailed the participants (of MSSP) yet?)

S =xianzai hai mei hai meiyou fa duanxin keshi wo tingshuode shi liangge ren xiang canjia (1.0) liangge dou shi (.) jiatingfunü. (I haven't emailed them yet, but I've heard that there are already two participants registered and both of them are housewives)

Firstly, Dan asked about their course announcement procedure. Shun replied and explained their current situation. Here, it

should be noted that Shun began his utterance by the statement of time, *xianzai* (now), accompanied by quick turn-taking. In summary, the use of the time statement helped the non-native participants retrieve the floor without letting the others disturb their turn-taking.

The findings of this analysis, however, still have some room for re-interpretation. Above all, both of these interactions are topic-initiated: both Zhou and Dan asked the Japanese participants about the schedule or time. Thus, it is quite natural for them to answer by referring to time.

Strategy 3: Back-channeling

One characteristic of Japanese foreign language speakers is their high frequency of back-channeling (White, 1989). Shigemitsu, Murata, and Otsuka (2006) identified Japanese used back-channeling to help establish rapport. In this meeting, the frequent use of back-channeling was also observed. In excerpt 6, to Dan's inquiry about the duration of the MSSP 2009, the supervisor of the course, Zhou, explains. During the explanation, Shun utilizes back-channeling to indicate comprehension.

Excerpt 6. Date confirmation

- D ni he T laoshi rang wo canjia summer school (.)
bayue jihao lai. (You and Prof. T allowed me to
take part in the summer school. When do I come in
August?)
- Z san hao dao ba hao. (from August third to eighth)
- S [[san hao dao ba hao. ((whispering)) (from August
third to eighth)
- D [[san hao dao ba hao. (from August third to
eighth)
- S shi de (yes)

Shun's utterance, whispering on the third line and showing agreement on the fifth line, should be noted. His use of back-channeling appears beneficial not only as a rapport-establishing, but also as a floor-holding strategy. This prevented him from losing the floor and becoming marginalized out of the conversation. A similar kind of back-channeling was observed when Zhou explained to Dan some practical use of the MSSP for research purposes.

Excerpt 7. How to utilize the MSSP 2

- Z hen you yisi tamen dou [...] ziji bie jiaocai (.)
ranghou ziji yanjiu zenme jiao (.) ta ye yiqi
cai... (lots of fun. They all [...] prepare the materials themselves, and then practice teaching. He is also...)
- N [wo neige: qunian] (Last year I)
- D [wo juede] wo jianglai de yanjiu name... (I think my future research is like...)
- Z feichang you yong (.) tamen de taolun yong shenmeyang de cai yong shenmeyang de neirong weishenme jiao. (Very useful. They discuss what kind of materials to use, what kind of contents to teach, and why it is important)
- D wo yao qu= (I have to go)
- N =o lai lai lai (1.0) wo bu yanjiu. ((laughter))
(oh welcome (1.0) I don't research, though)

Nobita used back-channeling on the third and eighth line, just like Shun in the previous excerpt. Compared with Zhou and Dan, Nobita's turn-taking frequency and word count is small. However, his continuous use of back-channeling activated his right to the floor, preventing him from being marginalized.

In sum, Shun's and Nobita's implementation of back-channeling functions as floor-holding strategies. As non-native speakers, Shun and Nobita employed frequent back-channeling as is often seen in Japanese conversation. Nevertheless, their use of back-channeling not only functions as rapport-establishing, but also helps them to hold and retrieve the floor, giving them relatively free access to the conversation.

Strategy 4: Information-adding

The last strategy demonstrated in this discourse community was the use of information-adding. This strategy must be rooted in a perception of communication as meaning co-construction rather than the mere conveyance of message. The following excerpts depict the situation where Zhou, Dan, and Shun were talking about the teaching philosophy of the MSSP 2009. Teaching philosophy is quite a difficult topic for a non-native speaker to deal with in Chinese, both because of the demands of organizing sentence structures and lexicalizing ideas about academics. Therefore, meaning co-construction is indispensable to overcome deficiency in proficiency.

Excerpt 8. How to utilize the MSSP 3

- Z ruguo ni qu (.) ni shi native speaker. (if you are there as a native speaker)
- D zhende (1.0) wode fayin butai hao (.) danshi jiao yinggai...= (really? My pronunciation is not good. Teaching should be...)
- Z =na meiyou guanxi (0.5) fanyin (0.5) yingwei ni-shi zhongguoren= (Pronunciation doesn't matter, because you are Chinese anyway)
- S =erqie (0.5) ruguo zenmeshuone (.) neige:: laide xueshenmen shuo hanyu ranghou (.) ni tingdedong

dehua (.) jiushi neige:: yizhong guli tamen ba (0.5) Yingwei tamen shuo hua ranghou zhongwen tingdedong jiushi (.) tamen de zenmeshuone (.) yizhong (1.0) yonggan. (Plus, what is it? Hmm:: the students come, and if they can understand you, that's hmm:: gonna encourage them. They speak Chinese and understand it, it's kind of encouragement)

On the fourth line, Shun retrieved the floor by adding some more information about the teaching philosophy of the MSSP. In doing so, he started his utterance with the word *erqie* (furthermore). This connector gave Shun the scaffolding to properly deal with the floor. As a side issue, it should be pointed out that Shun also frequently utilized *neige* as a floor-holding device. In addition, his use of *yizhong* (a kind of) preceding some over-generalized or over-simplified expressions (*guli* (encourage) and *yonggan* (courage)) suggests that he attempted to overcome his limited vocabulary by euphemisms.

Another example of information-adding from the discourse is shown in excerpt 9.

Excerpt 9. Distributing announcement 3

- Z neige tamen neige summer school tongyi de hua neige (1.0) chirashi? (Is it okay to distribute the announcement to them if the summer school agrees?)
- D zai tama center de xuexiao? (To the schools in Tama-Center?)
- Z tama center haiyou hinoshi a. (Tama-Center and Hino-City, maybe)
- S keshi nage doushi neige (.) yingyu de (1.0). (But it's all about the English course)

The added information in this situation (shown in the fourth line) somewhat diverges from what Zhou and Dan talked about, vis-à-vis the previous excerpt. It should be noted that Shun began with the phrase for contrast, *keshi* (but). Use of *keshi* enables him to provide additional information as well as to get the other participants' attention. Similarly, excerpt 10 indicates Shun also employed similar kinds of strategies to retrieve and hold the floor.

Excerpt 10. Distributing announcement 4

- Z e? qunian shi fang de limian neiyang? (*Oh, was that the same as last year?*)
- S shide (.) keshi jingnian neige tingshuo neige T laoshi meiyou tingshuoguo neige jingnian canjia hanyuban suoyi women dasuan kai suoyine neige xianzai de qingkuan shi women mingxing julebu kai duanqiban mm. (*Yeah, but Prof.T didn't know we would hold the Chinese course this year. So, we plan to do it ourselves. Now, we are in the situation where those of us in the Chinese Club have to manage the course*)
- D duanqi ban? (*intensive course?*)

On the second line, Shun began with a statement of agreement. Shortly after that, he immediately switched to a different topic. Subsequently, he attempted to fulfill his communicative responsibility accompanied by his relatively long turn-holding. In doing so, he employed the frequent use of filler (*neige*) to maintain the floor.

In sum, viewing the notion of communication as the co-construction of meaning, it is natural that adding more information to the previous utterance should play a communicative role, particularly for the benefit of floor retrieving and/or maintenance.

Conclusion

A paradigm shift concerning the teaching of foreign languages is taking place in Japan now, including with the teaching of Chinese. A large number of conventional teaching materials have dealt with lexico-grammatical items that are decontextualized. Tao (2005), in this regard, claimed that this context-freeness hinders the learners from developing their communicative abilities. Until now, no studies of Chinese have investigated the contextualizability of the items from learners' perspectives as far as the author knows. Thus, this strategic perspective should be invested into the process of teaching material development designed for developing communicative abilities. This study analyzed a meeting between native and non-native speakers of Chinese where Chinese was the primary language used. The findings are summarized as follows. Discourse analysis of the conversation has postulated four different types of communication strategies used by non-native speakers of Chinese to hold and retake the floor in conversation. They are: 1) the use of *neige* as filler; 2) statements of time; 3) back-channeling; and 4) information-adding.

This study was exploratory in nature, and hopefully provides a base for understanding how non-native speakers of Chinese apply turn-taking strategies when speaking Chinese. However, as this analysis is exploratory in nature and based on a single conversation, before the findings can be interpreted as definitive, it will first be necessary for other researchers to independently verify the floor holding strategies outlined here.

In conclusion, accompanied by the increasing demand on foreign language teaching for communicative purposes, improvement is needed in the field of Chinese teaching. To achieve this, discourse functions should be taught in addition to lexico-grammatical items. The findings of this study, even though it should be still characterized as an initial analysis, could suggest the use of statements of time and back-channel as topics for further research and materials development.

Informed consent

The author hereby declares that the research subjects gave their informed consent.

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Bio data

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