Greeting Strategies: L2 Learners of Chinese at Different Proficiency Levels

不同水平汉语二语学习者的问候策略

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Abstract

Greetings, as one of the most common speech acts in people’s daily communications, are acknowledged the different allocation of status in a conversation and perceived as the very crucial strategies to establish social relations (Goffman 1971, Laver 1981). Most of the studies on Chinese greeting strategies (Hu 1987, Christensen 2006 and Xiong 2007) treated ritualized greetings, while strategies for opening conversations and small talks have been neglected.

However, Chinese greetings are particularly rich and are highly situation-dependent. Due to its complexity, acquiring appropriate formulas for greetings is problematic for non-native speakers (Lu 1999, Zhou 1994 and Ran 2006). In this study, various greeting strategies in Chinese opening conversations and small talks are considered as greeting strategies and were discussed.

This study presents a cross-sectional study of greeting strategies in Chinese by L2 learners and native speakers (L1). Subjects were comprised of 15 undergraduate students from each Chinese class at 102 (the second semester of Chinese), 202 (the fourth semester of Chinese), 302 (the sixth semester of Chinese) and 402 (the eighth semester of Chinese), at a Midwest University in the U.S and 15 native Chinese speakers in China. A Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was used to elicit data related to greetings. Three situations in DCT represented the most common situations that students may encounter at a university in China. These situations were designed according to power and social distance.

The study found that the L1 group produced over 10 strategies in each situation whereas the L2 groups produced 6 strategies overall. In Pragmatic development, as students move from beginning level to intermediate and high level, they go from having the ability to use the ritualized greetings strategy, questions based on acknowledgement of action strategy and required more detailed information strategy to also being able to use explain own situation strategy, giving suggestions strategy and moving to other topics strategy. The L2 learners at beginning level produced fewer greeting strategies than intermediate and advance learners while intermediate and advance learners produced almost the same. However, L2 learners at all proficiency levels displayed overuse of ritualized greetings. Considering power distance, L2 learners have not acquired sufficient cultural knowledge in Chinese to display proper social behavior while intermediate and advanced learners acquired such understanding reflected from their greetings.