Teaching and Learning Chinese

Issues and Perspectives

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CHAPTER 3

EFFECTS OF USING PROMPT SENTENCES IN BEGINNING CHINESE CLASSES

Yongan Wu

ABSTRACT

This study examined the effects of using prompt sentences (PSs) in beginning Chinese classes. By asking three types of PSs to students and quantitatively analyzing their responses, the researcher sought to answer the following questions (1) whether it is effective to use PS in a beginning Chinese class, and (2) what type(s) of PSs are most beneficial to foster language growth. The researcher found that using PSs in beginning Chinese classes is only effective when students first have some familiarity with the related vocabulary and grammar. No particular type of PSs stood out as more or less effective in terms of developing language skills. Meanwhile, PSs have an insignificant impact on students' pronunciation in the short term.

Teaching beginning-level Chinese at the college level is a challenging task. Overloaded textbooks, insufficient curricula, and unprepared students adversely affect the quality of learning (Guo, 2003). Sometimes it is
hard for the teacher to get the students involved if he/she only delivers the content in lecture or asks students to do exercises in small groups (Zhao, 2004). The latter method may appear to be quite active, however, a beginner can learn very little from another beginner when speaking the target language with each other. Reading aloud together can be an effective method; yet students get bored soon after they finish the limited number of sentences in the textbook. Simple repetition may dampen the motivation of students to compose meaningful and useful expressions that could be used in a real conversation.

In advanced Chinese classes, teachers make use of prompt sentence (PS) to solicit and scaffold the students to produce language under a given context. Often, PSs are carefully designed questions that solicit students to produce answers by using a predetermined set of grammar and vocabulary. To come up with the correct answer, students not only have to master the basic structure of the phrase, but must also be careful about minor details. Mistakes are corrected instantly by the teacher and students are often asked to speak again until their sentences are complete and correct. This improves the depth of the student's understanding and internalizes what they have learned.

A PS is a teaching technique developed with reference to Vygotsky's scaffolding theory (Vygotsky, 1978). The PS was introduced by Bruner (1975) to educators in the United States in order to illustrate the cognitive process used when learners approach unfamiliar subjects under the guidance of a more knowledgeable individual, usually teachers or advanced peers. Many believed scaffolding was "the systematic sequencing of prompted content, materials, tasks, and teacher and peer support to optimize learning" (Dickson, Chard, & Simmons, 1998, p. 12). Learners cannot usually independently perform the tasks when they are first exposed to such materials. This is particularly true in the beginning Chinese classes where many students feel overwhelmed by the sheer number of characters, not to mention the complicated grammar and syntax (Cui, 1997). The teacher therefore needs to give students support until they can use their newly acquired language skills on their own (Rosenshine & Meister, 1992).

Vygotsky suggested that teachers should give more assistance when students learn new or difficult tasks, and that they should gradually decrease assistance when students demonstrate mastery and become more independent (Ball, 2000). Reading the text aloud, showing flashcards, and lecturing about the lessons could be regarded as intensive, preliminary scaffolding methods in a Chinese language class (Xu, 2005).

The purpose of learning a language is not to simply repeat what others say, but to use one's linguistic capacity to speak what one actually wants to say. PSs serve as the scaffold to elevate the simple repetition to a higher
level (Hogan & Pressley, 1997). A well-recognized PS scaffolding practice is to subdivide the perception of a class into four levels: the teacher, the whole class, groups, and individuals (Walqui, 2006). The teacher practices PSs with students from the top level down to the bottom. The teacher first models how to perform a new or difficult task before asking PSs and encouraging the students to answer them together. Next, students break into small groups and ask each other the PSs in order to become more familiar with them. Finally, the teacher asks individual students the PSs and immediately corrects their response sentences (RSs).

Some teachers have modified this model by skipping the scaffolding in small groups, arguing that students benefitted little from asking and answering nonnative speakers at the same level (Lee & Muncie, 2006). They also suggested that PSs should be short, concise, and task-orientated. A PS should deliver the question in the most efficient manner possible so that students do not spend time on comprehending unnecessary parts. The question must also maintain focus in the event that a student’s answer goes in the wrong direction. For example, researchers prefer to ask: “二月有几个星期二？(Éryuè yǒu jīgè xīngqì’ér; How many Tuesdays are there in February?)” rather than “请问你知道二月有几个星期二吗？(Qíngwèn, nǐ zhīdào ertyuè yǒu jīgè xīngqì’ér ma? Excuse me, do you know how many Tuesdays there are in February?)”. The latter is not concise enough and students may simply respond by saying: “我知道(Wǒ zhīdào; Yes, I know)” instead of “二月有四个星期二 (Éryuè yǒu sìgè xīngqì’ér; There are four Tuesdays in February).”

Furthermore, the importance of patiently, yet rigorously, correcting students’ incorrect answers was emphasized by the same group of teachers. They believed that a teacher must weed out all erroneous or unconventional expressions, as well as nonnative tones, to foster the linguistic growth of their students. An individual student should be pressed to say the same answer over and over again until they can say it perfectly. Meanwhile, the teacher should use this opportunity to scaffold other students. The teacher should recite the correct answer aloud with the whole class, ask the same PS or a slightly different one to other students, and explain the answer to those who may fall behind.²

The scaffolding approach, following the above formula, has been proven successful in advanced Chinese classes. However, few attempts have been made to use PSs in beginning-level Chinese classes. One might question whether beginners could keep up with such rigorous, intensive training activities. In addition, the PS technique is most often found in small classes with no more than eight people. In larger class settings, keeping twenty or more students engaged while asking a PS to only one student can be another challenge.
Based on prior experiences with implementing the use of PSs in advanced classes, the researcher asked three types of PSs to his beginning-level students. These included (a) yes/no questions like “你是中国人吗？”(Nǐ shì zhōngguó rén ma?), (b) translation questions (e.g., how do you say “I have two younger brothers?”), and (c) questions about who/what/where/when/why/how such as “你周末常常给谁打电话？”(Nǐ zhōumò chángcháng gěi shéi dǎ diànhuà?). The responses were recorded and analyzed from a quantitative approach to find out: (1) whether it is effective to use PSs in a beginning-level Chinese class, and (2) what type(s) of PSs are most beneficial to foster language growth. Such knowledge would help a teacher to compose and choose the appropriate types of PSs to use in classes where diverse learning abilities and academic backgrounds are common.

The researcher decided to use an action research (AR) approach, which enabled him to teach the class and conduct the research at the same time. AR recognizes teachers as active constructors whose role in class is not just to help students to learn, but also to study the art of teaching to improve the learning quality. The core components of this approach, as identified by McCutcheon and Jung (1990), are systematic inquiry, reflexivity, and a focus on the practical. AR encourages a teacher to transform theories into practice by upholding the essence of the proposed model with modifications if necessary (Bustingorry, 2008). McKay (1992) explained a six-step cyclical process that a teacher could take: (1) identify an issue; (2) gather and review the related information; (3) develop a plan of action; (4) implement the plan; (5) evaluate results; and (6) repeat the cycle with a revised strategy derived from what was learned in the first cycle. This process should be innovatively repeated until the teacher finds a suitable solution to the issue he/she identified at the beginning.

METHODS

To measure the effects of using PSs in beginning-level Chinese classes, the researcher took an action research (AR) approach by playing the roles of both teacher and researcher. This provided the researcher with the convenience of designing PSs based on his previous teaching experience and the learning condition of the students. It also provided the flexibility to align his teaching strategies with the PSs in mind. To address the fact that learning a foreign language is an ongoing process, the author chose repetitive measures to gauge the responses of students toward PSs through a variety of learning tasks.
Participants and Setting

The thirty-two participants who enrolled in the researcher's beginning-level Chinese class came from a public university in the Midwestern United States. Most of them (30) were of non-Chinese heritage and had little to no experience in learning a foreign language. The class met five times per week, from Monday to Friday, and each class session lasted 50 minutes. Students were expected to learn approximately 350 characters each semester. Four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) were equally stressed. The study did not begin until the fifth week of the semester, in order to provide students sufficient time to adjust themselves to the content and nature of the class.

Procedures

The author used his previous teaching experience, as well as the formula for PSs that he had learned while teaching advanced-level learners, in order to compose the PSs for this study. Different types of PSs were designed to cover every major grammar and language point in the course text. Questions were categorized according to the presumed difficulty level, including yes/no, translation, and Wh-questions (who/what/where/when/why/how). The teaching process included the following order of steps: explanation of grammar, overview of new words, group reading of the text aloud by the students, one-on-one drills, correction of each student's RS, and repetition of answers by students as a group. Three rounds of teaching and drilling were videotaped and later transcribed. Each round occurred 2 or 3 days apart and covered the same content. Each type of question consisted of thirty individual questions. Although an individual student could answer different questions throughout a round, the question pool remained unchanged throughout the study.

Due to the scope of this study, the researcher only systematically recorded a student's in-class performance, leaving the out-of-class issues to be documented through interviews. In the meantime, the researcher recorded the occurrence of errors in responses without further categorizing them into different groups. Errors of all types, whether being syntactical, grammatical, pronunciational, or otherwise, were treated and counted equally. This was because the participants were not at that time capable of producing free-style sentences. At best, they were only able to use designated sentence structures in highly controlled situations. Responses involving more than one grammar point were rarely observed.

A number of student participants were randomly selected for interviews. The interview questions related to their experiences in answering
the PSs, the amount of time they spent after class studying Chinese, their learning styles, and their suggestions for the PS exercises. The most typical, overlapping categories were selected to triangulate the quantitative data.

**Data Analysis**

The data analysis focused on the time lapse between the PSs and the RS's, which were meticulously counted by the researcher, and the frequency of student-produced errors on different types of PSs. The overall alpha level was set at .05 for all statistical analyses in this study. Because the occurrence of natural errors was a categorical variable, and there was no normal distribution, Friedman tests were conducted. These tests were used to see whether the error occurrence of each question type in each specific round was more or less than 33%, which was the assumed occurrence rate if questions were not significantly different from each other in terms of difficulty level. McNemar tests were utilized to compare the occurrence across different rounds on the same type of PSs. A repeated-measures design was used in which the within-learner factor was the type of PS. Repeated-measures analyses of variance (ANOVA) of the two dependent variables were carried out to measure the effects of PSs and the differences among types. The researcher looked for patterns of data, for example, of whether the same type of PS could be answered in a quicker manner in the second or third round.

**RESULTS**

To compare the difficulty level of the three question types in each round, the researcher conducted Friedman tests on the participants as three dependent samples and the results are presented in Table 3.1. The researcher assumed that each question type (yes/no, translation, and Wh-questions) would be of equal difficulty or ease, unless one particular type was statistically different than the others. With two degrees of freedom, the result showed that in all three rounds, the \( \chi^2 \) value grew larger (from .47 to 5.25), yet all \( p \) values in the three rounds were bigger than \( \alpha \). Thus, the null hypothesis was maintained that no particular type of question was harder or easier than the others with regard to the probability of error occurrences observed in participant answers.

Three pair-wise McNemar tests were performed to compare the error occurrence of each type of PSs from round 1 to round 3. The null hypothesis assumed that when participants were answering each specific ques-
The likelihood of making a mistake was the same from round 1 to round 3. The results are presented in Table 3.2, which shows that as the participants proceeded from round to round, the error occurrence for each question type did drop a little bit. For example, by comparing the error occurrence of Type 2 questions, the author found that the $\chi^2(2, N = 28) = 2.4$ in round 1 versus round 2 with an insignificant $p$ value. The only significant $p$-value came when comparing round 1 with round 3 for the Type 1 question, $\chi^2(2, N = 28) = 3.76, p = 0.04$. Other comparisons came back with nonsignificant results. This indicated that the error occurrence did not change considerably as the participants proceeded from round 1 to round 3, except for Type 1 questions between round 1 and round 3.

Three repeated ANOVA tests were run to see whether or not the response times for each question type changed in a significant manner from round 1 to round 3. The results are presented in Table 3.3. Significant differences were found in Type 1 questions, $F(2, 28) = 5.78, p = 0.02$ with a large effect size partial $\eta^2 = 0.17$, with an observed power of 0.62; in Type 2 questions $F(2, 28) = 3.58, p = 0.03$ with a medium effect size $\eta^2 = 0.11$ and an observed power of 0.49; and in Type 3 $F(2, 28) = 7.21, p = 0.01$ with a large effect size $\eta^2 = 0.20$ and an observed power of 0.76. Type 3 questions witnessed the biggest difference across the rounds. This indicated that as participants received prompt sentence practice, the average time between hearing a question and speaking a response became shorter and shorter.
Table 3.3. The Overall Difference of Response Time to Difference Types of Questions in Rounds 1, 2, and 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Type 1</th>
<th>Type 2</th>
<th>Type 3</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>5.78*</td>
<td>3.68*</td>
<td>7.21*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial η²</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p < 0.05, α = 0.05.

Table 3.4. Mean Difference of Response Time to Different Types of Questions in Round 1, 2, and 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>R1 vs. R2</th>
<th>R1 vs. R3</th>
<th>R2 vs. R3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type 1</td>
<td>0.133</td>
<td>1.07*</td>
<td>0.93*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type 2</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.9*</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type 3</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>1.03*</td>
<td>0.67*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: R1 = round 1; R2 = round 2; R3 = round 3; *p < 0.05, α = 0.05.

To further investigate the change of response times between the different rounds, a Fisher’s least significant difference (LSD) comparison was conducted and produced a mixed result, see Table 3.4. The mean differences in response time for Type 1 questions were significant in the later rounds, that is, in rounds 2 and 3 with a significant mean difference of 1.07 and 0.93 respectively. That for the Type 3 questions followed the same pattern, with a significant mean difference of 1.03 and 0.67 respectively, while for Type 2 questions, the difference appeared only between round 1 and round 3 with a significant mean difference of 0.9. This indicated that the response time in the third round was significantly shorter than the first round, regardless of the type of questions the participants faced. Meanwhile, the effect of PSs did not have a significant impact on Type 2 questions until the last round.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A common belief about PSs is that Wh-questions are harder than yes/no questions. However, according to Table 3.1, the type of the PSs had no significant difference related to the occurrence of errors. Student interviews corroborated these findings. Students said they had no particular thoughts about which type of PS was harder to answer. Each type was as hard as the others because each contained an equal amount of grammar.
Effects of Using Prompt Sentences in Beginning Chinese Classes

and vocabulary. For example, the sentences “你今天晚上请我吃晚饭吗 (Nǐ jīntiān wǎnshàng qǐng wǒ chī wǎnfàn mà? Will you invite me to dinner tonight?)” and “你今天晚上和谁吃晚饭? (Nǐ jīntiān wǎnshàng hé shéi chī wǎnfàn? Who are you going to eat dinner with tonight?)” both contain comparable grammatical and vocabulary requisites even though they represent different question types. In fact, the researcher found that the students actually had a harder time answering the first question (a yes/no type) because they sometimes missed the question marker, “吗 (ma),” at the end of the sentence. This misconnection made them instead spend excessive time wondering what the teacher was asking. However, the question pronouns such as “什么 (shénme; what),” “多少 (duōshǎo; how many),” and “哪里 (nǎlǐ; where)” were all comparatively easier to identify in speech. Consequently, participants were more sensitive to them and quicker to answer.

These findings suggest that PSs cannot scaffold students unless they have sufficient knowledge with which to begin. The difficulty of yes/no PSs illustrates that students cannot produce an answer until they truly understand what the teacher is asking. This finding should encourage teachers to ask their students yes/no PSs as frequently as Wh-PSs. In this way, students can spend more time focusing on their pronunciation, especially their tones. Since yes/no questions did not stand out as being the easiest type of question, the teacher could begin practice drilling by asking other types of PSs, such as Wh- or translation questions. This could be done as a group in order to scaffold the language growth of the students by giving them a sense of what to expect next. Before breaking students into smaller groups, the teacher might first ask Wh-PSs in order to probe whether students have acquired enough knowledge to complete the drills.

Another common assumption is that more practice leads to better performance. This was partially supported by the results. The response time decreased as the number of drills increased. A closer look at the data shows that the first round of drills took students a much longer time to respond to than the third round. A substantial decrease in response time for all question types did not take place until the last round. The researcher believes that the PSs helped students to build up their language skills by listening to and responding to the same types of questions repetitively.

The occurrence of errors was lower in the later rounds than in the first round. More practice led to a reduction, but such change did not prove significant for all question types. With more practice, students could respond to PSs quicker, but students were still likely to make the same number of mistakes after becoming familiar with the related vocabulary and the grammar. It would follow that the coordination between analytical knowledge and habitual responses would take a much longer time to
establish. If possible, students should be drilled more and over a longer time span in order to improve the overall quality of their proficiency.

The researcher did not observe significant changes in the pronunciation of the students during the study. The tones that were mispronounced in the first round were persistently incorrect in following exercises as well. From the interviews, the author discovered that PSs could effectively scaffold the growth of syntax and grammar, because those things represented large portions of the target language for which students could find counterparts in their own language. As a result, the students were able to perform the tasks by realignment and translation. In contrast, tonality is a uniquely Chinese feature of the language with no counterpart in English. PSs can help students learn how to pronounce through repetition, but only in a very limited way.

Because prompt sentences mainly focus on scaffolding the oral ability of students, teachers should be aware of its limits, specifically, the disconnection between speaking and writing. In this study the researcher noticed that some students were able to answer verbal PSs correctly yet made serious mistakes in homework or quizzes on the same grammatical points. This deficiency pointed towards the gap.

The data showed that using PSs in a beginning Chinese class was most effective when students first had an understanding of the vocabulary and grammar. No particular type of PS stood out as especially easy or hard. If the purpose of drilling was focused on pronunciation, then yes/no questions are better because they do not involve any new information. The teacher would, therefore, do better to test whether the students had memorized the necessary words before doing the PS drills. However, all of the findings for this study were built upon the data gathered from one Chinese class over a comparatively short period of time. There was no control group to distinguish the effects of PSs from other teaching methods. More comprehensive studies would therefore be necessary to address this issue.

**NOTES**

1. Prompt sentences have been widely used in Chinese classes at some Ivy League schools.

2. These teaching methods were observed by the author at the 2007 Harvard-Beijing Academy.

**REFERENCE**

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