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Grant Project Report: Developing Web-based Instructional Materials for Gift Offering and Acceptance in Chinese as a Second Language

Abstract: Pragmatic competence has long been identified as an important component of learners' second language (L2) communicative competence, but the curricula of language education often cannot afford extra time for explicit pragmatics instruction. Web-based self-access materials, therefore, are a practical and sustainable complement to classroom instruction. Our project aimed to develop an online module for the instruction of gift offering and acceptance (GOA) in Chinese, an important speech and cultural event in business communication. Ultimately, our goal was to develop web-based materials for all major speech events for business communication in Chinese, a website that can be a useful companion for business Chinese classes as well as a general resource for anyone interested in the cultural aspects of business communication with Chinese speakers.

Keywords: Business Chinese, gift offering and acceptance, politeness, pragmatics, webbased instructional materials

Project Rationale

This project was motivated by the overall need for developing web-based self-access materials for teaching pragmatics in Mandarin Chinese (henceforth, Chinese)¹. Despite the fact that pragmatic instruction proves to be necessary and effective (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan, 2010), the teaching field still faces many challenges in offering effective instruction, which could be attributed to inadequate pragmatic information in textbooks and supplementary materials (Boxer & Pickering, 1995; Crandall & Basturkmen, 2004; Grant & Starks, 2001; Tatsuki, 2016), as well as limited input and opportunities for output in classroom contexts (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1996; Nikula, 2002). Teaching pragmatics faces greater challenges in foreign language contexts, given the scarce opportunities to be exposed to authentic input or to use language for real-life purposes outside class (Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan, 2010).

Specifically, we aimed to develop teaching materials and practices that would enhance learners' pragmatic competence at the discourse level. Pragmatic competence involves not only the dynamic and dialogic aspects of communication, but also the ability to co-construct a social action through taking turns with other(s). With a few exceptions (e.g., Félix-Brasdefer, 2019; Kasper, 2006), existing research, teaching materials and pedagogical models primarily focus on choices of strategies of certain speech acts, mostly in a single turn. Given the crucial role of discourse competence in overall communicative competence (Celce-Murcia et al, 1995;

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Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan, 2006), there is a need for pedagogical materials that raise learners' awareness of the sequential organization of discourse and its communicative functions.

Our project supports the mission of its funder, the Centers for International Business Education and Research (CIBERs), by enhancing Chinese learners' pragmatic competence, a critical skill for effective cross-cultural business communication. By developing web-based self-access materials, we aim to address gaps in traditional instruction, providing language learners greater exposure to authentic and structured pragmatic input. Focusing on discourse-level competence, our approach equips learners with skills to perform real-world communicative tasks.

Project Goals

The primary goal of this project was to create web-based, self-access instructional materials that focus on Chinese GOA interactions. GOA practices vary across languages and cultures, and typically involve several turns. Such interactions are shaped by cultural norms, and in Chinese, these emphasize politeness, modesty, and maintaining harmonious relationships. For example, in interactions where a favor is sought, a person in need of help typically asks for assistance before offering a gift as a token of gratitude for the favor being sought. The gift recipient may then engage in "ritual refusal," modestly declining the gift to show politeness. The giver then responds with insistence, often downplaying the gift's significance and encouraging acceptance. Such a typical interaction would usually conclude with the recipient accepting the gift and agreeing to provide assistance. However, this is one of many possible sequences. For example, someone may offer a gift while seeking a favor, or accept a gift while providing assistance, within the same turn. It is important to note the fluid and dynamic nature of interactional dialogues in gift-exchange scenarios, and the variance that can occur in such an interaction.

Recognizing the general lack of emphasis on pragmatics in Chinese language classrooms, we also aimed to develop a prototype module that could serve as a foundation for creating materials on other speech acts. The online module highlights three aspects of Chinese GOA interactions: pragmatic strategies, discourse sequence, and contextual and socio-cultural factors. The module has a basic structure of 1) presentation of data-based explicit information with warm-up activities that raise learners' awareness of intercultural differences regarding the target pragmatic features, 2) noticing activities that direct learners' attention to how the target pragmatic features are realized, and 3) production activities that engage learners in communicative practice using the target pragmatic features.

Project Process and Outcomes

The immediate tangible outcome of our project was the creation of online instructional materials on Chinese GOA, which students can access independently outside of regular class hours. In the future, we hope these materials will serve as a prototype for developing similar resources focused on other speech acts.

Our first step was to determine an appropriate framework for instructional focus and material design. After reviewing different pragmatics pedagogical models (e.g., Félix-Brasdefer, 2006; Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan, 2006) and materials development frameworks (e.g., Harmer, 2010; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018), we adopted an eclectic approach rather than adhering to a

single framework. This allowed us to identify and incorporate key components across various models, ensuring comprehensive coverage of pragmatic instruction. We identified the following elements to be crucial for our project: exposing learners to authentic input that contains the target pragmatic features; engaging learners in noticing activities that draw their attention to the linguistic features, contextual variations, and turn-taking when speaking with another person; and providing learners with production opportunities to use the target pragmatic features (Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan, 2010; Shively, 2010).

After determining the pedagogical content, the next step was to choose appropriate technology to present such content online. Instead of developing standalone websites as originally proposed, we opted to leverage existing technology platforms, specifically Canvas. This choice was driven by the platform's flexibility, ease of integration, and adaptability to local teaching contexts. Canvas also offers an all-in-one solution by combining practice activities with automated grading functions, streamlining both instructional delivery and assessment. In the following sections, we showcase how we integrated the instructional components in Canvas.

Input: A Small Corpus of Elicited Data

Authentic data are recommended as the basis for instruction, as native speaker intuition can often be unreliable (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003). However, corpora of naturally occurring Chinese conversations that include sufficient tokens of specific speech acts, such as GOA, are currently unavailable. We thus chose to use a small corpus of data elicited through role plays between Chinese native speakers. While not entirely natural, such elicited data are still considered to be on the more authentic end of the authenticity continuum (Bardovi-Harlig, 2010; Roever, 2011), as they are an attempt to mimic or reproduce dynamics of authentic situations.

In an earlier study of Chinese GOA interactions, also funded by the Centers of International Business Education and Research (CIBERs) (Bao & Su, 2021), we studied the discourse patterns of GOA in six contexts, including expressing thanks, seeking favor, special celebration, visiting the sick, traditional festivals, and return from a trip. The quantitative analysis revealed that *seeking a favor* and *expressing thanks* elicited GOA interactions characterized by distinct discourse patterns, including delayed presentation of gifts as well as delayed acceptance of gifts. For instance, in Table 1 below, F1 does not present the gift until after expressing the intention to seek favor (lines 8-10). F2 initially responds to the gift giving with a refusal (line 11: "You don't need to be so polite") and does not explicitly accept it (line 13) until F1 insists (line 12). This refusal is considered ritual or ostensible, serving primarily as a means of rapport building (Gu, 1990). We chose to focus on these two occasions as the core of our teaching material because they highlight contrasting discourse patterns in Chinese (delayed gift presentation and delayed acceptance) versus American English (immediate gift presentation and immediate acceptance).

Table 1 *GOA of Seeking Favor Between Two Chinese Female Native Speakers*

Original Chinese dialogue	English translation
F1: 学姐, 你好。那个, 我这个毕业	F1: Hi, senior. Um, I have a few experiments in my thesis. I don't quite understand this question. I heard
) 化又里面有几个头短,这个问题个众 , 明白。那个我打听到你在这方面很擅	that you are really good at this, so I want to ask for
	your advice.

5	==: 10	F2: Oh, sure sure, no problem. What exactly are you unclear about?
9	小心意, 我从我家带来的茶叶, 特别	F1: Right, it's just that I don't really understand this validation experiment. And here, senior, this is a small token of my appreciation, some tea from my hometown, it's really delicious.
11	F2: 呃,不用这么客气的。	F2: Oh, (you) don't need to be so polite.
12	F1: 来,来,就一点小心意。	F1: Come on, it's just a little token.
		F2: Uh, alright then. Let's start by going through the thesis together.
15	F1: 好。	F1: Sure.

Explicit Instruction and Noticing Activities

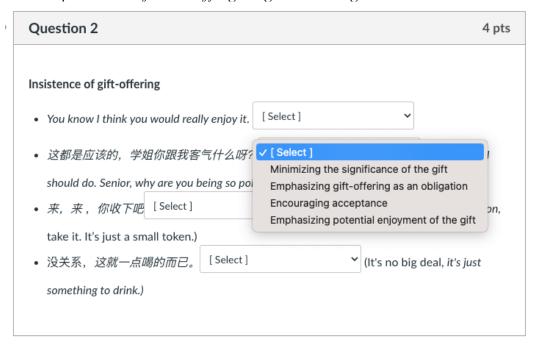
Given that our materials are meant for learners' self-study online, we believe that explicit instruction is more appropriate for our context. It is noteworthy that our explicit information was based on the findings from an empirical study, thus reducing the over-reliance on intuition and increasing the reliability of pragmatics information. We provided data-based explicit information followed by targeted noticing practices on the following three aspects: pragmatic strategies, discourse sequence, and contextual and socio-cultural factors.

Teaching Pragmatic Strategies

Regarding gift-offering, a wide range of pragmatic strategies are used in these occasions, including direct presentation of the gift, additional information about the gift, hope for appreciation of the gift, etc. (Zhu et al., 2000). Regarding gift-acceptance, Chinese speakers show a tendency to use a pre-acceptance refusal and insistence of gift offering (Kádár et al., 2025; Su, 2020). Common refusal strategies include dismissing the gift, minimizing the favor, and referencing the nature of the relationship as a reason for declining. When presenting such information to students, we highlighted the different practices in Chinese and English. By doing so, we hoped to further raise students' awareness of cross-cultural differences.

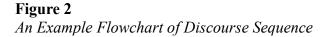
Online practice tasks that followed the explicit information presented to students asked them to identify the pragmatic strategies used in the dialogue from conversations by native speakers of English and native speakers of Chinese. Figure 1 shows an example of a multiple-choice question for identifying strategies used in insistence of gift-offering.

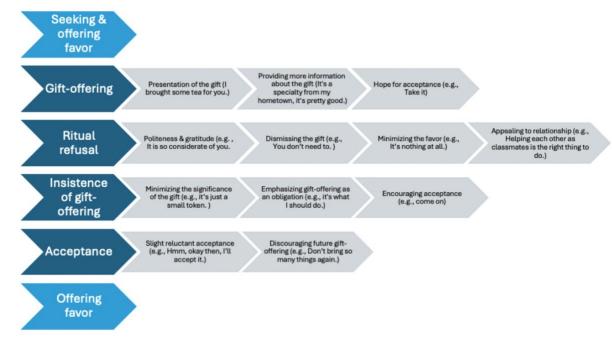
Figure 1
An Example Exercise for Identifying Pragmatic Strategies



Teaching Discourse Features

Discourse features refer to the linguistic elements that shape how meaning is constructed, negotiated, and understood within social interactions (Félix-Brasdefer, 2006). With GOA in Chinese, for example, the gift offering is often delayed until the seeking of help is accepted by the interlocutor. The gift-acceptance also tends to be delayed. With the favor-seeker's insistence of acceptance, the interlocutor may finally accept the gift. To help learners develop an awareness of the sequential organization, such as turn-taking, adjacency pairs, openings and closings, we presented such information in the format of a flowchart (Figure 2). This flowchart provided learners with a straightforward visual presentation of a typical GOA sequence in Chinese.





To test learners' understanding of the discourse sequence, we designed exercises that asked students to arrange randomly ordered conversational turns into a logical and appropriate sequence. Drawing from Félix-Brasdefer's (2006) pedagogical suggestions regarding "doing conversation analysis in the classroom" (p. 185-188), we also designed exercises to check students' awareness of conversation boundaries, particular actions realized in sequences, and construction of roles and identities.

Teaching of Contextual and Socio-cultural Factors

Socio-cultural and situational factors, such as age, gender, power, occasion, and culture, also play an important role in the realization of speech acts. We highlighted the factors of gender and occasion in our explicit instruction. Learners develop socio-pragmatic awareness through a two-stage process that incorporates both comprehension and analysis of contextual and socio-cultural factors. In the initial stage, they listened to a given text and responded to multiple-choice questions (e.g., relationships between the interlocutors). Following explicit instruction, learners engaged in a more in-depth reflection on the influence of these factors through guided questions (Figure 3).

Figure 3

An Example of Open-ended Discussion for Reflecting on Socio-cultural Factors

Step 5b | Contextual and sociocultural factors activities At

We have explored two scenarios of gift-giving: one as a birthday gift (Module 1) and the other as a gesture to seek a favor (Module 2).

Share your thoughts on the following discussion questions by replying to this post.

- 1. How does the intention behind the gift (celebration vs. expressing gratitude) affect the way it is presented and received?
- 2. Think about a situation where a man gives a woman a gift versus one where a woman gives another woman a gift.

How might these interactions differ in terms of formality or conversational style?

- 3. How does the type of gift (e.g., expensive, handmade, or token) influence whether the recipient feels compelled to refuse initially or accept immediately?
- 4. How might close friends versus casual acquaintances or professional relationships (e.g., coworkers) react to receiving a gift?

What language or behaviors might they use to express appreciation?

5. In Chinese culture, the concept of politeness may be manifested differently from American culture.

How do cultural notions such as relationship (关系), indebtedness (人情), and face (面子) affect the gift-giving and offering interactions?

Production Activities

We designed two-staged production activities. The first activity focused on eliciting learners' meta-pragmatic knowledge and assessed their ability to apply such explicit knowledge. The second activity offered students an opportunity to engage in authentic communication. Figure 4 illustrates a comprehensive activity in which students constructed a written dialogue with details about contextual information, pragmatic strategies, and discourse features. Canvas allows users to link to an external tool such as a Google document, which allowed for pair work and teacher feedback. Figure 5 presents an example of authentic production task, in which students needed to text message their Chinese-speaking friends to perform the designated speech act. Additional opportunities for authentic digital communication included sending emails and posting in an online discussion forum. Furthermore, spontaneous oral production was supported through assessment tools such as Extempore.

Figure 4

An Example of Controlled Production
Gift Offering and Acceptance Module 2 (seeking a favor)
Your name:

Gift offering and acceptance dialogue						
Participants:						
Relationship:						
Favor:						
Gift:						
Line	Speaker	Script	Pragmatic strategies	Discourse features (position of GOA)		
1						
2						
3						
4						
5						
6						
7						
8						
9		·				
10						
Feel free to adjust the rows as needed.						

Figure 5

An Example of Authentic Production Task

Step 7a | Written production task At

Task

Imagine you need to ask a Chinese-speaking friend or teacher for help.



Step 1: Crafting a message (text message or WeChat/Line message) where you:

- · Request their assistance with something specific (e.g., a question about language, culture, or a course project).
- Offer a small gift as a token of appreciation.
- Be considerate of cultural norms and pragmatic strategies mentioned in this module.

Step 2: Take a screenshot of it and upload it here.

Step 3: Respond to two peers. "Like" or vote for the messages you find most effective or culturally insightful.

Step 4: Reflect on pragmatic strategies and discourse features you observe in your classmates' messages.

How are they similar to or different from what we discussed? How do contextual and sociocultural factors influence the interactions?

Reply

In summary, Table 2 outlines the key components of pragmatic instruction, the various types of exercises, and corresponding digital resources that can be used at each stage. The structured template can be adapted to designing pragmatic materials that address diverse speech acts, such as apologizing, making requests, or expressing opinions. Educators can develop resources tailored to their specific teaching contexts and learner needs.

 Table 2

 Online Instruction Design Template

Key	Targeted focus	Presentation/Exercise	Assessment focus	Canvas tools
components		types		
Explicit	Pragmatic	Cross-cultural	Comprehension of	Page
information	strategies	comparison of	pragmatic strategies	_
	_	strategies		
	Discourse	Flowchart of turn	Comprehension of	Page
	features	sequences	discourse features	-
	Contextual and	Comparison of key	Comprehension of	Page
	socio-cultural	factors across	various contextual	-
	factors	pragmatic strategies	factors	
		and discourse features		

Noticing	Noticing of	Drop-down list	Identifying and	Quiz
activities	pragma-linguistic	Multiple choice	analyzing pragmatic	
	features	True or false	strategies	
	Noticing of	Ordering	Identifying and	Quiz
	discourse features	Multiple choice	analyzing discourse	
		Filling in blanks	features	
	Noticing of	Open-ended questions	Interpreting and	Discussion post
	socio-pragmatics		comparing the roles	
			of various factors	
Production	Comprehensive	Constructing and	Application and	External tools
practices	metapragmatic	analyzing a	evaluation of key	(e.g., Google
	knowledge	conversation	pragmatic features	doc)
	Authentic	Text messaging with	Creating	External tools
	oral/written	Chinese speakers	pragmatically	(e.g., text
	communication		appropriate	message, email,
			interactions	Extempore)

Results of Pilot Test

The learning materials were pilot tested in an intermediate level Chinese language class (i.e., with students who had completed four semesters of courses at the college level). They were offered as a supplementary module that students could complete on a voluntary basis. A total of fifteen students completed the module and five of them provided written feedback. Overall, the informal feedback indicated that students found the online materials to be useful. The five students who provided written feedback reported that specific activities, such as listening to and identifying the patterns of conversations around gifts were particularly appreciated. Students noted that these exercises "really helped me check my understanding," and were "helpful to understanding the structure and cultural norms." Additionally, the dialogue-creation activity was deemed beneficial, although some students mentioned it was somewhat time-consuming due to the need to coordinate with peers to exchange text messages. Despite this, the feedback underscored the effectiveness and practicality of the learning materials for pragmatics learning.

We also presented our project at the 22nd International Conference on Pragmatics and Language Learning, specifically within a colloquium focusing on integrating pragmatics in less commonly taught languages. The audience, composed of both researchers and practitioners, responded positively to the project. They regarded it to be innovative and practical, particularly for its ability to address challenges such as limited instructional time and the scarcity of pragmatic teaching materials. The project was recognized as offering an alternative approach to teaching pragmatics that could be readily integrated into existing language curricula.

Conference Presentation

We presented our project titled *Developing Web-based Instructional Materials for Gift Offering and Acceptance in L2 Chinese* at the International Symposium on Languages for Specific Purposes (ISLSP)/CIBER Business Language Conference. Our presentation provided a comprehensive overview of the project, focusing on the overall design of learning materials and showcasing the Canvas site where the instructional content was housed. The audience responded positively to our efforts, particularly appreciating the empirical foundation of the teaching materials. One audience member asked about any unexpected findings in our data from native

speakers. We observed that the younger generation tended to perform Chinese GOA speech act sequences in ways more closely aligned with English-speaking practices in many situations. This observation has also led us to consider expanding our data collection to include a more diverse age range and further investigate potential generational differences.

Attending the conference was an enriching experience. We were exposed to a wide range of research and pedagogical initiatives, covering topics such as needs analysis in language-specific instruction, innovative teaching practices, and the integration of emerging technologies, including AI. The conference, true to its theme, served as an invaluable platform for fostering connections among language educators and researchers from various linguistic backgrounds. In particular, we appreciated the opportunity to exchange ideas with colleagues who teach less commonly taught languages, as we shared both resources and instructional challenges. At the same time, we gained valuable insights and inspiration from larger language programs, broadening our perspectives on curriculum development and instructional design.

Project Reflection

Our goal of developing online materials has been successfully achieved. If undertaking a similar project again, we would pilot test portions of the instructional materials with students at an earlier stage rather than waiting until the full development of materials is complete. This approach would allow us to gather student feedback iteratively and refine the materials throughout the development process, ensuring greater effectiveness and learner engagement.

This project has been instrumental in shaping our approach to developing effective pragmatically-oriented pedagogical materials and online instruction. It underscores the significance of three key principles: providing explicit pragmatic instruction, raising learners' pragmatic awareness, and engaging learners in real-life production activities.

Moreover, the findings of this project have broader implications for the field of languages for specific purposes, demonstrating how pragmatic pedagogy can contribute to curriculum innovation in language programs and to the development of learners' interactional competence. Additionally, the collaborative nature of the project also allowed us to integrate diverse expertise and bridge the gap between research and practice. Practitioners benefit from theory-driven, empirically based insights, while researchers rely on practitioners to translate these findings into effective teaching and learning materials. Encouraging collaboration of this kind is essential for advancing the field.

Future Directions and Next Steps

Our next step is to expand access to our teaching materials to a larger student body. We hope to measure learners' gains in pragmatic competence operationalized as awareness, comprehension, and production of acceptances. While previous studies have typically examined the productive aspect of learners' pragmatic gains in various languages (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig, Mossman, & Su, 2017; Halenko & Jones, 2011; Li, 2012), we aim to be among the first researchers to examine the effectiveness of instruction on the development of pragmatic competence in a broad sense.

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