

Book Review: *Researching and Teaching Second Language Speech Acts in the Chinese Context*

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Abstract

In the domain of interlanguage pragmatics (ILP), numerous speech act studies have shown that first language (L1) cultural norms exert a profound effect on second language (L2) learners' strategy and language use of speech acts in the target language. Cynthia Lee's book *Researching and Teaching Second Language Speech Acts in the Chinese Context* is one of the few that provides a comprehensive account of Chinese English learners' speech act production and development under the influence of their shared L1 culture in Chinese mainland, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. This book review briefly introduces the main contents of each chapter, and then provides substantive evaluation, including the strengths and weaknesses of the book.

Keywords: L1 culture; L2 speech acts; Chinese learners of English; English speech act research and teaching; Speech act production and development

Despite the fact that a plethora of publications have explicated various speech acts by Chinese learners of English from the cross-cultural perspective, Cynthia Lee's book takes one step further by proposing and implementing teaching ideas to facilitate the teaching of L2 speech acts based on the findings of recent empirical studies. As such, the chief contribution of the book to ILP literature lies in forming an interface between researching and teaching Chinese students' speech acts with special reference to the effect of their own culture.

The book under review consists of six chapters. As the theoretical foundation of the book, Chapter one deals focally with the definitions of pragmatics and interlanguage pragmatics. It also attends to the teachability of L2 speech acts so as to set the scene for discussing at length teaching speech acts to Chinese learners of English in Chapter five.

Chapter two is divided into two parts. The first part profiles three methods to develop L2 speech act competence, namely formal instruction in the classroom, natural exposure to the target language and culture, and learning from fellow learners. The second part delineates the advantages, disadvantages, features, and applications of the most common instruments to collect experimental and authentic data for speech act research, including discourse completion tests (DCTs), role plays, cartoon oral tasks, retrospective interviews, verbal reports, emails, recorded natural conversations in real life or via technology, and field notes.

As one of the most fascinating parts in the book, Chapter three focuses on how Chinese culture frames Chinese speakers' speech act production in Chinese and English. First, this chapter describes Chinese culture as hierarchical and collectivistic, in which speakers should have *lǐmào* (礼貌, politeness) to achieve harmony in interpersonal communication. Then it distinguishes two crucial cultural concepts which are integral parts of *lǐmào*, namely *liǎn* (脸, face) and *miànzi* (面子, facework), accentuating that both can be maintained and saved by performing speech acts politely according to social variables, personal and contextual factors to "ensure

smooth interaction and harmony” (Lee, 2018, p. 32). With these cultural concepts in mind, the rest of Chapter three delves into how they influence Chinese speakers’ realisation strategies, linguistic expressions, and information sequencing of five well-studied speech acts—requests, refusals, complaints, compliment-responses, and apologies in Chinese and English.

Chapter four is devoted to the developmental trajectories of the same five speech acts performed by Chinese students of English from childhood, adolescence to adulthood. As is indicated in the literature review, Chinese students’ speech act competence follows a general trajectory: their pragmalinguistic competence does not improve significantly whereas sociopragmatic awareness increases with ages. In addition, the review exhibits a common phenomenon that Chinese learners of English tend to transfer their own cultural values and language to sociopragmatic behaviours and pragmalinguistic choices in performing English speech acts. To conclude, Lee deduces a “direct-to-indirect, single-to-combined pattern” (2018, p. 59), which can apply to realisation strategies and language structures and expressions for Chinese English learners’ speech act development.

Drawing upon the study findings reported in Chapters three and four together with classical second language acquisition theories, the author introduces some speech act teaching ideas and materials piloted in an intensive pragmatics-related summer course for Hong Kong undergraduate and postgraduate students. To clearly convey the teaching ideas, Lee presents a course design, including specific teaching objectives, procedures, and methods based on the noticing hypothesis, the input hypothesis, and the output hypothesis. Furthermore, the teaching materials consisting of DCTs, discussion tasks, turn-taking analyses of conversations, and self-reflection activities are found to be useful for enhancing learners’ pragmatic awareness levels.

In the concluding Chapter six, three future research ventures into L2 speech act research and teaching are proposed, including the relationships between personal factors and learners’ speech act performance, the role of teachers’ pragmatic knowledge, beliefs as well as their practice in teaching speech acts, and technology-assisted teaching, learning and research in interlanguage pragmatics.

Taken together, what makes this monograph distinctive from other works on interlanguage pragmatics is that it succeeds in not only offering a brief but clear overview of how L1 cultural norms shapes Chinese students’ speech act production and development in Chinese and English, but also linking recent speech act research findings and practical pedagogical ideas. Hence, the major strength of this book is that it draws the reader’s attention to the effect of L1 culture on L2 speech act research and teaching. More importantly, the role of formal instruction in facilitating learners’ speech act performance is strongly emphasised throughout the whole book. As is known, pragmatic competence has gained little focus in traditional language classroom, especially in the English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) context where learners have low natural exposure to the target language and culture. In other words, pedagogical intervention is a primary way to provide sufficient pragmatic input to ESL/EFL learners. Thus the book, to some extent, will enable teachers and curriculum developers to incorporate pragmatic competence together linguistic competence into English language curriculum.

Besides, adding to the book’s charm are the “Questions for Thought and Reflection” at the end of some major sections from Chapters 1 to 4. These thought-provoking and reflective questions are specially designed to deepen the reader’s comprehension by providing opportunities for them to connect their personal experiences of speech act teaching or learning with what they have read in the book chapters. Last but not the least, the book is highly reader-friendly in presenting numerous examples to facilitate the reader’s understanding of Chinese L1 and L2 speech act production and development. For example, Chapter 3 provides so many sentences and phrases written in Pinyin, simplified and traditional Chinese characters, and English at the same time that readers across Greater China and beyond have no difficulty in understanding the five speech acts made by

Chinese native speakers.

However, the book is not without weaknesses. The most obvious disadvantage of the work is that little attention is paid to L2 speech act comprehension of Chinese learners of English. Above all, L2 learners' ability to comprehend speaker's implied meaning is an essential component of pragmatic (including speech act) competence, which should merit equal attention. Second, several core concepts in the book are not clearly defined, such as 'speech act' in Chapter 1, 'positive face' and 'negative face' in Chapter 3, 'explicit instruction' and 'implicit instruction' in Chapter 5. As a result, these concepts would pose challenges to novice researchers in interlanguage pragmatics. Third, the book only touches on five speech acts performed by Chinese speakers. In fact, other speech acts like suggesting, thanking, and ordering are also worth a great deal of investigation in the Chinese context.

In spite of some limitations, the book still proves to be of particular value for English language teachers, researchers, postgraduate and doctoral students who are interested in interlanguage pragmatics or cross-cultural pragmatics, especially with regard to speech act research and instruction related to Chinese culture. Finally I highly recommend the book to Chinese ESL/EFL learners, who intend to improve their pragmatic competence by noticing the similarities and differences between their L1 and L2 speech act production and development.

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Reference

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Biography

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