

The Students' Development of Discourse Competence in the Elementary Chinese Courses for International Learners

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Abstract

Based on the theoretical approaches to interlanguage and discourse cohesiveness, this study examines international students' growth in discourse awareness and discourse competence in the teaching of elementary Chinese reading and writing, and explores a set of assessment methods for teaching discourse. The learners' knowledge and production of Chinese conjunctive words were assessed with multiple test methods, including the sentence sequencing test for testing learners' cognitive understanding of discourse cohesiveness, the elicitation tasks for assessing learners' production of conjunctive words, the tests of picture-based sentence writing and essay writing for evaluating learners' discourse awareness of the cohesiveness in form and meaning. 13 students were recruited by us to participate in these tests. A comprehensive discussion of the data supports that appropriate reading and writing instruction can develop learners' discourse competence and enhance their discourse awareness to a certain extent.

Keywords: discourse cohesiveness, conjunctive words, second language development, Teaching Chinese as a Second Language (TCSL)

1 Research Background

1.1 Discourse Studies in China

Conjunctive words are essential for text structuring. (Hu Zhuanglin, 1994; Tian Ran, 2013) The use of conjunctive words and referential expressions, as well as the internal coherence of logical reasoning, are all indications of discourse awareness. Chinese discourse studies have their roots in ontology studies (Liao Qiuzhong, 1991; Fang Mei, 2005), particularly within the context of systemic functional linguistics (Han Lide, 2011; Miao Xingwei, 2017); and in the area of teaching English as a foreign language with a variety of methods such as the composition test for university students (Wang Lifei, 2002).

1.2 Research on Teaching Discourse and Teaching Chinese as a Second Language

In the field of teaching Chinese as a second language (TCSL), the study of discourse acquisition at the intermediate and advanced stages has always been the focus (Lv Wenhua and Lu Jianji, 1993). Relevant topics are mainly concentrated on paragraph organization (Zhang Baolin, 1998), word cohesion (Tian Ran, 2004), referential anaphora (Gao Ninghui, 1996), and the like. In recent years, research on learners' development of discourse competence has gradually moved from general topics to a more country-specific or language-specific stage. Country-specific studies have been conducted mainly for Korean learners, Thai learners, and the like. (Cao Xiuling, 2000; Li Yunda, 2012). Language-specific studies are primarily aimed at native English speakers (Luo Jianfei, 2009). In addition, more and more studies on discourse acquisition of speakers from various countries or regions are increasing (Zheng Tongtao and He Shanyan, 2016).

Interlanguage research has a solid connection to language teaching and learning, and its findings should benefit these fields. Writing and speaking are particularly important to the teaching of discourse cohesion in TCSL (He Lirong, 1999; Li Xiaoli, 2001), which has been supported by research and teaching practices of discourse acquisition (Liu Yuehua, 1998; Dong Yuwen, 2015; Song Gang, 2018). A specific teaching model has gradually developed (Song Gang, Zhang Xin, and Cao Zhiqiang, 2019). Furthermore, a thorough understanding of the function of discourse in the teaching of writing has been developed, but there is still a shortage of efficient

instructional models and tools for cultivating discourse competence and awareness in students.

This study investigates how Chinese learners' discourse competence develops through comprehension and elicitation tests in the use of discourse conjunctive words in reading and writing. The study explores practical strategies and comprehensive solutions to help students develop their discourse awareness and competence in TCSL.

2. Research Method

2.1 Overview of the Discourse Competence Test

Although discourse competence is not the focus of instruction in the elementary stage of the basic Chinese language, scholars generally agree that discourse education should be implicitly incorporated into the teaching of fundamental Chinese (Dong Yuwen, 2015; Song Gang, 2016). We used a range of elicitation techniques, including sentence sequencing, picture-based sentence writing, and picture-based essay writing, to measure students' understanding and application of the target materials over a four-month semester of reading and writing instruction. The information about the types of the tests and testing time is given below:

Table 1. Schedule of the tests

No.	Test types	Testing time
1	Sentence sequencing (1)	Sept. 23, 2019
2	Picture-based sentence writing	Oct. 28, 2019
3	Picture-based essay writing (1)	Nov. 28, 2019
4	Sentence sequencing (2)	Dec.4, 2019
5	Picture-based essay writing (2)	Dec. 23, 2019

The target test items of this study are overt discourse cohesive devices, that is to say, additive expressions, including individual lexical items such as "lingwai(in addition) ", "ciwai(in addition) ", "zaizhe(besides) ", "bujinruci(furthermore) ", "chucizhiwai(not only)", and also including paired conjunctive elements such as "budan...erqie...(not only... and...)", "bujinjin...hai...(not only...but also...)". They are mainly used to express the appearance of things, situations and the like that are usually of the same nature and characteristics, in addition to those that already exist. Besides the aforementioned overt conjunctive words, the function of expressing addition can also be achieved through semantic coherence, as long as the semantic expression is clear in the corresponding context and does not mislead normal communication. In this study, the additive expressions include "lingwai (in addition)", "ciwai (in addition to)" (See (1)).

Example (1)

- a. 她会说英语和汉语，另外也能说一点儿法语。

She speaks English and Chinese, plus a little bit of French.

- b. 来华留学生不但可以学汉语，而且可以了解中华文化，此外还可以认识中国朋友。

International students coming to China not only can learn Chinese language, but also can learn about Chinese culture. In addition, they can meet Chinese friends.

The subjects in this study were pre-university undergraduates enrolled in the first semester of 2019-2020 school year in Beijing Language and Culture University. All together, 13 students participated successively, whose Chinese language proficiency was quasi-HSK Band Four. Further, all the tests were conducted in class to find whether the learners could produce the target lexical items correctly or autonomously.

2.2 Comprehension Test of Sentence Sequencing

We used a comprehension test of sentence sequencing, also used in HSK (Chinese Proficiency Test) Band Four, to test learners' mastery of additive expressions "lingwai(in addition)", "ciwai(in addition)". All test questions have been classified into five major categories on the basis of main cues for sentence sequencing, such as conjunctive expressions, temporal expressions, content, and internal logic without overt markers, referential relationship, and others, and then two sets of test questions containing two target test items each ((2) and (3)) have been developed. The target test questions were compiled by adapting the original sentence sequencing questions of HSK Band Four. The original questions expressed progressive relationships, and all the items, such as "budan(not only)", "erqie(but also)", "ye(also)", "hai(and also)", which could reveal semantic relationships between different clauses, were deleted or replaced with non-prompting expressions. Meanwhile, the target test items of "lingwai(in addition)" and "ciwai(in addition)" were used to connect the different clauses.

(2)

- a. 人们能看到一群群小鱼在河里游来游去。

People can see schools of small fish swimming around in the river.

- b. 这儿的河水非常干净，站在河边。

The river here is very clean, standing at the side of the river.

- c. 另外能看到河底绿绿的水草。

(One) can also see the green water grass at the bottom of the river.

(3)

- a. 筷子在中国已经有 3000 多年的历史了。

Chopsticks have been used in China for more than 3,000 years.

- b. 此外代表着一种文化。

In addition, it represents a culture.

- c. 它是人们吃饭用的一种工具。

It is a tool for people to eat with.

2.3 Elicitation Test (I): Picture-based Sentence Writing

We used an elicitation test "picture-based sentence writing", which is used in the writing section of HSK Band Four, to assess learners' verbal output of additive expressions "lingwai(in addition)" and "ciwai(in addition)". As introduced before, the test items are an adapted version of original questions in HSK Band Four, as exemplified as in Picture 1.



Picture 1. Pictures for the picture-based sentence writing test

2.4 Elicitation Test (II): Picture-based Essay Writing

We used an elicitation test "picture-based essay writing" to examine learners' output of target test items on the discourse level. The test method is used in the writing section of the qualification exam for pre-university undergraduates. The two topics of pictures used in these tests are a story of a female student's weight loss and a story of a male student's daily life (shown in Pictures 2, 3) (Pictures 1 and 2 are taken from the textbook edited by Zhang Li (2008) and Picture 3 from the textbook edited by Yang Nan (2008)). These topics are closely related to the students' daily life, and both words and grammar concerned are familiar to them. In the first test, the additive expression as the target test item was given directly in the test question as given words so that learners had to use the target test item. In the second test, although the additive expression was not given directly in the open-ended test question, the test pictures were specially designed for the elicitation of additive items in terms of content.



Picture 2. Pictures for picture-based composition (I)



Picture 3. Pictures for picture-based essay writing (II)

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results of the Sentence Sequencing Test

We employed comprehension tests and elicitation tests to track the development of learners' discourse skills longitudinally at different stages of the learning process.

The first comprehension test of "sentence sequencing" was taken by 10 subjects on September 23, 2019, and half of them failed to answer correctly the sequencing question where "lingwai (in addition)" was located. In terms of cues that learners can rely on to complete the sequencing task, all the cues are covert except for the overt cues; the "lingwai (in addition)" is likely to be an influencing factor in (2). Thus, it can be seen that "lingwai (in addition)" is the most accessible cue for learners to find and use.

The second comprehension test was taken by 11 subjects on December 4, 2019, and 2 subjects failed to answer the sequencing question of "ciwai (in addition)" correctly, with a correct response rate of 81.8%; therefore, "ciwai (in addition)" was well mastered by the learners. In terms of possible cues that learners relied on to complete the task, the referential relationship between pronouns and their referents was a common cue, such as the backward referential relationship between "kuaizi (chopstick)" and its pronoun "ta (it)". Furthermore, "ciwai (in addition)" is another overt cue in (3).

In summary, the comprehension tests showed that learners' knowledge and use of the additive expressions "lingwai (in addition)" and "ciwai (in addition)" is gradually improving during the course of reading and writing teaching.

3.2 Analysis of the Picture-based Sentence Writing Test

The study examined learners' competence to use the additive expressions "lingwai (in addition)" and "ciwai (in addition)" through the elicitation tests of the picture-based sentence writing and essay writing. As for the picture-based sentence writing test, which was held on October 28, 2019, 7 out of 12 subjects produced the target word "lingwai (in addition)" correctly; 2 of them had made some kind of error on the sentential level: one made 2 grammatical errors, the other made 1 grammatical error and did not complete the whole sentence. Furthermore,

only 5 of them not only produced correct and complete sentences, but also produced the target word correctly; among them, 3 of them wrote a compound sentence with two clauses (as shown in (4)), and 2 of them wrote a two-level sentence group with three clauses (as shown in (5)). It can be inferred that learners' mastery of "lingwai (in addition)" is good to some extent, but not yet to a particularly excellent state.

(4)

a. 这位女生很漂亮，另外很喜欢吃新鲜的苹果。

The girl is very pretty and in addition, likes fresh apples very much.

b. 她很漂亮，另外她跑得很快。

She's pretty, and in addition, she runs fast.

c. 他很漂亮，另外，他跑得很快。

He is beautiful, and in addition, he runs fast.

(5)

a. 因为她要有漂亮的样子，所以，他多吃水果，另外多锻炼身体。

Because she has to look pretty, he eats more fruits and additionally exercises more.

b. 她很漂亮，另外吃很少，也每天锻炼身体。

She is very beautiful, and in addition, she eats very little and also exercises every day.

In terms of the grammatical complexity of the subjects' utterances, 9 of the 12 subjects produced either a compound sentence with 2 clauses or a two-level sentence-cluster with 3 clauses, with 3 subjects producing a two-level sentence-cluster with 3 clauses and 6 subjects producing a compound sentence with 2 clauses, leaving out the 3 subjects who did not produce the target lexical items. It is clear from the learners' usage of "lingwai (in addition)" to connect sentences into a discourse that they are aware of discourse awareness, which is shown by additive expressions.

3.3 Analysis of the Picture-based Essay Writing Tests

The first picture-based essay writing test, held on November 28, 2019, was specially-designed to examine the output of the additive expressions "lingwai (in addition)". Among all 11 subjects, 9 of them produced sentence-clusters containing at least 3 clauses, and 3 of them did not produce "lingwai (in addition)", but used the functionally equivalent "haiyou (also)" instead of "lingwai (in addition)". This finding is consistent with the conclusion of Song and Quan (2004); "haiyou (also)" is an additive expression that is frequently used by learners of the elementary level. This indicates that the learners already have an awareness of discourse cohesion and coherence to some extent but cannot produce appropriate conjunctive expressions more proficiently due to the limitation of their second language competence. Furthermore, 6 of the learners produced "lingwai (in addition)", and only 2 of them produced utterances with inappropriate semantic coherence. One of them not only produced a semantically correct compound sentence with two clauses, but also used "lingwai (in addition)" correctly; another one used "lingwai (in addition)" to connect two different paragraphs and produced "lingwai (in addition)" correctly in the subsequent paragraphs. Thus, the learners' mastery of discourse means has shown that they have improved significantly through three months of reading and writing teaching.

The second picture-based essay writing test was taken by 11 subjects on December 23, 2019, and 10 of them produced different forms or types of discourse conjunctive expressions; 2 out of them used "haiyou (also)" which is functionally equivalent to "lingwai (in addition)", in addition to this, one used time word "...yihou (after)" to express the temporal relationship of events concerned. Furthermore, except for one subject who used only "haiyou (also)", the other 9 subjects produced at least two discourse conjunctive expressions; among them, 7 subjects used the temporal expressions, "yihou (after)", "...yihou (after)", "...hou(after)", "...de shihou (while)", "pingshi (usually)", "zaoshang (morning)", "zhongwu(noon)", "xiawu(afternoon)", 5 subjects used the conjunction "ranhou (then)", and another 2 subjects used the adverb "ye (also)". Furthermore, all the subjects also produced a large number of various conjunctive expressions, such as "yinwei (because)", "suoyi (so)", "danshi(but)" and the like. The acquisition facts show that the learners have gained some discourse awareness and are skilled at employing some conjunctive expressions.

3.4 Development and Assessment of Learners' Discourse Competence

All of these tests on discourse awareness in this study have been administered simultaneously with the teaching of discourse cohesive means and the progressive cultivation of discourse awareness. Only in this way can we

provide the most direct evidence to assess the feasibility of teaching discourse awareness and also help to construct an assessment model for learners' discourse competence development.

After the first comprehension reading test (on Sept. 23, 2019), special word instruction on conjunctive expressions was provided for students concerned, with a focus on the conjunctive word "lingwai (in addition)". After a certain interval about five weeks, a writing test (on Oct. 28, 2019) was used to assess these learners' use of additive expressions, and as an overt test, the target test item "lingwai (in addition)" was directly provided in the question as given words for learners to complete the picture-based sentence writing. The design of this study is consistent with the basic routine of vocabulary learning, from comprehension tests to production tests. Lexical acquisition develops gradually, both in terms of the breadth and depth of target words as well as the transition from passive to active vocabulary (Laufer, 1998).

The complexity of test items was eventually matched by an increase in the difficulty of test tasks. The transition from comprehension tests to production tests and from passive to active production tasks are both examples of how this is portrayed. The second picture-based essay writing test required students to actively produce target words based on the content of given pictures during the writing process, as opposed to the first picture-based writing test, which included the target word as the given word of the question. The gist of the five serial assessment tests is that the right linguistic expressions can only be chosen by learners in accordance with their expressive needs once they have mastered the additive expressions.

As mentioned above, the input of additive expressions, such as "lingwai (in addition)", "ciwai (in addition)", is always increasing. Meanwhile, learners' mastery of them is also developing as the amount of input and practice increases. Thus, it is clear that reading and writing instruction can contribute to the acquisition of conjunctive expressions, especially additive expressions, which function as the foundation of cohesive vocabulary.

4. Discussion

4.1 Teaching and Learning of Discourse Competence in TCSL

The core principle of teaching discourse awareness is to gradually infuse teaching content of discourse into daily instruction, and the difficulty of learning is spiraling upward, rather than forcibly instilling it overnight. This is because the overall workload of the subjects is heavy, and the previous learning backgrounds of different learners vary greatly, so it is difficult to teach the relevant discourse knowledge and means in a uniform manner; in addition, discourse awareness involves complicated discourse cohesion and cohesive devices, so it is difficult to master discourse knowledge and devices in a short period. We attempt to explore a way to combine regular reading and writing instruction and discourse instruction in TCSL.

The teaching of discourse cohesiveness covers a wide range of topics, including discourse knowledge, discourse devices, and the like. What is more complicated is that some of the teaching contents are overt while others are covert, such as semantic coherence, discourse awareness, and so on. Therefore, we work to develop specially designed curricula from a variety of perspectives, including reading, writing, and strategies within the reading and writing class. We also actively coordinate the types of teaching in different courses to focus on discourse cohesion and semantic coherence.

4.2 Cultivation of Discourse Awareness and its Research in TCSL

Teaching of discourse should be integrated to certain extent into teaching of grammar, vocabulary and other elements in the elementary stage of teaching Chinese as a second language. Words or expressions with overt markers that assume a specific discourse function can be selected as targets, and relevant rules for teaching can be explored through teaching experiments. Among them, conjunctive expressions, which can play a conjunctive role, should be given more attention, especially conjunctions and some adverbs, and proper instruction should be provided appropriately for learners along with their relevant discourse functions although discourse knowledge is not the focus of elementary Chinese. In addition, formulaic expressions, which are usually attached to specific situations and used in daily communicative tasks, such as the expression of opinions and narrative of events, should also be highlighted in the training process of reading, writing, or listening and speaking, and then specially-designed training should be provided for specific needs, such as writing for academic purpose, for the sake of cultivation of discourse awareness. This kind of pedagogical idea has also received some support (Dong 2015).

At the same time, research on discourse awareness has become more popular in the fields of teaching Chinese to ethnic groups and English as a foreign language (Zeng, 2010). The relevant research methodologies and conclusions can be referred to in TCSL. In terms of theoretical development, Tian (2013) has attempted to create a discourse grammar system for teaching Chinese as a second language and has also researched the usage of

cohesive devices by English-speaking learners as well as learners from Korea, Japan, and Vietnam.

In terms of teaching mode, Zheng and He (2016) have attempted to build a basic model of teaching discourse and proposed feasible teaching strategies. Among them, teaching of knowledge, training of abilities, and cultivation of awareness all aim to enhance learners' awareness and techniques of using discourse devices. The goal is being pursued because pre-university undergraduates are adult second language learners who have mastered at least one language or dialect, especially with strong reading and writing skills in their first language; besides, they have considerable cognitive ability and subjective motivation, and also have strong ability for self-directed learning. It is learners' discourse awareness in their first language that is why language competence and acquisition strategies of their first language should be promoted consciously to transfer positively to a second language faster and more through word learning, reading guidance, and writing reinforcement. (Odlin, 1989; Wang and Wen, 2004; Goundar, 2019) This is also the greatest advantage of adult second language learners.

5. Conclusion

The findings of our tests on the instruction of discourse awareness confirm that, first, second-language learners of Chinese can gradually master some coherence devices in discourse and acquire some initial discourse awareness through instruction in reading and writing. Second, it is possible to teach discourse knowledge and discourse devices. Third, fundamental expressions for teaching discourse cohesion include overt linguistic forms, covert logic, and patterns of expression; additionally, we should adopt a practical teaching ethos in actual instruction and adhere to fundamental principles of helping students adapt to local circumstances and instructing according to their aptitude.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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