

Teaching Chinese with Authentic Materials*

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The Chinese CALPER project emphasizes the importance of social interaction and communicative competence in the definition of advanced language proficiency (ALP). While in the past similar proposals have been made for many languages, such criteria have rarely been defined in a concise manner and with insights from naturalistic data. In our attempt at this issue, we view the following to be critical elements for ALP:

- 1) Sensitivity to interactional moves;
- 2) Sensitivity to discourse cohesion and coherence;
- 3) Sensitivity to information structuring;
- 4) The ability to negotiate epistemic and affective stances;
- 5) The ability to exploit alternative resources in communicatively challenging situations.

This is of course by no means an exhaustive list, but it does include some of the most essential elements for a discourse-based understanding of ALP. In each of these cases, the learner should be exposed, and eventually should be able to show sensitivity, to these properties and be able to performance accordingly.

We believe that the best way to expose the learner to these properties is to collect native speaker language corpora and to find out what they do in real communicative situations (Carter and McCarthy 1995). The Chinese CALPER project has collected a total of 60 hours of natural conversation segments, covering a variety of communicative situations (dinner table talks, playing games, touring the campus, commenting on TV shows, shopping at the farmer's market, etc.). Pedagogical materials have been developed to highlight discourse communicative strategies in the corpus of the native speaker speech and for implementation in the classroom context. In what follows, data segments from the CALPER Chinese project are presented to illustrate what these features are and what a teacher can do with the materials in teaching an advanced Chinese language class.

Illustrations from the CALPER Chinese Project

Interactional moves

Interactional moves refer to the collaborative actions of conversation participants that enable the conversation to run in a smooth manner. For example, in a story-telling session, the listener does not just listen passively, but also asks questions, acknowledges the main speaker, and offers evaluative comments about the story being told. This type of action has been variably called backchanneling or reactive tokens.

Extract 1: Speaker F2 talks about her travel experience in Venice where her group couldn't find a place to stay.

F2: Jiù zài tāmen de cāntīng ((xiào)) guò le yī yè .

“So we spent the whole night in their dining hall.

F1: O=,

Oh really?

F2: Shì zhèyàng de .

Yeah, it's like that.

F1: Shì zhèyàng de ,

Oh, it's like that.

Nà nà gè rén dǎo tǐng hǎo de , ho=?

That guy was pretty nice to you, right?

F2: Dui.

Yes.”

In this extract while F1 is not the main speaker she asks questions in addition to producing an acknowledgement token.

Since reactive tokens are typically manifested as brief words or phrases, or even simple vocal noises, they are often considered empty from a semantic point of view. However, they are important for conversationalists to manage the flow of talk and have important interactive consequences (displaying listenership and showing deference, among others). They need to be taught and practiced in the language classroom and an ALP learner should also be able to use them in appropriate ways.

Discourse cohesion and coherence

Due to the transitory nature of spoken language, tracking what is being said before and linking different elements together in order to continue the flow of speech in an orderly manner demands a great deal of use of linking devices (Halliday and Hasan 1976). Not surprisingly, these types of elements are hard for learners to grasp. For an ALP learner, however, there should be a demonstrated level of competence in using these elements.

Many of the discourse linking devices take the form of a regular lexical expression, but their usage as discourse linking devices, which often differs from the regular use, has rarely being elucidated in standard textbooks. Below is a sample of a few items in real use.

Extract 2: Speakers discuss the geological features of a tourist attraction featuring limestone.

A: Shì ma. Suǒyǐ tā= , ēn= , shíhuī yán tā= , bèi= , duōnián bèi yǔshuǐ chōng shuā ne , tā=zhègè ^shān , shì zhòng děngyú cóng píng dishang qǐlai de.

“So, so this is, well, limestone **TA**; (it) has been washed by rain, and the mountain **TA**, the whole mountain **TA** is like growing out of a plain field.

B: En en.

Ok.

A: tā méiyǒu= , ēn bù xiàng=nǐ píngcháng kàndào de shān shì , yīgè xié pō màn màn wǎng shàngshēng gāo.

It’s different, it’s different from what you usually see in normal mountains, where a slope may rise gradually.”

In spoken Chinese *ta* (它), otherwise treated as a third person pronoun, often tracks an inanimate referent that has a topical status. In the above example, *ta* is used to refer back to *shihuiyan* 'limestone' and *shan* 'mountain', both designating inanimate referents.

In addition to lexical means for tracking and linking discourse elements, non-lexical means can also be used for similar purposes. One of these is discourse repetition. Discourse repetition refers to a situation where the second speaker repeats, wholly or partially, the utterance produced by the first speaker (Tannen 1987). For example,

Extract 3. Speakers discuss a travel itinerary

B: Nǐ shì bāyuè shísì bāyuè shíliù hào dào Běijīng jīchǎng , duì ba ?

“You will be arriving at the Beijing Airport on August 14, no, August 16, right?”

A: é duì , bāyuè shíliù hào shàngwǔ shídiǎnèrshí ,

Yes, (I’ll be there) on August 16.”

In this case the second speaker repeats partially what the previous speaker has uttered. The effect of this kind of repetition is that the current speaker acknowledges that she is with the prior speaker, and in this case, we can say that, at the level of speaker interaction, coherence is created among the turns contributed by different speakers. Whether it is a lexical element or a non-lexical repetition, these devices make the spoken language, which is usually perceived as fragmented, highly integrated and smooth flowing. As such they should be reflected in the definition of ALP.

Information presentation and tracking

Information presentation is also an important part of discursive practice in conversational interaction. Researchers have found that grammatical coding of referents depends heavily on the speaker's assumption of the activation states of the referents in the hearer's consciousness (Chafe 1994). Specifically, new and non-identifiable referents typically receive indefinite coding, whereas given, accessible, and identifiable referents are typically coded with definite or attenuated forms. In Chinese *yi*(一)-related expressions contrast with demonstratives in coding identifiability, where *yi* expressions mark un-identifiable referents. Thus in (4) we can see that when a referent is first mentioned, *yi* is used; in the subsequent tracking of the same referent, some kind of definite marking, e.g. *zhe* (这), is often used.

Extract 4. (See Extract 3)

A: Guílín yǒuyìsi , nèigè=zhěnggè de dìxíng ma dōu shì= , yī zhòng= , a jiào= , a

^shíhuī yán。

“Guilin is a very interesting place. This whole area is made of what is called limestone.

B: En。

OK.

A: Shì ma. Suǒyǐ tā= , ēn= , shíhuī yán tā= , bèi= , duōnián bèi yǔshuǐ chōng shuā ne ,
tā=**zhè**gè ^shān , shì zhòng děngyú cóng píng dishang qǐlai de.

“So, so this is, well, limestone; (it) has been washed by rain, and the mountain, the whole mountain is like growing out of a plain field.”

Such alternating coding strategies is best seen in connected discourse and needs to be incorporated in the ALP curriculum.

Epistemic and affective stances

Epistemic stance refers to the speaker’s commitment to what is being said in terms of certainty and source of information. Affective stance has to do with the speaker’s emotional and attitudinal orientation toward what is being said (Ochs 1996). In spontaneous conversation, speakers utilize lexical, grammatical, as well as prosodic devices to express stances. What is more, many of the lexical and grammatical elements may work together with prosodic manipulation and conversation structure to indicate stances. For example, an unstressed first person subject plus a cognitive verb structure (wo juede ‘I feel’) after a predicate can indicate the speaker’s distancing attitude, whereas the same structure with an accent at the beginning of a speaker turn does the opposite, namely indicating a committal stance. Other prosodic means may include change of tone of voice, tempo, hesitations, and pauses.

In addition to prosody, gestures and other bodily conducts can also be used to indicate stance. For example, a hand stroke accompanying a stressed prosody can mean a high degree of certainty, whereas an indirect gaze can mean a negative stance. Gestures can and often do work together with other verbal and non-verbal devices for stance marking. ALP learners should be exposed to how these elements work in native speaker interaction and be able to utilize the various devices in a systematic manner.

Alternative resources in communicatively challenging situations

Alternative resources for communication are needed when communication requires special tools. For example, rather than conduct conversation at a normal pace, the speaker may find it necessary to delay the turn-taking process. Another example would be when the speaker wants to correct the utterance just uttered, some ways of repairing it would be needed. These are called

delays and repairs respectively. While delays and repairs may or may not involve disfluency in natural discourse, they represent some of the most stigmatized aspects of the spoken language. However, as Conversation Analysts have shown, there is much regularity in conversation delaying strategies and repair mechanisms (Goodwin 1980, Schegloff 1979, Fox et al. 1996). The following extract contain a variety of devices used by Speaker A to delay and repair her speech. This includes the use of a hesitation marker *ai* (呃), negative *bu* (不), affirmative token *dui* (对), the interjection *de* (得), and so forth.

Extract 5: Speakers discuss a travel itinerary

B: wǒ yě shàng nà tàng huǒ –

“I may also want to take that (train).

A: è, bù, è, nǐ, nǐ yào shì ,duì, nǐ yào shì,yào qù dehuà, dé, è, tíqián lái gào su wǒ, ràng tāmen gěi nǐ mǎi piào yāo.

Well, actually, if, you, if you want to, if you want to go, well, let’s see, you need to tell me in advance, and I can tell them to buy the ticket for you.”

Exactly how these repair tokens differ from one another is a matter for further research, but it is clear that the spoken language does provide a variety of devices for delaying and repairing in the course of one’s speech. Learners who are less-exposed to natural speech often have difficulties both comprehending and producing these elements. As such, ALP must include features in delay and repair in order to improve speaking proficiency.

The five factors outlined above reflect native speaker strategies in real context. Even though these devices constitute some of the most fundamental aspects of conversational strategies, they have rarely been incorporated and reflected in most current teaching materials. The CALPER Chinese project is an attempt at filling this gap.

The CALPER Chinese Project Pedagogical Resources

The CALPER Chinese project has developed teaching materials based on authentic conversation data. These material have been carefully selected and annotated to best suit pedagogical needs. CALPER Chinese materials, which can be found at <<http://calper.la.psu.edu/chinese.php>>, comprise different units or modules. Each unit is chosen primarily based on salient conversation features. Some of these features include story telling and presenting events, expressing

agreements and disagreements, introducing and negotiating topics, reacting to and collaborating with the main speaker, etc. At the same time topic types (travel, TV shows, shopping, sports, etc.) and speech events (chat, talking in action, and narration, etc.) associated with the talk are also taken into consideration: different topics and different speech events can manifest different features of conversation. Instructors can choose the modules to use by looking at either the topic types, speech events, or conversation features, or some combinations of these, depending on the curriculum needs. Conversation features and speech event types of each unit are discussed in the introduction section of each module, while grammatical features and other important aspects of talk are discussed in the commentaries as well as in the design of exercises and activities.

Pedagogically, it is suggested that the instructor first of all get familiarized with the language of authentic text by listening to the audio and analyze the line-by-line commentaries. The audio recordings help put the words in context, while the line-by-line commentaries are designed to help the instructor to understand the key lexical and grammatical issues as exhibited in the recordings. The modules can be used either to supplement the regular curriculum or for self study. In developing this material we strive to make each unit to be self-contained with each unit illustrating a particular feature or a set of features of spoken Mandarin Chinese.

For a regular language program, these clips can be used in advanced conversation classes, especially a conversation class that consists of mostly non-heritage students.

Typical classroom activities include the following:

- Initial activities: These activities prepare the student with the necessary vocabulary items before listening to the recorded speech.
- First listening: initial exposure to the recorded speech along with activities.
- After listening activities: comprehensive discussion of the clip and related activities.
- Second listening: further listening to the recording for better understanding of the recorded speech.
- Follow up activities: exercises, assignments and activities.

*Note: More detailed discussions of some of these topics have been covered in Tao (2005).

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