

CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' DEVELOPMENT OF PRAGMATIC SKILLS

The Italian Case

Andrea Scibetta



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Lingua, traduzione, didattica

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Il volume è stato pubblicato con il contributo dell'Università per Stranieri di Siena
– Scuola Superiore di Dottorato e di Specializzazione.



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword by Carla Bagna	pag. 11
Introduction	» 13
1. The pragmatic perspective: Theoretical considerations and key-concepts	» 19
1.1 Pragmatics: tentative definitions and current sub-disciplines	» 20
1.1.1 Pragmatics: theoretical background, sub-disciplines and interfaces	» 22
1.1.2 Speech acts: taxonomic criteria for pragmatic research	» 29
1.2 Key-concepts in interlanguage and intercultural pragmatic research	» 31
1.2.1 Spoken communication (vs. written communication), common ground construction and the role of perspective in interaction	» 32
1.2.2 “Common ground” and “perspective”: two key-concepts in pragmatics and in intercultural communication	» 32
1.2.3 The “cultural” and “intercultural” dimensions	» 35
1.2.3.1 The concept of “culture” beyond its definitions	» 36
1.2.3.2 From culture(s) to interculture(s) as ad hoc creations	» 38

2. Pragmatic competence and its development	pag.	41
2.1 Pragmatic competence and its development in L1 and L2	»	41
2.2 Current research on pragmatics in L2 Italian acquisition and teaching	»	45
3. The “Chinese International Students” profile: between communicative needs and specificities	»	49
3.1 Chinese international students in Italy: a brief description of the “profile”	»	50
3.1.1 Students belonging to “Marco Polo” and “Turandot” programs	»	52
3.2 Chinese learners of L2 Italian: research and literature about a heterogeneous “profile”	»	54
3.3 The “categorization” of the “Chinese learner” profile: between perceptual criteria and stereotypical views	»	56
3.4 Open issues in L2 Italian for Chinese international students	»	60
4. “Marco Polo – Turandot” students’ development of pragmatic skills in L2 Italian.		
Description of the research conducted	»	63
4.1 Research-related considerations and purposes	»	65
4.2 Research articulation and adopted methodologies	»	68
4.2.1 Analysis of students’ perceptual patterns related to the role of the pragmatic dimension in their process of L2 Italian acquisition	»	68
4.2.2 Analysis of students’ development of pragmatic skills in L2 Italian	»	69
4.3 Data analysis: the perceptions of the role of pragmatics in the process of acquisition of L2 Italian	»	76
4.3.1 Structure of the questionnaire	»	77
4.3.2 Analysis of the gathered data	»	77
4.4 Data analysis: non-participant observations and experimental activities	»	86
4.4.1 Analysis of data gathered during non-participant observations	»	88

4.4.2	Analysis of data gathered through written activities	pag. 90
4.4.3	Analysis of data gathered through oral activities	» 104
5.	A brief corpus of pragmatic activities addressed to Chinese international students of L2 Italian	» 119
5.1	Theoretical considerations at the basis of the proposed activities	» 119
5.2	Structure of the corpus of activities	» 120
	Conclusions	» 137
	Afterword. A contribution toward recognizing the Sino-Italian component in contemporary society	» 141
	by Valentina Pedone	» 141
	Appendix	» 145
	Appendix 1 – Sample of the questionnaire on “Marco Polo – Turandot” students’ perceptions of pragmatics in the acquisition of L2 Italian	» 145
	Appendix 2 – Sample of the 1 st experimental written pragmatic activity	» 149
	Appendix 3 – Sample of the 2 nd written experimental pragmatic activity	» 151
	Appendix 4 – Sample of the 3 rd written experimental pragmatic activity	» 153
	Appendix 5 – 1 st oral experimental pragmatic activity	» 155
	Appendix 6 – 2 nd oral experimental pragmatic activity	» 156
	Appendix 7 – 3 rd oral experimental pragmatic activity	» 158
	Appendix 8 – 4 th oral experimental pragmatic activity	» 159
	Appendix 9 – 5 th oral experimental pragmatic activity	» 160
	Appendix 10 – 6 th oral experimental pragmatic activity	» 161
	Appendix 11 – 7 th oral experimental pragmatic activity	» 162
	Works cited	» 163
	Websites cited	» 171

FOREWORD

Carla Bagna

The research conducted and the results obtained by Andrea Scibetta are placed in a “territory” that has gained an increasing attention in the last 15 years, in relation with Chinese international students. Research, mainly in the field of applied linguistics and educational linguistics, focused on the acquisition of Italian by Chinese-speaking immigrants, has been integrated by studies aimed at detecting the linguistic conditions and the different learning pathways of Chinese speaking students accessing Italian higher education. In various contributions the “Chinese-speaking students profile” has been taken into consideration from the point of view of specific research sectors and analyzing corpora of data referring to more homogeneous categories of learners. However, despite the presence of a wide international research which attributes a crucial importance to the development (and, therefore, also to the teaching) of pragmatic skills, this aspect does not seem yet to be among the privileged areas of investigation in the context of L2 Italian for Chinese students.

The research study presented in the current volume aims at highlighting the analysis of the development of pragmatic skills by Chinese international students, both through an in-depth discussion of some theoretical aspects and through the construction of adequate tools for a phase of application of the results. The research described was developed through a collection and an analysis of multiple data gathered in 2014 and 2015, according to a rigorous observation and implementation protocol, and involved over 400 students in a very precise sequence of actions aimed at conducting detailed observations, collecting corpora of data of various typologies, and analyzing the collected data through different points of view. The main goals were: to analyze Chinese international students’ performances in L2 Italian, in order to confirm the presence of difficulties related to specific aspects of the development of pragmatic skills; to critically observe the conditions

of pragmatic skills teaching in guided contexts, in order to accelerate and improve the quality of pragmatic competence; to verify the impact of well-structured pragmatic learning paths, in order to encourage Chinese international students' development of pragmatic skills in L2 Italian.

The obtained results seem to confirm the initial theoretical and conceptual considerations in relation with the pragmatic aspects of competence, as well as with the analysis of the mechanisms of influence exerted by possible phenomena of pragmatic transfer, from specific “pragmemes” (or “prototypical pragmatic acts”) in the L1 of the learners towards some “practs” (or realizations of “pragmatic acts”) in the L2. Furthermore, the construction and the experimentation of a well-structured learning path, albeit small and limited in time, composed of a series of logically interconnected pragmatic activities, has produced visible improvements in the quality of the pragmatic competence of the observed students, as well as an acceleration in the development of such abilities.

The originality of the research, especially due to the extent of the results and the implications deriving from it, will allow the construction of a linguistic model of analysis aimed at better emphasizing the crucial role played by the pragmatic dimension in Second Language acquisition processes.

INTRODUCTION

Among the heterogeneous processes of L2 Italian teaching, the multifaceted category represented by Chinese learners¹ has gained particular influence in the past few years. Such a profile of learners, which has drawn an increasing attention since the 1980s, is composed by students belonging to different social classes, with different cultural backgrounds, different educational experiences and different motivations and expectations related to Italian language learning (cf. Banfi, 2003; Ceccagno, 2003; Rastelli, 2010). Such a plurality implies specific teaching actions addressed to the various sub-categories in which this general profile can be articulated.

In the past few years, in particular, the number of Chinese international students of L2 Italian has increased as a consequence of international agreements, like the “Marco Polo” and “Turandot” programs, which will be described in Chapter 3. These agreements have promoted the presence of Chinese students in Italy, who aim at taking part in academic degree courses after having attended preparatory intensive Italian languages courses (cf. the annual statistics of Uni-Italia about Chinese international students within Italian universities and academies).

At the same time, the number of institutes of higher education and universities which have signed cooperation agreements related to different disciplines and research perspectives with Chinese partners has also risen. Consequently, the opportunities to promote cultural exchanges that allow Chinese students to conduct periods of study and/or specialization in Italy are visibly growing in number.

1. As will be emphasized in the Chapter 3, the expression “Chinese learners” is used with the only purpose of subsequently defining specific group of learners, and never with the purpose of looking for an abstract, generalized model of “Chinese student”.

The attention attributed to Chinese learners and to the sequences of acquisition of Italian language and communicative skills of Chinese immigrants had already produced some relevant research studies since the early 1990s: the works of Valentini (1992) and Banfi (2003) are particularly worthy of mention. These works mainly focused on the analysis of the most frequent irregularities in L2 Italian produced by Chinese learners belonging to different age groups and different socio-cultural backgrounds, in most cases within spontaneous contexts. The disciplines mainly taken into consideration were phonetics and morphosyntax, often according to L1-L2 contrastive methods.

The category “Chinese learners” has been more recently investigated also from the point of view of more specific fields of study and analyzing corpora of data related to more homogeneous sub-categories of students (cf. Galli, 2007; D’Annunzio, 2009; Diadori & Di Toro, 2009). As far as Second Language Acquisition studies and the *input processing theory* are concerned, Rastelli (respectively 2010; 2013) is worthy of mention.

Nevertheless, although international literature attributes a crucial importance to the development (and also to the teaching) of pragmatic skills, this aspect does not appear to represent one of the preferred objects of investigation in the field of L2 Italian for Chinese learners (except a few relevant publications, like Nuzzo, 2010; De Meo & Pettorino, 2011; Scibetta, 2016 *inter alia*). As regards other L2s, in particular German and English, on the contrary, the existent literature in this specific field of study is rather flourishing (cf. Hong, 2002 and Wang, 2007 for German; Wang, 2011 and Leung & Ruan, 2012 for English *inter alia*).

Due to a lack of studies conducted in order to better investigate the issues mentioned above, the importance of implementing a research on Chinese international students’ development of pragmatic skills in L2 Italian is here emphasized. The importance of such a research can be related both to the need to deepen the knowledge on some theoretical aspects and to realize suitable instruments for the application of the results.

The main aim of the current volume is, in fact, to describe and explain the main results of a research on Chinese international students’ development of pragmatic skills in L2 Italian, taking into account some target groups composed by “Marco Polo – Turandot” students of the University for Foreigners of Siena whose language communicative competencies range from A2 to B1 level (CEFR). A further purpose of this work is to suggest a corpus of teaching activities in order to encourage the development of pragmatic abilities *ad hoc* for the investigated category of learners.

In particular, the main theoretical and conceptual considerations lying at the basis of this research are the following ones:

- As far as the aspect of Chinese learners' acquisition of an L2 is concerned, a number of scientific sources (cf. Mitschian, 1991 or D'Annunzio, 2009 *inter alia*) tend to take for granted that this category of students is characterized by a certain tendency to prefer formal accuracy rather than communicative efficacy in an L2.
However, with particular regard to the communicative and learning needs of Chinese international students, it can be argued that the aspect of communicative efficacy is not only judged as fundamental by these students in their process of acquisition of L2 Italian, but is also considered more important than the aspects related to formal accuracy.
- When studying Chinese international students of L2 Italian, it can be observed that some widespread difficulties related to specific aspects of their development of pragmatic skills can be shared by a considerable part of learners. Such a consideration implies the necessity to observe and investigate corpora of data related to written and oral performances of these students, with the purpose of trying to identify generalized pragmatic difficulties and recognizing the causes that lie at their basis.
- As hypothesized and highlighted by several studies, the teaching of pragmatic skills in classroom contexts can contribute to accelerate and to improve the quality of the development of pragmatic competence in an L2, helping learners overcome generalized difficulties faster and better (cf. Nuzzo, 2012; Nuzzo & Gauci, 2014).
- One of the most relevant limitations related to the effectiveness of teaching pragmatic skills in class is due to the fact that syllabi often do not consider a clear and logic articulation of the notions that have to be taught. The pragmatic skills which are taught, instead, are usually selected according to the teacher's own initiative (cf. Nuzzo & Gauci, 2012). It therefore becomes necessary to plan and to realize structured and well-defined pathways in order to let Chinese international students develop these kinds of abilities properly and effectively.

This work necessarily assumes an interdisciplinary aspect, involving in particular different sub-disciplines of pragmatics (pragmalinguistics, socio-pragmatics, interlanguage, intercultural and cross-cultural pragmatics), Second Language Acquisition, Conversation Analysis, and Intercultural studies.

Chapter 1 mainly aims at giving a general account of the disciplines that constitute the most relevant part of the theoretical background of the research.

Particular reference will be made to pragmatics, that is one of the disciplines which this research attributes major importance to. After having mentioned some among the most influential definitions attributed to the concept of “pragmatics” in the past few decades, some of its most common current connotations will be described. After that, the notion of “speech act” (as well as that of “pragmatic act”, cf. Mey, 2001), at the basis of pragmatics itself and also of this research, will be investigated. Moreover, some key-concepts like those of “communication” and “interaction” (in particular along with the differentiation between written and oral communication), and those of “common ground”, “context” and “perspective”, “culture”, “intercultures”, will be accurately described.

In Chapter 2, theoretical considerations about the concept of “pragmatic competence” will be provided. Specifically, differentiations will be made between the characterizations of the development of pragmatic competence in L1 and in L2. Moreover, indications about the multiple articulations of pragmatic competence, involving not only the pragmalinguistic, sociopragmatic and intercultural pragmatic dimensions, but also aspects related to prosody, textual linguistics, and metapragmatic awareness will be brought into light. The second part of the Chapter will be particularly dedicated to an overview of the current research about pragmatics in L2 Italian acquisition and teaching.

Chapter 3 takes into particular consideration the “Chinese international students of L2 Italian” profile. First, an overall view on the development of the presence of Chinese international students in Italian universities and academies will be provided. Particular attention will be dedicated to the presence of students belonging to “Marco Polo” and “Turandot” programs. After that, the existing relevant scientific literature on Chinese students’ acquisition of L2 Italian, with a specific focus on international students, will be mentioned. In the third part, specific dynamics of “categorization” and creation of models of “Chinese learners”, usually explained through stereotypical criteria, as well as through processes of hyper-simplification of complexity, will be investigated. The final part of the Chapter will be dedicated to some open issues regarding different aspects of L2 Italian teaching to Chinese international students.

Chapter 4 represents the central part of this volume, since it aims at introducing a research conducted on Chinese international students’ development of pragmatic skills in L2 Italian. In particular, the results of several research phases carried out through preliminary observations and by conducting experimental activities with “Marco Polo – Turandot” students at the University for Foreigners of Siena in 2014 and 2015 will be introduced and described.

The main considerations lying at the basis of the research, as well as the main purposes, and the adopted methodologies for the implementation phases will be described in detail. After that, the steps in which the research was articulated will be listed and illustrated. The main actions included in the implementation phases of the research are:

- Data collection and analysis related to “Marco Polo – Turandot” students’ perceptions of the pragmatic dimension in the process of L2 Italian acquisition through a questionnaire entitled “Le percezioni sulla lingua italiana e la pragmatica: questionario rivolto agli studenti dei corsi Marco Polo – Turandot”².
- Preliminary non-participant observations of possible target groups composed by “Marco Polo – Turandot” students.
- Data collection about common difficulties and peculiarities characterizing some pragmatic skills of the observed learners.
- Analysis of the gathered data with the main purpose of investigating the presence of possible pragmatic transfer phenomena underlying some common and generalized difficulties.
- Implementation of 10 experimental written and oral pragmatic activities with the target group and comparisons between performances through the use of a control group.

On the basis of what is described and analyzed in Chapter 4, Chapter 5 aims at introducing a series of pragmatic teaching activities specifically addressed to Chinese international students. Such activities were planned and realized taking into account the communicative and learning needs of the observed students, as well as the difficulties noted during the periods of non-participant observations and implementation of experimental activities.

2. EN. “Perceptions of Italian language and pragmatics: A questionnaire addressed to students of the ‘Marco Polo – Turandot’ courses”.

1.

THE PRAGMATIC PERSPECTIVE: THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND KEY-CONCEPTS

The current chapter aims at building a theoretical background based on the main disciplines involved in the research conducted, and at introducing some remarks on particular questions and issues. The chapter is divided into three main paragraphs, each one dealing with specific theoretical considerations and remarks.

In the first paragraph, one of the key-disciplines of this research, namely pragmatics, will be introduced. On the basis of a specific theoretical background, some of the most common definitions of “pragmatics” will be analyzed and compared. Subsequently, the most relevant scientific prerequisites that have contributed to consider pragmatics as an independent field of study within linguistics will be illustrated; after that, the principal sub-disciplines which pragmatics is currently composed by (pragmalinguistics, socio-pragmatics, interlanguage pragmatics, intercultural pragmatics and cross-cultural pragmatics) will be listed and briefly described.

Furthermore, with the purpose of attributing major importance to the analysis of contextualized communicative interchanges, and to the relationships between utterances within communicative events, reference will be made to Conversation Analysis, Discourse Analysis and Politeness Studies. These disciplines are all strictly related to pragmatics and are therefore considered fundamental in this work. Such an interdisciplinary theoretical background aims at emphasizing the strict interrelationship between pragmatics and other disciplines that belong both to linguistics and to different fields of study. Subsequently, some key-notions belonging to the tradition of pragmatic studies will be investigated, starting from the notion of “speech acts” (cf. Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), as well as some of the most acknowledged taxonomic criteria to describe them.