

Cynthia Lee: Researching and Teaching Second Language Speech Acts in the Chinese Context

(Springer, Singapore :2018. 110 pp.)

Pragmatics gained significance in applied linguistics almost half a century ago. Pragmatics is concerned with studying language use, meaning, and interpretation in context rather than the 'description of linguistic structures' (Levinson 1983: 7). Cynthia Lee, Head of Education and Deputy Director of Research Institute for Bilingual Learning and Teaching (RiBILT) at the School of Education and Languages at the Open University of Hong Kong, has studied the pragmatic competence of Chinese EFL learners for nearly two decades. In her research, she considered their variability due to L1 culture's effect on L2 (English). Lee's book explores speech acts performed by Chinese learners of English, providing pedagogical and didactic insights to bridge theory to practice in teaching pragmatic competence in the Chinese EFL classroom.

The six chapters in the book sought to fulfill two objectives. First, bring awareness to the Chinese EFL speech acts development and production, through the viewpoint of cross-linguistic, cross-cultural, L1 and L2 development. Second, they propose research and theory-based assessment and instructional tool for teaching and learning speech acts to Chinese EFL learners.

The first objective of the book is laid out in the first four chapters. The first chapter discusses general definitions and pragmatics-related issues, providing a focussed and reader-friendly overview of the field. In the second chapter, Lee discusses several essential factors that promote EFL pragmatic development/learning- specifically speech acts; and the different traditional methods and tools for data collection in natural and experimental settings. The third chapter begins with a discussion on the culture/language connection. A brief description of the Chinese community structure is given, emphasizing two Chinese intercultural terms (politeness and facework), which have a significant cultural contribution to speech act productions. Accordingly, cross-cultural views of the effect of Chinese cultural norms on both Chinese and English speech act productions are conceived in terms of 5 speech acts: requests, refusals, complaints, compliment responses, and apologies. Chapter four addresses the interlanguage development of Chinese EFL learners on the previously mentioned speech acts, stressing the assumption that the speaker's strategy use and age are correlated. With this assumption corroborated, Lee focuses on ability and age relation as a by-product of the teaching to which the learner is exposed.

The second objective of the book is dealt with in chapter 5, where Lee showcases and explains, in well-constructed arguments and a comprehensive overview, the methods and practices for the teaching of speech acts to Chinese EFL higher education learners, who have completed two pragmatic-focused courses at two universities in Hong Kong.

The final chapter pulls together both aims of the book – research and pedagogical ramifications—noting the importance of a better understanding of L2 learners’ speech act performance and its relations with their L1 culture and suggesting the integration of L2 pragmatic instruction in teacher training, exploring L2 pragmatics through technology, and exploring further research directions.

The book successfully relates to representative interlanguage and cross-cultural speech act studies while also shedding light on some main characteristics of L2 speech act output of Chinese EFL learners and makes sound generalizations. Though it is not a long read, the book enables the foreign reader to be informed about the communicative patterns of Chinese EFL learners by highlighting the interaction between L1 cultural and linguistic norms and their cross-linguistic and cross-cultural effect on L2 speech act acquisition. The insightful analysis of the studies of Chinese EFL learners' L2 speech act realizations and explanations of the potential personal, pedagogical, didactic exposure, and socio-cultural factors influencing L2 speech act performance provide ample opportunity for exploration in different languages, linguistic constellations, contexts, and cultures. The book suggests that intercultural contact between Chinese students and foreign native speakers of English can be more successful by reaching a more significant and mutual understanding of the communicative patterns of these learners.

The book meets its two objectives successfully. Perception of Chinese EFL speech acts development and production are more easily formed through brief, yet detailed viewpoints of cross-linguistic, cross-cultural L1 and L2 development, which is discussed in the first four chapters. In comparison, the second aim of the book addresses assessing speech acts teaching and competence in the Chinese EFL classroom, which is presented in the fifth chapter, on the theory and practice of practical instruction. In this chapter, Lee shows how learning tasks and resources can be structured to teach higher education Chinese EFL learners the target speech act with regard to recent findings and results of speech acts core concepts for practical instruction, and well-known hypotheses of L2 acquisition, including noticing, input, and output hypotheses.

All in all, Lee's book makes a compelling read on the teachability and development of speech acts of L2 learners in general, familiarizing readers with interlanguage, cross-cultural speech acts, and pragmatics teaching in the Chinese context in particular. It offers well-researched approaches, which might be helpful for researchers and students who are interested in following pragmatic-based approaches of instruction or completing further research on speech act realizations of speakers of other languages and from different cultural backgrounds.

References

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We acknowledge the financial support of Széchenyi 2020 under the **EFOP-3.6.1-16-2016-00015**.