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The effects of deductive instruction and inductive instruction on learners' development of pragmatic competence in the teaching of Chinese as a second language

Xuedan Qi [a, *], Chun Lai [b]

[a] Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China
[b] The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

Pragmatic competence determines one's overall communicative competence and can be developed through pedagogical interventions. The existing literature generally agrees on the effectiveness of explicit instruction in the development of pragmatic competence, but diverges on when and how explicit knowledge is best provided, and when and how pragmatic input may be most effectively presented. This study adds to the existing literature by comparing the effectiveness of two types of pragmatic instruction – deductive instruction and inductive instruction – via self-access websites in developing Chinese as a second language (CSL) learners' pragmatic competence in the speech act of request. Forty-two intermediate-level CSL learners were randomly assigned to the two treatment conditions, and their performance in open-ended discourse completion tasks (DCT) was compared across the two groups. The study found a significantly greater effect of the inductive approach on learners' DCT performance in both the immediate and delayed posttest. This suggests that inductive instruction might be more effective in teaching the speech act of request in CSL.

1. Introduction

Pragmatic competence has been recognized as an essential component of communicative competence (Laughlin, Wain, & Schmidgall, 2015; Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2006), and has been found to be a great challenge to second language (L2) learners, even those with advanced proficiency levels, as they are frequently reported to lack the knowledge and ability to use pragmatically appropriate language in daily communication (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Halenko & Jones, 2011; Kasper, 1997). Thus, how to help learners to develop L2 pragmatic competence has drawn much research attention (Li, 2012; Martínez-Flor, 2008).

It is commonly agreed that most pragmatic features, such as speech acts, pragmatic routines, discourse makers, and discourse strategies, are teachable in the classroom environment (Rose, 2005), and that L2 learners who receive pragmatic instruction outperform those who are merely exposed to the target language (Jeon & Kaya, 2006; Yoshimi, 2001). Research on pragmatic instruction has compared the effectiveness of explicit instruction (i.e., explicit discussion and teaching of pragmatic

* Corresponding author. Room 204, Institute for International Education, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, No.2 North Baiyun Avenue, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China.
E-mail addresses: 201710058@oamail.gdufs.edu.cn, qxd88121@gmail.com (X. Qi).

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rules) to that of implicit instruction (i.e., engaging learners' attention without explicit metalinguistic explanation or discussion) on the development of L2 pragmatic competence, and the findings are generally in favor of explicit instruction (Alcón-Soler, 2005; Duan & Wannaruk, 2010; Farrokhi & Atashian, 2012; Martínez-Flor, 2006; Rose & Ng, 2001; Takahashi, 2001). Despite universal agreement on the effectiveness of explicit instruction, there is a great deal of controversy over when and how explicit rules are best provided (Kasper & Roever, 2005). One issue is whether explicit pragmatic rules should be provided after students have gone through the mind work of finding out the rules from examples by themselves, or whether the rules should be provided directly to students before they are provided with elaborative examples – in other words, whether explicit instruction should be delivered deductively or inductively.

This study aims at enhancing our understanding of the issue through an experimental study that compares the effectiveness of explicit deductive instruction and explicit inductive instruction on a group of CSL learners' development of pragmatic competence in the speech act of request in a lab-based experiment.

2. Literature review

2.1. Deductive instruction and inductive instruction

Deduction is the process that goes from the general to the specific, and a deductive approach to language teaching provides explicit explanation on the metalinguistic rules related to the target language structures first before presenting students with examples of these structures (Decoo, 1996; Vogel, Herron, Cole, & York, 2011). In contrast, induction is the process that goes from the specific to the general, and an inductive teaching approach focuses on directing learners' attention to the target structures and/or guiding learners to work out the rules from real language use (Decoo, 1996; Takimoto, 2008; Vogel et al., 2011). Thus, the procedural relationship between rules and examples is the key factor that differentiates inductive approaches from deductive approaches. A natural question that follows is whether inductive learning denies the explicit teaching of rules. In other word, does inductive learning necessarily imply implicit learning? Decoo (1996) and DeKeyser (2003) have proposed two influential theoretical frameworks that could shed some light on this question. Both frameworks negate the simple equation of deductive learning to explicit learning and inductive learning to implicit learning. Decoo (1996) conceptualized four modalities of inductive learning, which could be either explicit or implicit (see Appendix A and Table 1).

DeKeyser (2003) further pointed out that both deductive and inductive could be either explicit or implicit (see Table 2).

DeKeyser asserts that both explicit deductive learning and explicit inductive learning involve metalinguistic rules, and the only difference is whether the rules are acquired through teaching or through self-discovery. However, neither of the frameworks specifically theorizes whether inductive learning would involve direct explanation of the rules. Prince and Felder (2006), in their seminar, works on inductive teaching, made it explicit that "when we speak of inductive methods, we therefore do not mean total avoidance of lecturing and complete reliance on self-discovery" (p. 124). The point was also highlighted by DeKeyser (1995), who stated "induction can be either implicit or explicit (and explicit induction can happen with or without help from a teacher or textbook" (p. 380)). Based on these theoretical discussions, this study operationalizes inductive learning as inductive guided discovery supplemented with the provision of explicit rules of the target features, which aligns with the practice in quite a few studies (Chan, 2004; Glaser, 2016; Haight, Herron, & Cole, 2007; Jean & Simard, 2013; Takimoto, 2008; Vogel & Engelhard, 2011).

2.2. Empirical studies on deductive and inductive pragmatic instruction

Empirical studies have examined the efficacy of deductive versus inductive instruction on learners' development of L2 pragmatics, but the findings remain inconclusive. Some found significant differences between the two approaches (Glaser, 2016; Rose & Ng, 2001; Takimoto, 2008), while others did not find any (Trosborg & Shaw, 1998). Among the studies that

Table 1
Comparison of Decoo's five modalities.

	Deductive	Inductive			
	Modality A	Modality B	Modality C	Modality D	Modality E
Explicit or implicit	Explicit	Explicit or implicit	Explicit	Implicit	Implicit
Guided discovery	Absence	Presence	Absence	Absence	Absence
Material structure	N/A	N/A	N/A	Structured material	Unstructured material

Table 2
The inductive/deductive-implicit/explicit dimensions (DeKeyser, 2003: 315).

	Deductive	Inductive
Explicit	Traditional teaching	Rule discovery
Implicit	Using parameters	Learning L1 from input