Use of Prompt Sentences to scaffold language growth in

lower level Chinese classes

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Abstract: This study examined the use of Prompt Sentences (PSs) in lower level Chinese classes. By asking three types of PSs to students and quantitatively analyzing their responses, the author tried to answer the questions: (1) whether it is effective to use PS in the beginning Chinese class, and (2) when to apply which type of PS to which group of students and what situations. The author found that using PSs in beginning Chinese classes is only effective when students have some grip on vocabulary. No particular type of PS stood out as more or less effective in terms of developing language skills. PS's have an insignificant impact on students' pronunciation in the short term.

Key words: Prompt Sentences; Chinese language class; quantitative

1. Introduction

Teaching elementary Chinese at a college level is a challenging task. Overloaded textbooks, insufficient curricula, and unprepared students adversely affect the quality of learning[1]. Sometimes it is hard for the teacher to get the students involved if they only deliver the content in lecture or ask the students to do exercises in small groups (ZHAO, 2004). The latter method may appear to be quite active, however, a beginner can learn very little from another beginner when speaking the target language amongst each other. Reading aloud together can be an effective method; yet students get bored soon after they finish the limited sentences in the textbook. Simple repetition also dampens the motivation of students to create sentences on their own, that is, to synthesize meaningful and useful sentences that could be used in the real conversation.

In advanced Chinese classes, teachers make use of Prompt Sentence (PS) to solicit and scaffold the students to produce language under a given context[2]. PSs are usually carefully designed questions soliciting students to produce answers by using a predetermined set of grammar and vocabulary. To come up with the correct answer, students not only have to master the basic structure of the phrase, but must also be careful about the minor details. Mistakes are corrected instantly by the teacher and students are often asked to speak again until their sentences are complete and correct. This improves the depth of the student's understanding and internalizes what they have learned.

Referring to prior experience of implementing PSs in advanced classes, the author of this paper asked three

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[1] This is based upon unpublished, personal experience by the author.
[2] Prompt sentences were widely used in Chinese classes of some Ivy League schools.

types of PSs, including yes/no questions, fill-in-the-blank questions, and questions about how or why to his students and then he recorded their responses. The author took a quantitative approach to find out: (1) whether it is effective to use PS in a beginning Chinese class, and (2) when to apply what type of PS to which group of students. Such knowledge helps the teacher compose and choose the appropriate types of PS in class where diverse learning abilities and academic backgrounds are common.

2. Literature review

PS is a teaching technique developed with the reference to Vygotsky's scaffolding theory (Vygotsky, 1978). Based on Vygotsky's cognition theory, scaffolding was introduced by Burner (1975) to United States educators to illustrate the cognitive process used when learners approach unfamiliar subjects under the guidance of the more knowledgeable individual, usually teachers or advanced peers. Many believe scaffolding is "the systematic sequencing of prompted content, materials, tasks, and teacher and peer support to optimize learning" (Dickson, Chard & Simmons, 1993). Learners cannot usually perform the task independently when they are first exposed to such materials. This is particularly true in the elementary Chinese classes where many students are overwhelmed by the sheer number of characters, not to mention the grammar and syntax (CUI, 1997). The teacher needs to give students support until they can perform their new skills independently (Rosenshine & Meister, 1992). Vygotsky suggests that teachers should give more assistance when students are learning new or difficult tasks, and gradually decrease side assistance when students demonstrate mastery and become more independent (Ball, 2000). Reading the text aloud, showing flashcards and lecturing about the lessons can be regarded as intensive, preliminary scaffolding in the Chinese class (XU, 2005).

The purpose of learning a language is not to simply repeat what others say, but to use one's linguistic capacity to speak what one actually wants to say. PSs serve as the scaffold to elevate the simple repetition to a higher level (Hogan & Pressley, 1997). A well-recognized PS scaffolding practice is to subdivide a class into four levels, that is, teacher, whole class, groups and individuals (Walqui, 2006). The teacher practices PSs with students from the top level, down to the bottom. The teacher first models how to perform a new or difficult task, and then asks the PSs and students answer them together. Next, students ask each other the PSs to become familiar with them. Finally, the teacher asks individual students the PSs and corrects their Response Sentences (RSs) instantly.

Some teachers modified this model by skipping the scaffolding in small groups, arguing that students benefit little from asking and answering a non-native speaker at the same level (Lee & Muncie, 2006). They also suggest that PSs are short, concise and task-orientated. A PS should deliver the question in the most efficient manner so that students will not spend time on comprehending the unrelated parts. The question also needs to maintain focus in case a student's answer goes in the wrong direction. For example, they prefer "二月有几个星期二?" (How many Tuesdays does February have?) to "请问你知道二月有几个星期二吗?" (Do you know how many Tuesdays does February have?). The latter is not concise enough and students may simply say "我知道" (I know)

instead of "二月有四个星期二" (February has four Tuesdays).

Furthermore, the importance of patiently yet rigorously correcting students' answers is emphasized by the same group of teachers, who believe that the teacher must weed out all erroneous or unconventional expressions, as well as non-native tones, to foster students' literacy growth. An individual student is pressed to say the same answer over and over again until they can say it perfectly. Meanwhile, the teacher uses this opportunity to scaffold other students. They recite the answer aloud with the whole class, ask the same or a slightly different PS to others, and explain the answer to those who are left behind[3].

The scaffolding following the above formula has been proven successful in advanced Chinese classes. Few attempts have been made, however, to use PSs in elementary Chinese classes. It is questionable whether beginners can keep up with such rigorous, intensive training. Also, the PS technique is most often found in small classes with no more than eight people. Asking a PS to one student, yet keeping other 20 or so students engaged, is an altogether different challenge.

3. Methodology

To find out the effectiveness of using PSs in a beginning Chinese class, the author took an action research approach by playing the roles of both the teacher and the researcher. The participants who enrolled in his beginning Chinese class came from a public, Midwestern university. Most of them were not students of Chinese heritage and had little or no experience in learning a foreign language. Some students from another lower level class participated in the tutoring sessions.

The author used his general teaching experience, as well as the formula for with PSs learned from teaching at a higher level. Different types of PSs were designed to cover every major grammar and language point in the text. According to difficulty level, questions can be categorized into yes/no, fill-in-the-blanks, or why/when/what/how. Students were sometimes given visual presentations on PowerPoint slides, which created a concrete context and seamlessly integrated different types of PSs. The teaching process included these steps, in order. He explained grammar, went through new words, told students to read the text aloud as a group, broke into one-on-one drill, corrected each student's RS, and made students repeat the answer as a group. The teaching and drilling were videotaped.

The data analysis focused on the time lapse between the PS and the RS, the types of PSs and the frequency of students' errors. Using quantitative data, the author monitored and compared the progress of participants, as well as the quality of each type of PS. The author looked for the patterns of data, for example, whether the same type of PS could be answered in a quicker manner in the second or third round. He also differentiated students' performance in big classes versus in private tutoring sessions to see the effects of practicing in a more intimate context.

Because of the scope of this study, the author only systematically recorded students' performance in class, and left the out-of-class issues to interviews. A number of participants were randomly selected for interviews. The interview questions were about their experiences in answering the PSs, the time they spent after class studying

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[3] Those teaching methods were observed by the author in 2007's Harvard Beijing Academy.

Chinese, their learning styles and their suggestions for the PS exercises. The typical, overlapping categories were selected to triangulate the quantitative data.

4. Result

An independent sample t-test (Table 1 and Table 2) was run to test the group differences in errors among the different types of PSs. The author divided four types into two groups (yes/no and fill-in-the-blank questions versus translation and how/why). The result shows that the types of questions had no significant influence on the error frequency ($p=0.382>\alpha=0.05$).

Table 1 Group statistics

	QTYPE	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Error occurr ence	>= 3.00	100	.28	.451	.045
	< 3.00	85	.22	.419	.045

Table 2 Independent samples test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Error occurr ence	Equal variances assumed	3.142	.078	.876	183	.382	.06	.064	-.071	.184
	Equal variances not assumed			.882	181.544	.379	.06	.064	-.070	.183

A one-way ANOVA (Table 3) was run to test the influence of each specific question type on the error occurrence. Again, the author did not find significance when $\alpha=0.05$.

Table 3 Multiple comparisons

Dependent Variable: ERROR

	(I) QTYPE	(J) QTYPE	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Tukey HSD	yes/no	blank	.23	.312	.884	-.58	1.04
		Translation	.06	.103	.950	-.21	.32
		How/why	-.08	.069	.628	-.26	.10
	blank	yes/no	-.23	.312	.884	-1.04	.58
		Translation	-.17	.322	.949	-1.01	.66
		How/why	-.31	.313	.751	-1.12	.50
	Translation	yes/no	-.06	.103	.950	-.32	.21
		blank	.17	.322	.949	-.66	1.01
		How/why	-.14	.104	.546	-.41	.13
	How/why	yes/no	.08	.069	.628	-.10	.26
		blank	.31	.313	.751	-.50	1.12
		Translation	.14	.104	.546	-.13	.41

A bivariate correlation test (Table 4 and Table 5) was run to test whether the time length to answer a PS question decreases as the number of exercises increases. The correlation is significant ($p=0.036<\alpha=0.05$).

Table 4 Descriptive statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
TIMELENG	2.9103	3.33524	145
LENGRANK	.5206897	.28966073	145

Table 5   Correlations

		TIMELENG	LENGRANK
TIMELENG	Pearson Correlation	1	-.150*
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.	.036
	Sum of Squares and Cross-products	1601.834	-20.879
	Covariance	11.124	-.145
	N	145	145
LENGRANK	Pearson Correlation	-.150*	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.036	.
	Sum of Squares and Cross-products	-20.879	12.082
	Covariance	-.145	.084
	N	145	145

Note: * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

A correlation test (Table 6 and Table 7) was run to see whether the occurrence of errors decreases when the number of exercises increases. Significant correlation was found (P=0.000 at α level 0.05)

Table 6   Descriptive statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
ERROROC	.3013	.46029	156
TIMESRAN	.5192308	.28956258	156

Table 7   Correlations

		ERROROC	TIMESRAN
ERROROC	Pearson Correlation	1	-.287**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.	.000
	Sum of Squares and Cross-products	32.840	-5.927
	Covariance	.212	-.038
	N	156	156
TIMESRAN	Pearson Correlation	-.287**	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	.
	Sum of Squares and Cross-products	-5.927	12.996
	Covariance	-.038	.084
	N	156	156

Note: ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

5. Discussion

A common belief about the PSs is that why/how questions are harder than yes/no questions. According to the Table2 and Table 3, however, the types of PSs had no significant influence on the occurrence of errors. A further analysis also revealed that the types of PSs also had no significant influence on the length of time students took to respond. Students' interviews collaborated these findings. They said they had no particular thoughts about which type of PS was harder. Each type was as hard as the others because each contained an equal amount of grammar and vocabulary, for example, "你今天晚上请我吃晚饭吗?" (Will you invite me to dinner tonight?) and "你今天晚上和谁吃晚饭?" (Who are you going to eat dinner with tonight?). In fact, the author found that his students actually had a harder time answering the first one, because they sometimes missed the question marker "吗" at the end of the sentence. This failure made them spend time wondering what the teacher was asking and which caused confusion. The question pronouns such as "什么" (what), "多少" (how many) and "哪里" (where) were comparatively easier to identify in speaking, and consequently made the PS easier to answer.

This finding suggests PSs cannot scaffold students unless they have enough knowledge to begin with. The difficulty of yes/no PSs illustrates that students cannot answer until they truly understand what the teacher is asking. This finding also encourages teachers to ask yes/no PSs to students as frequently as asking why/how PSs. In this way, students can spend more time focusing on their pronunciation, especially their tones. Since yes/no questions did not stand out as the easiest, the teacher can start drill practice by asking some other types of PSs, such as fill-in-the-blank questions or translation. This can be done as a group to scaffold students' language growth by giving them a sense of what will come next. Before breaking students into smaller groups, the teacher may ask why/how PSs to probe whether students have acquired enough knowledge to complete the drills.

Another common assumption is that more practice leads to better performance. This is collaborated by the results shown in Table 5 and Table 6. The author found that both the occurrence of errors and time to respond

decreased as the number of drills increased. A closer look at the data shows that the first several rounds of drills took students a much longer time to respond to, and the occurrences of errors were significantly higher, too. The PSs helped students to build up their language skills by listening to and responding to the same or similar types of questions repetitively. They could then respond quicker, speak faster and make fewer mistakes. On the other hand, the author did not notice significant changes in their pronunciation. The tones that were mispronounced in the first few rounds were persistently wrong in following exercises. From the interviews, the author discovered that PSs could nicely scaffold the syntax and grammar growth, because those things were by and large "big chunks" for which students could find counterparts in their native language, they were able to perform the task by realignment and translation. In contrast, the tone is a uniquely Chinese language feature. PSs can help students learn how to pronounce by repeating, but only in a very limited way. More quantitative data need to be gathered to sufficiently address this question.

The author also noticed the length of time to respond did not decrease at the same rate between different class sessions. In some classes, students seemed to get the knack quicker, so they soon began to respond promptly with fewer errors. In other classes, such a phenomenon was not observed. The author then ran simple regressions to measure the coefficients of response time on each round of practice. He found that in classes when a lot of new vocabulary and grammar was introduced, the coefficients of response time on each round of practice were smaller than their counterparts in classes when fewer new things were introduced. Simply put, the effectiveness of PSs decreases when the amount of knowledge to learn increases. Scaffolding cannot accommodate those who still struggle to memorize the rubrics.

6. Conclusion

Because Prompt Sentences mainly focus on scaffolding students' oral ability, teachers should be aware of its limits, namely, the disconnection between speaking and writing. In this study, the author noticed that some students were able to answer Prompt Sentences correctly yet made serious mistakes in homework or quizzes on same grammar points. This deficiency points out the gap.

The data shows that using PSs in a beginning Chinese class is effective when students have some grip on the vocabulary first. No particular type of PS stands out as more or less effective because they are equally challenging for beginners. The teacher would do better to test whether the students have remembered the words before doing the PS drills. All these findings, however, are built upon the data gathered from one Chinese class over a comparatively short time. So, a larger study is called for and a deeper understanding of the individual students is needed.

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