CrossMark

Research in the News

Lang. Teach. (2016), **49.2**, 295–298 © Cambridge University Press 2016
doi:10.1017/S0261444815000506

Second language research

The Center for Linguistics and Applied Linguistics (CLAL) at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies is recognized as a 'National Key Research Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences' by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. It is the only center recognized by the Chinese Ministry of Education to have a national key research institute devoted to linguistics and applied linguistics. CLAL has cultivated a core team of scholars whose work in linguistics and applied linguistics is both prolific and broad in scope, spanning three fields of research: second language (L2) learning, societal and public discourse analysis, and theoretical linguistics.

1. Introduction

CLAL's L2 research involves both how Chinese learn foreign languages (particularly English), and how foreigners learn Chinese, mainly focusing on second language acquisition (SLA), psycholinguistics, bilingual research, and language testing. The societal and public discourse studies draw on a variety of areas in linguistics, including forensic linguistics, interpersonal pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and discourse analysis. The specialists in theoretical linguistics mostly investigate dialect grammars, linguistic philosophy and special language impairment in young children. CLAL is indeed institutionalized in that applied linguists and theoretical linguists work together in the same research center. This report only offers a brief summary of L2 research recently published or currently underway within CLAL.

2. Second language pragmatics

Several papers by Wei Ren have been published on L2 pragmatic development in study abroad (SA) contexts. Ren (2014) longitudinally investigates the cognitive processes of advanced Chinese learners of English engaged in a multimedia task that elicited status-equal and status-unequal refusals during their SA. The results revealed that the learners reported paying increasingly more attention to sociopragmatics in context when they responded to each situation within the task. The study also showed the effect of SA on the learners' perceptions of the factors affecting their pragmatic language production. It was therefore demonstrated that utilizing retrospective verbal reporting at different points during learners' SA allows examination of the changes in the cognitive processes involved in L2 pragmatic production.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444815000506 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In a larger research project Ren (2015) examines the effect of participating in an SA program on the pragmatic development of Chinese students. Data were collected from 20 Chinese graduate students studying abroad and 20 studying at home (AH) at three different points during one academic year. Overall, the findings revealed the complexity of the effect of study abroad on learners' L2 pragmatic development. The research demonstrates the need to specify the aspects of pragmatic competence investigated when the impact of learning context on L2 pragmatic development is examined. It also shows the necessity of investigating both the SA group and the AH group with a similar design.

Several research projects led by Jianda Liu focus on assessing learners' L2 pragmatic competence, including Chinese learners' English pragmatic competence and the pragmatic competence of learners of L2 Chinese. Liu & Xie (2014) report on a study of rater effects in a WDCT (written discourse completion tasks) pragmatic test. Four types of rater effects were investigated: leniency/severity, central tendency, halo effect, and differential leniency/severity. The results revealed significant differences in terms of rating severity, with a general tendency towards severity.

Work is also being conducted on the evaluation of English textbooks in China concerning the representation of pragmatic knowledge. Ren & Han (forthcoming) report on a study of ten English textbooks used in Chinese universities with a particular focus on their coverage of pragmatic information, the treatment of speech acts and the representation of intralingual pragmatic variation. The findings show that pragmatic knowledge is still underrepresented in most textbooks. The range of speech acts included is rather limited, and the ways that speech acts are presented seem to be based on writers' intuition. There is a paucity of explicit metapragmatic information on speech acts. Little attention is devoted to enhancing learners' awareness of intralingual pragmatic variation.

3. English as a lingua franca

Although there has been a steady growth of empirical studies investigating spoken English as a lingua franca (ELF) usage in institutional settings, less attention has been paid to written texts. To extend the existing ELF research into email discourse, several projects are in progress exploring the communicative strategies Chinese ELF users employ in email communication. Ren (2016) analyzes and discusses the remedial and preemptive pragmatic strategies employed by Chinese university students to remedy or prevent problems of understanding in their ELF emails. Liu & Ren (2016) analyze apologies in emails between two groups of Chinese university students with different English proficiency levels in terms of apology strategies and the perception of sociopragmatic variables.

Ren co-authored a paper (Ren, Chen & Lin 2016) comparing university students' perceptions of ELF phonology and lexico-grammar in mainland China and Taiwan. It was observed that Mainland Chinese and Taiwanese learners preferred to achieve a native-speaker accent. Students from both regions could understand and tended to accept all the ELF sentences. The study also revealed variations between the two groups. Given that little research has compared ELF users' perceptions across different geographical areas, this study

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444815000506 Published online by Cambridge University Press

addresses an important research gap by investigating the interaction of ELF perceptions and local contexts.

4. The read-then-write task in L2 learning and teaching

Chu-ming Wang (2015) has advanced influential hypotheses related to SLA such as the Learn Together, Use Together Hypothesis and the Compensation Hypothesis. From these hypotheses, Wang has developed widely adopted foreign language teaching methods such as the Length Approach and the Read-Then-Write Approach. A key concept for these hypotheses and teaching methods is alignment, which refers to 'a socio-cognitive process in which human agency plays an important role as humans dynamically interact with and adapt to the environmental affordances' (Wang & Wang 2015: 505). From the alignment perspective, language learning can be considered as translating learners' language experience through tasks into mental representations with alignment mediating the two. One of the recent publications (Wang & Wang 2015) showed that alignment existed in a written task intimately coupling production with comprehension. On the other hand, when production was not coupled with comprehension, self-alignment (i.e. the activation and exploitation of the background knowledge in learners' minds in response to a language use task with no input to help) occurred, and the task that activated the learners' L1 contextual knowledge incurred significantly more meaning-based L1 transfer errors. In another study, Wang (2015) investigates the L2 learning mechanism of the read-then-write task via think-aloud. The results confirmed the effectiveness of the read-then-write task in facilitating L2 learning and use. The findings shed light on how the continuation task can be improved and how an effective L2 teaching model can be developed.

5. China's standards of English

In September 2014, the China State Council issued the document *The Implementation Opinions of the State Council on Deepening the Reform of the Examination and Enrollment System*, stipulating the construction of the assessment system of foreign language proficiency. Jianda Liu is leading the development of China's national foreign language aptitude testing and evaluation system. Taking English as an example, the scales will describe what Chinese learners and users of English can do and, to a certain degree, prescribe what they should be able to do with the target language. Liu (2015) explains that developing China's common framework for foreign languages is the basic step towards establishing a national foreign language assessment system. The scales should take into consideration the current state of China's foreign language education and be aimed at its future demand and development.

References

Liu, J. (2015). Some thoughts on developing China Common Framework for English Language Proficiency, *China Examinations* 1, 7–11.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444815000506 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Liu, J. & W. Ren (2016). Apologies in emails: Interactions between Chinese EFL learners and their foreign peers. In Y.-S. Chen, D.-H. V. Rau & G. Rau (eds.), *Email discourse among Chinese using English as a Lingua Franca*. Dordrecht: Springer, 230–256.
Liu, J. & L. Xie (2014). Examining rater effects in a WDCT pragmatics test. *Iranian Journal of Language Testing* 4.1, 50–65.
Ren, W. (2014). A longitudinal investigation into L2 learners' cognitive processes during study abroad, *Applied Linguistics* 35.5, 575–594.
Ren, W. (2015). *L2 pragmatic development in study abroad contexts*. Bern: Peter Lang.
Ren, W. (2016). Strategies used in Chinese university students' ELF emails to remedy or prevent problems in understanding. In Y.-S. Chen, D.-H. V. Rau & G. Rau (eds.), *Email discourse among Chinese using English as a Lingua Franca*. Berlin: Springer, 163–181.
Ren, W. & Z. Han (forthcoming), The representation of pragmatic knowledge in recent ELT textbooks, *ELT Journal*.
Ren, W., Y.-S. Chen & C.-Y. Lin (2016). University students' perceptions of ELF in mainland China and Taiwan *System* 56, 13–27.
Wang, C. (2015). Why does the continuation task facilitate L2 learning?, *Foreign Language Teaching and Research* 47.5, 753–763.
Wang, C. & M. Wang (2015). Effect of alignment on L2 written production, *Applied Linguistics* 36.5, 503–526.

Wei Ren
Centre for Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, Guangdong University
weiren@gdufs.edu.cn

Jianda Liu
Centre for Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, Guangdong University
jackliu@gdufs.edu.cn

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444815000506 Published online by Cambridge University Press