

Refusals through Compliments in Chinese

By: Jaidan Mclean

Course Context

This activity is for college students studying Chinese at a beginner level in a foreign language context. Although students may be studying Chinese for any reason, this assignment is particularly for students in their first of the two years fulfilling the foreign language requirement for a Bachelor of Arts degree. The goal of this activity is to add a pragmatic perspective to the commonly taught phrases of giving and accepting compliments. However, these phrases are not usually taught all at once but rather throughout units or lessons in which compliments may appear often, such as shopping, dining out, or traveling.

Rationale

Having the language skills to properly respond to a compliment given to a learner in their target language can be a critical part of their fluency journey. For example, students studying abroad will encounter situations like making new friends or asking teachers for help, in which the pragmatic aspect of social distance is a key component that would be incredibly beneficial for students to learn early on in their language learning journey. Multiple studies have been done to examine the directness of refusals, and they have found that Chinese speakers use indirect refusals more frequently than English speakers do (Chang, 2009; Bresnahan et al 1994). Chang (2009) show that Chinese speakers use indirect refusals more often than English speakers do. These findings are significant in a language teaching setting because how the pragmatic function specifically works in the target language should be taught. In other words, rather than teaching only direct refusals that relate to learners' pragmatic competence of English, including phrases that represent a more authentic learning experience would be beneficial for L2 learners. Although it may be challenging and not something the learners are used to, pragmatic activities like this are critical in teaching Chinese because of the cultural impact these sort of refusal exchanges may result in losing face.

Overall, in utilizing videos, classroom discussion, and authentic conversations with L1 Chinese speakers, this activity gives learners an opportunity at increasing their range of pragmatically influenced refusal skills. One of these specific skills will be learning the appropriate refusal strategies for situation involving varying social distance and compliments. Another will be having the pragmatic competence to choose a directness level of refusal, as well as the language skills to support their reasoning for the choice. Since this assignment is quite flexible, the instructor may choose to elaborate on aspects not yet covered (or barely covered) in class, such as the cultural importance of saving face, or not losing respect from someone.

Objectives using the IPIC Model

Knowledge

- Students understand the other speaker's compliment.
- Students know the common direct and indirect refusal strategies (e.g. reason, statement of alternative, or regret) to refuse a request.

Subjectivity

- Students are able to make a choice of what refusal to give, whether direct or indirect.
- Students are able to explain why they made that particular choice.

Analysis

- Students are able to recognize the power and social distance of a situation and choose from a set of appropriate refusal strategies.
- Students are able to use the chosen direct or indirect refusal to communicate a sense of reason, statement of alternative, or regret.
- Students are able to offer other potential refusals and explain why those were not chosen.

Awareness

- Students are able to recognize how the listener interpreted the refusal.
- Students are able to then adjust their response as needed.

Objectives, more generally

- Students will be able to appropriately refuse a compliment using direct or indirect approaches learned that rely on the social distance of a situation.
- Students will be able to justify their choices of refusal strategy, as well as provide additional reasoning as to why they may not have made a different choice.
- Students will be able to justify their peers' refusals in partner discussions based on the social distance of the situations, while also being able to critique them for level of pragmatic competence and level of directness in the refusal.
- Students will be able to reconstruct or provide additional instruction for the refusals they give as needed based on the conversation and listener, or justify why they may have chosen not to refuse (probably unlikely, but in the case of such students should be able to support their actions).

Resources

- "Don't compliment a Chinese unless you want to get insulted" by @candiselin86 on TikTok <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMekJNMkd/>.
- "Travel in Chinese Lesson 34 Peking University" from 1:40–2:00 on Daily Motion <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x35fywf>.

Procedure

1. The instructor asks students to watch the short video and note the type of language the two "characters" use. Although the title of the video implies a different language exchange than being taught with this activity, it offers a fun way to view the how Chinese culture influences refusing compliments in the language.
2. The instructor then asks the students to share in a class discussion what they observed from this video, making sure to note the variation in the refusal strategies.
3. After discussing these a bit, the instructor (re)introduces the concept and importance of saving face in Chinese culture and how it impacts the social distance. Students are then asked to discuss with their neighbor a comparison of how they would respond to a compliment from a friend versus from an instructor.
4. Students then watch the 20 second clip from Travel in Chinese, which the instructor prefaces with the relationship on the two characters being old classmates. Once again in a class discussion, students should answer two questions: What refusal strategy did each person use? How might the compliment-refusals exchange made in the video be different if it were instead an old student and teacher reunion rather than old classmates?
5. The instructor reiterates that an important factor in refusing compliments in Chinese is the social distance between the interlocutors, giving further detail and examples as needed.
6. Once the instructor feels the students understand the concept well, they then introduce the extension part for of this activity.

- a. Through contacting clubs or other connections, the instructor asks other college students who are Chinese L1 speakers to visit the class during the week. These L1 speakers will be coming to chat with the L2 learners, to allow an opportunity for the learners to practice their Chinese skills.
 - b. The L1 speakers are instructed to ask the Chinese learners about topics that have been covered in class, with the one key requirement of complimenting the learners. L1 speakers may choose to compliment the learners' Chinese skills or outfit.
7. After the L1 and L2 students have spent the class practicing and connecting through Chinese, the class' student will be asked to write a one page, double spaced, 12pt font, reflection. This reflection should explain their interaction with the L1 speakers, as well as compare it to what the student learned from the week's lesson. Students need to answer the following:
- a. What did the interaction consist of? Please retell the conversation and any other information important to the exchange.
 - b. How does the refusal strategy you use compare to other potential strategies that we have learned?
 - c. What was the social distance of your interaction? Why do you think it was a positive/neutral/negative social distance situation?
 - d. How does you interaction with the compliment, social distance, and refusal relate to the cultural importance of face in Chinese refusals we learned in class? Please explain how the culture of saving face influenced your refusal(s).

Assessment

Excellent (5pts)	Good (3pts)	Needs Work (1pt)
Answers all of the questions in significant detail, relating the exchange to the course content thoroughly.	Answers all of the questions but does not include some core details relating to the course content.	Does not answer all of the questions and does not include references to course content.
Gives a close retelling of the conversation and what compliment(s) and refusal(s) were given.	Gives a brief retelling of the conversation and may or may not include the actual compliment(s) and refusal(s) given.	Does not include a retelling of the conversation. Or student only includes the refusal(s) but not the compliment(s) that is being responded to.
Uses an appropriate refusal strategy for the social distance. Or student uses mostly appropriate refusal, but then provides an explanation of a more appropriate option.	Uses a mostly appropriate refusal strategy but does not explain a more appropriate option. Or student does not use an appropriate refusal strategy but does provide an explanation of a more appropriate option.	Does not use an appropriate refusal strategy, nor gives any explanation as to a more appropriate option.
Expresses a clear understanding of the way in which saving face and social distance influence directness in refusals.	Expresses a clear understanding of either saving face or social distance, but not quite both.	Does not express clear understanding of either the culture of saving face through compliments or social distance.

Total: ____ / 20 points

Works Cited

Bresnahan, M., Cai D. A., and Rivers, A. (1994). **Saying no in Chinese and English: Cultural similarities and differences in strategies of refusal.** *Asian Journal of Communication* 4(1), 52-76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01292989409359594>

The research presented in this study aimed to examine refusals given by Chinese speakers in Taiwan and American English speakers on the basis of culture. The main goals of this paper was to look at how the two cultures of Chinese and American English influence the speakers' refusal strategies when obligation and relational closeness are manipulated. More specifically, this study actually finds significant differences on how the Chinese culture concept of "face" and gender vary with refusal strategies.

The three main findings on culture and gender within how Chinese speakers in Taiwan and American English speakers refuse were that women in both cultures are more compliant with the request therefore using less direct refusals, US men's refusals are the least face sensitive therefore using more direct refusals, and Taiwan women are the most compliant there using less direct refusals than any other group. These particular findings are very significant in understanding how gender and culture interact with refusal strategies in both cultures, especially when compared to an previous studies that can give the language teaching field a look at variational pragmatics as well.

Chang, Y. F. (2009). **How to say no: an analysis of cross-cultural difference and pragmatic transfer.** *Language Sciences* 31(4), 477-493. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2008.01.002>

Rather than looking directly at influences on the refusals themselves, the study described in this article looks at how refusal strategies transfer happens across cultures and across L2 proficiency levels. The article explains that Mandarin speakers learning English completed a questionnaire that was then compared to the refusal responses of American English speakers. After comparing the refusal strategies used by both American L1 and Chinese L2 speakers of English, the study found a significant difference in the frequency of direct refusal strategies used. Due to the importance of maintaining face or respect in Chinese culture, indirect refusal strategies have been found by this article and others (see Bresnahan et al, 1994 explained above) to be the preferred strategy for Chinese speakers learning English.

These findings are significant in a teaching setting because if indirect refusals are more often used by Chinese speakers, then it makes more sense for those studying Chinese to learn what fluent speakers find appropriate. In other words, rather than teaching Chinese with more direct refusal strategies that English tends to use (or whatever language the L1 the learners are coming from), phrases that include grammar points and vocabulary for refusals should also include appropriate examples.

UO Center for Applied Second Language Studies. (2020, Sept 3). **Intercultural, Pragmatic, and Interactional Competence (IPIC): Overview.** [Video]. YouTube.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d0SOGLSNfJQ&list=PLndkqcMp9-4BCY4tDR24lFGztnixhqb8g&index=12&ab_channel=UOCenterforAppliedSecondLanguageStudies

This YouTube video explains the Intercultural, Pragmatic, and Interactional Competence (IPIC) tool for assessing pragmatic language skills. The IPIC model was utilized in the making of the "Refusals through Compliments in Chinese" activity included on this webpage. Created by the Center for Applied Second Language Studies, this IPIC model breaks down the way we can learn and assess pragmatics in a L2 context by categorizing learning goals into four parts: Knowledge, Analysis, Subjectivity, and Awareness. The video here goes into detail on what each category entails, as well as

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includes a brief introduction on what pragmatics. The video can be used by instructors to introduce activities or assignments that incorporate pragmatics to further benefit the learners.