

Pragmatic Development of Chinese Sentence Final Particles via Computer-Mediated Communication

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Abstract : This study investigated in which condition computer-mediated communication (CMC) could promote pragmatic development. The focal feature included four Chinese sentence final particles (SFPs), a, ya, ba, and ne. They occur frequently in Chinese, and function as mitigators to soften the tone of speech. However, L2 acquisition of SFPs is difficult, suggesting the necessity of additional exposure to or explicit instruction on Chinese SFPs. This study follows this line and aims to explore two research questions: (1) Is CMC combined with data-driven instruction more effective than CMC alone in promoting L2 Chinese learners' SFP use? (2) How does L2 Chinese learners' SFP use change over time, as compared to the production of native Chinese speakers? The study involved 19 intermediate-level learners of Chinese enrolled at a private American university. They were randomly assigned to two groups: (1) the control group (N = 10), which was exposed to SFPs through CMC alone, (2) the treatment group (N = 9), which was exposed to SFPs via CMC and data-driven instruction. Learners interacted with native speakers on given topics through text-based CMC over Skype. Both groups went through six 30-minute CMC sessions on a weekly basis, with a one-week interval after the first two CMC sessions and a two-week interval after the second two CMC sessions (nine weeks in total). The treatment group additionally received a data-driven instruction after the first two sessions. Data analysis focused on three indices: token frequency, type frequency, and acceptability of SFP use. Token frequency was operationalized as the raw occurrence of SFPs per clause. Type frequency was the range of SFPs. Acceptability was rated by two native speakers using a rating rubric. The results showed that the treatment group made noticeable progress over time on the three indices. The production of SFPs approximated the native-like level. In contrast, the control group only slightly improved on token frequency. Only certain SFPs (a and ya) reached the native-like use. Potential explanations for the group differences were discussed in two aspects: the property of Chinese SFPs and the role of CMC and data-driven instruction. Though CMC provided the learners with opportunities to notice and observe SFP use, as a feature with low saliency, SFPs were not easily noticed in input. Data-driven instruction in the treatment group directed the learners' attention to these particles, which facilitated the development.

Keywords : computer-mediated communication, data-driven instruction, pragmatic development, second language Chinese, sentence final particles

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