

Self-Introduction Strategies in Mandarin Chinese: How Do L1, Chinese Heritage Learners, and L2 Differ?

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Article History</p> <p>Received: May 10, 2021</p> <p>Accepted: August 22, 2021</p> <hr/> <p>Keywords</p> <p>Self-introduction Speech act Chinese learning</p> <p>DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.5233955</p>	<p><i>Integrating culture into Chinese classes has drawn an increasing attention to the field of language education. More and more educators of Chinese have emphasized the significance, urgency, and necessity of combining culture into the process of learning Chinese with a primary focus on how to integrate culture into Chinese classes, textbooks, and language practices. This study aims to distinguish the differences among Chinese natives (L1), Chinese heritage learners (CHL), and the U.S. non-heritage learners of Chinese (L2) from their self-introductions in Chinese. The distinctions of cultural awareness behind the language among these three groups were determined, such as their attitudes toward hometown, the way to explain Chinese names, the usage of idiomatic phrases, hobbies, and so forth. The research findings aim to draw on pedagogical implications for integrating culture into teaching Chinese courses, particularly teaching self-introduction.</i></p>

Introduction

Culture has continuously been attached with numerous, complex definitions from different perspectives and subjects, and has been widely debated, resulting in the broadening of its concepts. Applying culture to teaching Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL), E.B. Tylor (1871) suggests a working definition for culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (p.1). Ruth Benedict (1934) indicates that "what really binds men together is their culture, the ideas and standards they have in common" (p.16). Galal Walker (2010) offers a concept that limits the definition of culture into daily behaviors, suggesting that "culture is what we do, and also, how we know what we have done. In other words, culture frames our behaviors and gives us the means to recognize the completion of events and artifacts in our worlds" (p.24). Therefore, Culture is deeply bind with people's everyday social behaviors, the common cognition standards in communities, and the rules that people follow and judge others (by such rules) in a certain society.

Culture and Language

The relationship between language and culture also has been center to the attention of many researchers. Kramsch (1998) elaborates the associations of language and culture, pointing out that "language expresses cultural reality; language embodies cultural reality; language symbolizes cultural reality" (p.3). Lange (1998) considers culture to be part of language and vice versa. The association of language with its culture is often viewed as a challenge in language learners. Even if learners of Chinese are able to use their target linguistic competence accurately and fluently, they might not attain effective language communications in terms of lacking appropriate target culture. Culture understanding is not an easy task. As stated by Shrum and Glisan (2010), "acquiring a language means more than knowing about its linguistic system, understanding another culture involves more than learning facts about it"(p.90). The inclusion of cultural components into language teaching has been emphasized in pedagogy. ACTFL standards also concentrate on integrating culture into foreign language teaching. For instance, it provides culture as one part of the 5Cs, namely cultures, communication, connections, comparisons, and communities. In addition, the ACTFL guideline promotes that "culture has been elevated to equal status with grammatical forms", and it becomes one of standards for judging learners' mastery of second language. Authentic material captures the culture and such everyday use of language provides contexts for cultural observations. Therefore, language teachers should focus more on authentic and natural rather than unilaterally input linguistic systems to students. Spring (2002) highlights the significance of integrating authentic material into textbook in helping students improve sociocultural competence and

grammatical ability at the same time. One implication in the language classroom is that when learners of Chinese study grammar, vocabulary, and sentence constructions, it is necessary to integrate such authentic elements into the Chinese culture context, such as hobbies, history, customs, and so forth, in order to attain effective acquisition.

Incorporate Culture into TCFL

Considering how to effectively incorporate culture into TCFL, some teachers may think of teaching culture as "experiencing traditional Chinese culture," such as playing videos of Beijing operas or presenting Chinese mountains and water paintings in class. Indeed, these are part of Chinese culture; however, the gap still remains. How are these classroom practices related to Chinese pedagogy? Is learning target culture facts sufficient in understanding target culture or assimilating into the target language society? The answer is negative. Paying more heed to mundane cultural issues that are of relevance to the communicative language should be more beneficial. Jiang, Wang, and Tschudi (2011) address such issues in a seminar paper where language pragmatics are discussed. They state that "the greatest challenge in integrating culture into language teaching is how to identify those cultural elements hidden behind grammatical forms that can determine the success or failure of communicative exchanges and reveal these hidden cultural elements to the learner" (p.2). Schmidt (1995) emphasizes the importance of contrast in the procedure of language learning, suggesting the students to "look for clues as to why target language speakers say what they say and compare what [they] say with what target language speakers say in similar contexts" (p.45).

Self-introduction in Chinese

Self-introduction plays an important role in communicating. As No and Park (2010) stress, "self-introduction is very important to give a good first impression to the listener because it tells him/her who you are and what you are about. Generally speaking, it tells what aspects of your life you want to share with them" (p.87). Self-introduction becomes more important when applied to the Chinese cultural context, since Chinese have very different ways of treating "in-group people" and "out-group people". Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998) indicate that "Chinese make clear distinctions between insiders and outsiders. A person with an insider status often enjoys privileges and special treatment beyond an outsider's comprehension. Moreover, Chinese are less likely to initiate interactions or to be involved in social relationships with outsiders" (p.49). The advanced level L2 is expected to not only appropriately greet with native Chinese speakers, but also encounter situations where they need to practice self-introductions in terms of Chinese culture. The reason for such a class design is simple: L2 learners will often be engaged in situations of self-introductions, such as through job-interviews, homestays, as well as being a newcomer in a city, community, school, or group. Depending on the practices of self-introductions, L2 are able to develop a beginning experience to enter the foreign culture and continue to increase their abilities in terms of such social cultural demands. If L2 share a similar life with L1, and they are able to find a common ground at the beginning of the conversation, L1 more likely see the students as in-group people. In other words, Chinese people prefer finding common points or similar stories when they distinguish between in-group people and out-group people. Self-introduction is one of the most important first stages in sharing common experiences for the purpose of initiating deep interactions.

There is not much research focusing on the differences of self-introduction among L1, CHL, and L2. No and Park (2010) explored the differences between Korean speakers of English and American native speakers of English in their English self-introductions. The authors mainly address the differences in topics, discourse markers, and word classes to explore the different cultural cognitions. Several related studies investigated the differences of greetings and refusals between L1 and L2. Christen (2006) discusses the strategies of greeting in the context of daily communication in Chinese. He found out that "Hello" is often used with natives when greeting foreigners, superiors, in the restaurant setting or where services are offered and acknowledgment of action is a common strategy used among friends, family, and others a person is close to, whom are also called "in-group people". Another study focuses on the different ways of refusal between L1 and L2. Wei (2011), for instance, discusses differences between these two groups in "direct refusals, addressing titles, expressing thanks, apologizing, providing alternatives, and indirect compliant" (p.127). These differences provide implications in teaching students how to properly refuse in Chinese culture.

There are some detailed daily cultural behaviors that are even not noticed by native speakers. Nonetheless, subconsciously we do follow such rules to deal with everyday business. Therefore, these cultural practices have to be included in language teaching. When educators of Chinese realize, summarize, and teach these strategies, learners of Chinese will be able to achieve effective communications.

Research questions

This study attempts to contrast the differences among L1, CHL, and L2 in self-introductions. Through comparing the differences between L1 and L2, some misunderstanding could be found, which include several cultural elements. The differences could provide implications of teaching proper Chinese self-introductions in TCFL. The study raised the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the differences of doing self-introductions in Chinese among L1, CHL, and L2.?

RQ2: What are the pedagogical implications for integrating culture into teaching self-introduction in Chinese?

Method

Research methods include contrast groups designs and case studies. The reason for the choice of case studies is based on Nunan and Bailey (2010), who state that "case studies are strong in reality, the findings can generalize from an instance to a class, and it can provide a database of materials for future studies" (p.166). The research was conducted in two large public universities in U.S. and one large public university in China.

Participants

22 participants are Chinese native speakers (L1) who are students in a large public university in China. 31 participants are from fourth-year Chinese classes in two large public universities in U.S. Nine of them are Chinese heritage learners (Table 1). The participants' language proficiency ranges from intermediate-high to advanced-low based on the ACTFL proficiency guidelines.

Table 1. Students' Background Information

Group	Participates	Numbers	Chinese language proficiency levels	Grades	Age
1	Chinese native speakers	22	Native speakers	Junior or senior	21-22
2	Chinese heritage learners	9	Intermediate-high to Advanced low	Junior or senior	20-23
3	Non-heritage learners	22	Intermediate-high to advanced-low	Junior or senior	20-24

Data collection

The study required participants to do self-introductions within four discourses: individual information, family, hometown, and hobbies. These four discourses basically cover almost all situations that learners of Chinese need to introduce themselves, such as meeting friends' parents in home visits, communicating with strangers, getting to know new Chinese friends or peers in class, participating at a job-interview, presenting at a conference, and so forth. The prompt is described as follows: Imagine you are attending a Chinese cultural communicative activity with your teachers and classmates where there are some Chinese natives from China's universities. You are required to introduce yourself to these Chinese natives and their teachers. The self-introduction consists of talking about your hometown, family, and hobbies. In addition, you have to choose three images, including one about your hometown, another about your family, and of the other about a hobby or pastime you often engage in, and incorporate the story of the pictures into your introduction.

Data analysis

In the first phase, the recordings of self-introductions were transcribed and anonymized. Next the transcriptions were coded. The codes were combined to generate themes. For example, codes such as "using humble titles", "praising hometowns", "mentioning age", "describing personality and appearance", and "explaining every character in the name" led to the theme "differences in content". Codes such as "frequency of cohesive devices", "frequency of prepositional units", and "frequency of four-character idioms" were combined to derive the theme "differences in linguistic forms". Codes such as "playing musical instruments", "sports", "traveling", "studying", "playing video games", and so forth lead to the theme "hobbies". In the third phase, the research team applied cross-case analysis. The study identified the different patterns in participants' self-introductions. These patterns were considered as the research findings and served as the foundation for discussions.

Results and Discussion

The study demonstrates the data in three tables. Table 2 shows the differences in content, such as the differences between the participants' topic choice in introducing individual information and their methods of introducing hometowns. Table 3 investigates linguistic differences in their speech. Table 4 addresses the differences about the hobbies of the three groups.

Differences in content

As illustrated in Table 2, only one L1 used the humble title in the self-introduction. Even though the participants were introducing themselves to their teachers or professors, it doesn't seem to be necessary to add such a humble title. There are not apparent distinctions in the introduction of their educational background, age, and ways of greetings at the beginning. Most participants began with greeting expressions such as "Hello, everybody", "Hello, teachers and classmates". There are however several interesting differences among the groups which I explain below.

(1) The major distinctions occurred in the participants' praising their hometown. All of the Chinese natives complimented their hometown:

Excerpt 1: *My hometown is a very relaxing city, and people love life and enjoy every spare moment in the afternoon.*

Excerpt 2: *Qingdao is a very beautiful city, I love Qingdao so much.*

However, only 32% L2 had positive attitudes toward their hometown. The majority of them expressed the negative side of their hometown:

Excerpt 3: *One may think of Hawaii is a beautiful place, but the place where I live/came from is really boring.*

Excerpt 4: *I'm from the city of Phoenix, and it is hot as an oven during the summer.*

Various reasons may lead to this contrasting result. L2 and CHL in the U.S often move during their lifetime, so that their concept about hometown may be vaguer. Therefore, they may understand a city where they are living for a long time, but they have nothing to do with a city where they were born (hometown). Comparatively, Chinese rarely leave their hometown before they go to college, so they are emotionally more attached to their hometown. A second possible reason is that Chinese culture focuses on one's "root". In other words, being part of it, Chinese feel proud of their hometown, some L2 learners mentioned that praising their hometown is to show off; therefore, they tended to be less positive when they were introducing their hometown. Still, another possibility is that the L2 learners just said what the fact in their mind about their hometown was. Chinese, on the other hand, hesitate to say something negative about where they come from because they may be associated with that negative image, and they may feel that it saves their "Face" to say something positive. Additionally, some cultural awareness behind the language needs to be taken into account too. As "hometown" often plays the role of an "ice-breaker" at the beginning of the communication in China, it is necessary for one to explore and illustrate some beautiful views and excellent features of their hometown in terms of Chinese contexts. If a student of Chinese says, "My hometown is boring" or "I don't like it", it sounds like he/she wants to shut the door of communication from a Chinese native. Introducing hometown in this case becomes an important means to find "a common ground" with Chinese, gradually getting closer to be the "in-group".

(2) 61% of L1 provided invitations when they were introducing their hometown or at the end of their self-introduction, but only one L2 (and no CHL) initiated an invitation. Providing invitation could be seen as a polite ritual in self-introduction, especially when introducing hometown. It seems that L2 who have studied Chinese for almost four years as well as CHL were unable to such nuance.

Excerpt 5: *Welcome to my hometown, Qingdao.*

Excerpt 6: *Welcome to Chengdu in the future.*

This cultural difference behind the language reflects a traditional concern for others, as opposed to selves, in Chinese culture. Liu (2008) points out that "in Confucian culture, people should always think from others' perspective, and focus on other people's needs, desires, and goals. An individual's personal goal is also embodied in a concern about others" (p.29). An invitation is also to show warmth from the speaker, which ritual practice is deeply rooted in the Chinese culture.

(3) 43% of L1 introduced their personalities and appearances in the self-introduction, but only one CHL introduced her hair and personality, and none of the L2 mentioned such matters.

Excerpt 7: *I am a happy girl.*

Excerpt 8: *I am not short, and not too thin, and I have a big nose.*

(4) 44% of L2 and 41% of CHL explained every character when they were telling the listeners their names. Since most Chinese educators teach students to introduce names in such a way, several learners of Chinese followed the rules in this study. However, only one L1 introduced his/her name this way. There may be some other reasons. For instance, it may be that saying names that way young people have forgotten or the result is controlled by different districts in China.

Table 2. Differences in Content

	L1 (22)		CHL (9)		L2 (22)	
	total	percentage	total	percentage	total	percentage
Using humble titles	1	.04	0	0	0	0
Educational backgrounds	18	.82	6	.67	18	.82
Praising hometown	22	1.00	4	.44	7	.32
Providing invitations to hometowns	14	.61	0	0	1	.05
Explaining every character in the name	1	.04	4	.44	9	.41
Mentioning age	5	.22	3	.33	6	.27
Describing personality and appearance	10	.43	1	.11	0	0
Greetings at the beginning of self-introductions	15	.65	6	.67	15	.68

Differences in linguistic forms

As shown in Table 3, there are no big differences in the number of characters used and the frequency of cohesive devices. Cohesive devices refer to linking words in Chinese, such as “although...but...”, “because...so...”, “sometimes...sometimes...” “if...so...”, etc. L1 often adopted such cohesive devices to connect words and sentences, both in writing and speaking. These components make the output more fluent and natural. The mean number in using such cohesive devices does not differ much among three groups, since L2 learners are explicitly taught to use these cohesive devices in their Chinese classes.

The frequency of prepositional units drew researchers’ great attention. The number of tokens in the use of prepositional units among the CHL and L2 group are up to 9.56 and 8.55, respectively, but Chinese natives’ is only 6.3. Data show that Chinese natives have less preference over prepositional use. Further, the findings, similar to earlier research on L1 transfer (e.g., Cohen &Broojs-Carson, 2002; Karim &Nassaji, 2013), identified the frequency of prepositional unit use is influenced by participants’ native language (directly translate from English).

As far as four-character idioms are concerned, none of CHL used them, and only seven four-character idioms were used among the 22 L2’s self-introductions. The mean number of such idiomatic usage from Chinese natives is 1.78. The data shows that Chinese natives prefer using four-character idioms in communicating.

Table 3. Differences in linguistic forms

	L1 (22)		CHL (9)		L2 (22)	
	total	mean	total	mean	total	mean
Characters used	9514	432	3791	421	8671	394
Frequency of cohesive devices	156	7.09	74	8.22	161	7.32
Frequency of prepositional units	127	5.77	86	9.56	188	8.55
Frequency of four-character idioms	39	1.78	0	0	7	0.32
Frequency of using “topic-topic” unites	49	2.23	17	1.89	32	1.45

Differences in hobbies

Table 4 is about hobbies. Results show that up to 55% of L1 mentioned studying as their hobbies, and only four L2 said that they liked physics and studying language. It seems that American students do not think of studying as a hobby, but Chinese natives do. It is easy to understand why Chinese natives would view studying as their hobbies in the Chinese society. Choi (2006) discusses the important role of education in Korea, which I think also applies to the Chinese context, saying that “The Korean society evaluates its members based on their academic achievements and educational backgrounds”. In addition, No and Park (2010) point out that “Korean parents feel high prestige in providing their children with good education. There are many mothers who are over solicitous for their children. We have an old saying that parents send their children to school to study and pay

for them even though they themselves are badly off” (p.95). Based on the values behind the language, the difference of percentages in video game, traveling, sport, and eating is easy to comprehend. Chinese natives tend to put these hobbies into the field of “playing”, the opposite of “studying”; therefore, most of the Chinese natives did not mention playing part as their hobbies.

Table 4. Differences in hobbies

		L1 (22)	percentage	CHL (9)	percentage	L2 (22)	percentage
Playing instruments	musical	4	.18	2	.22	1	.05
Sports		4	.18	5	.56	13	.59
Traveling		2	.09	2	.22	4	.18
Studying		12	.55	1	.11	3	.14
Watching programs	T.V	8	.36	2	.22	3	.14
Reading		2	.09	4	.44	4	.18
Listening to Music	popular	5	.23	1	.11	1	.05
Designing architecture		1	.05	0	0	0	0
Playing video games		0	0	2	.22	2	.09
Arts		2	.09	2	.22	2	.09
Handcraft		1	.05	0	0	2	.09
Eating Food		0	0	1	.11	5	.23
Volunteer Activities		0	0	0	0	1	.05

Conclusion

This study distinguished the differences among Chinese natives (L1), Chinese heritage learners (CHL), and the U.S. non-heritage learners of Chinese (L2) from their self-introductions in Chinese. The study concluded that 1) providing an invitation, praising hometown, and presenting personalities are three elements that American learners often ignore, 2) Chinese natives used more four-character idioms than Chinese heritage learners and L2 learners, 3) based on the differences in using prepositional units, another factor we need to take into consideration is whether L2 learners' language is not that authentic due to the influence of L1, and 4) there are different perceptions toward hobbies among Chinese natives, Chinese heritage learners, and L2 learners. In future studies, more participants taking part in the study will certainly provide more reliable data. In addition, there may be some other factor influencing the results of self-introduction which the study did not take note of.

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