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Title:

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Date:

2021-12-01

Citation:

Wu, J. & Roever, C. (2021). Proficiency and Preference Organization in Second Language Mandarin Chinese Refusals. *Modern Language Journal*, 105 (4), pp.897-918. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12736>.

Persistent Link:

<https://hdl.handle.net/11343/303053>

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Proficiency and Preference Organization in Second Language Mandarin Chinese Refusals

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<ABSTRACT>

This study investigates second language (L2) interactional competence in Mandarin Chinese, with a specific focus on dispreference organization in refusals. Twenty-eight L2 Chinese learners at 3 proficiency levels (A2, B1, B2) and 10 native speakers each participated in 3 role plays. We found that learners at different levels clearly differed in their ability to organize refusals as dispreferred and to fine tune their refusal to the initiating action. Lower intermediate (A2) learners either fronted negative responses or adopted a single dispreference marker (e.g., apologies, pauses, prefatory particles, etc.), whereas upper intermediate (B1) learners overwhelmingly delayed their refusals and never produced straightforward negations, also showing different organizations of refusals depending on the initiating action. Advanced learners combined sequential tools and linguistic devices to demonstrate a strong orientation toward affiliation, and clearly oriented to scenarios differentially. However, they lagged behind native speakers, who had more diversified interactional tools and systematically oriented to features of the initiating actions. We attribute the differences partially to L2 proficiency, though proficiency-independent increase in contextual sensitivity can be observed.

<END ABSTRACT>

*Keywords:* pragmatics; conversation analysis; Mandarin Chinese; interactional competence; proficiency

This is the author manuscript accepted for publication and has undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process, which may lead to differences between this version and the [Version of Record](#). Please cite this article as [doi: 10.1111/mccl.12736](https://doi.org/10.1111/mccl.12736).

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Work in second language (L2) pragmatics has recently broadened from a focus on learners' ability to produce particular speech acts to an investigation of learners' ability to participate in extended discourse (see Félix-Brasdefer, 2019, for a review). Commonly taking an interactional competence (IC) perspective (Pekarek Doehler, 2019; Young, 2019), studies have investigated a variety of interactional features, such as sequential organization (Al-Gahtani & Roever, 2012), preference organization (Al-Gahtani & Roever, 2014, 2018), turn-taking (Cekaite, 2007; Gardner, 2007), repair, (Hellermann, 2009, 2011), and topic management (Galaczi, 2014). However, with few exceptions, English has been the target language of these studies, and no studies have investigated IC in L2 Chinese. This study aims at filling the research gap by investigating how L2 learners of Mandarin Chinese at different proficiency levels produce the disaffiliative social action of refusal in open role plays, and what the impact of their proficiency is on the sequential organization and formatting of their refusals.

### <A>interactional competence

The concept of IC was first introduced by Kramsch (1986) and Hall (1995) critiquing the limitations of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972). Informed by conversation analysis (CA; Sacks, 1992; Sidnell & Stivers, 2013), the central concern of IC lies in the collaborative work done by interactants in achieving intersubjectivity in discursive practices against a backdrop of context-dependent expectations and interactants' shared members' knowledge (Hall & Pekarek Doehler, 2011; Young, 2011, 2019). Importantly, this means that IC becomes visible in and through interaction and is specific to discursive practices. Although the co-constructed and discursive nature of IC is uncontroversial, there is a spectrum of views on the degree to which it can be considered an individual attribute.

From a nonindividual perspective, IC is seen as a product of co-construction that resides in the conversation independent of the individual (He & Young, 1998; Mehan, 1979), or is even only a relevant consideration if interactants orient to it (Hauser, 2019). This perspective accords with CA's agnosticism toward invisible, individual cognition (see Kasper, 2009; Molder & Potter, 2005), and in accounting for differences, it describes change over time but does not model an individual's cognitive attributes to explain change (see, e.g., Pekarek Doehler & Pochon-Berger, 2018).

By contrast, more individualistic perspectives on IC, such as Hall & Pekarek Doehler (2011), propose that IC contains individuals' ability to deploy context-appropriate linguistic, sequential, and prosodic resources to make utterances recognizable for the interlocutor while also recipient designing talk according to the ongoing contingent context of talk in interaction (see also Youn, 2015, 2020). In some studies, this perspective has been combined with exogenous theoretical approaches from L2 pragmatics, such as sociocultural theory (van Compernelle, 2018), socialization (Hasegawa, 2019), or cognitive processing and noticing (Al-Gahtani & Roever, 2012, 2014, 2018).

In this study, we view IC from an individualist perspective, and follow Al-Gahtani & Roever (2018) in distinguishing an analytic and an explanatory phase of the study. The analytic phase of the study follows CA in describing patterns and practices in the management of interaction without speculating on interlocutors' mental states. In the explanatory phase, we explain our findings from the perspective of L2 pragmatics, drawing primarily on L2 proficiency as an explanatory construct.

### <A> L2 interactional competence

Pekarek Doehler's (2019) overview of research on L2 IC shows that lower level learners rely on a limited range of interactional resources, which are used as 'passe-partout' methods (Pekarek Doehler & Pochon-Berger, 2015), regardless of situational or discourse context. With increasing L2 proficiency level, the linguistic and sequential interactional tools available to learners become more diverse, and they show more fine-tuning of their production to the recipient and context of the talk. This is the case for fundamental features of interaction such as turn-taking (Cekaite, 2007), repair (Hellerman, 2011), and preference organization (Al-Gahtani & Roever, 2014, 2018; Pekarek Doehler & Pochon-Berger, 2011), which is the focus of this article.

Preference organization describes a method employed by interactants to make their orientation to social harmony and affiliation visible in their talk. Disaffiliative actions (such as requests, refusals, disagreements, criticism) are likely to threaten social harmony and are therefore frequently done as dispreferred by means of interturn gaps, turn-initial delays, giving accounts, excuses and appreciations, *pro forma* agreements (i.e., 'yes-but' format), hedges, disclaimers, mitigating devices, insert-expansions, ostensible repairs, turn-initial particles (e.g., *well*), and elaboration (Schegloff, 2007). This interactional work is often sequentially placed in a pre-expansion, preceding the impending disaffiliative action, as well as foreshadowing and delaying it. By contrast,

affiliative actions (such as offers, agreements, invitations, praise), which are likely to enhance social harmony, are frequently done as preferred with shortened gaps, immediate and direct responses to preceding utterances, upgrading, and short turns (Schegloff, 2007).

A growing body of work has investigated how learners develop in their ability to recognizably demonstrate their orientation toward the need to maintain social harmony and organize disaffiliative social actions as dispreferred. Studies by Al-Gahtani and Roever (2012, 2013, 2014, 2018) on requests and refusals, Pekarek Doehler and Pochon-Berger (2011) on disagreements, and Youn (2013, 2015) on requests demonstrate a trajectory of action formation and sequential organization for disaffiliative actions. At low levels of IC, learners do little to delay or obscure disaffiliative actions and produce them in similar ways as affiliative actions: clearly, immediately, and directly. For example, Al-Gahtani and Roever (2018) showed that low-level ESL learners frequently used explicit *no* in role plays when refusing requests, and inconsistently commenced their response with a prefatory particle. Studies by Bella (2014), Félix-Brasdefer (2009), and Taguchi (2013) have shown a similar tendency toward directness at lower proficiency levels.

As learners' IC develops, their organization of disaffiliative actions becomes more recognizably dispreferred. In Al-Gahtani and Roever's (2018) study, more advanced learners consistently used prefatory particles (*oh*), formatted their response as a *pro forma* agreement followed by a contrast marker (*yes but*) or avoided overt display of disaffiliation entirely by giving raw accounts. They invariably provided explanations or accounts as well as occasional apologies and expressions of regret. As their abilities increased further, they also sometimes deployed insert expansions and greatly broadened their repertoire of refusal initiation formats.

Notably, learners still differed from native speakers in that the prefatory particle *well* was common among native speakers but absent among learners, and the formatting of accounts followed a consistent pattern among native speakers that was not observed among learners. These findings, again, are in accordance with Bella's (2014) study, which showed that learners became increasingly similar to a native speaker comparison group in formatting their refusals indirectly but remained distinct in terms of the frequency with which certain strategies were used.

Moving beyond pure description, what might explain the differences between learners observed in IC research? In the cross-sectional studies by Al-Gahtani and Roever (2012, 2013, 2014, 2018), Youn (2013, 2015), Bella (2014), Pekarek Doehler and Pochon-Berger (2011), and Taguchi

(2013), the main explanatory variable is proficiency. In all these studies, learners at different target language proficiency levels were compared, and differences in levels of IC were tacitly equated with differences in proficiency level. As Taguchi and Roever (2017) explained, proficiency is a crucial individual difference variable in L2 pragmatics when it comes to accounting for learners' attainment. From a psycholinguistic perspective, higher proficiency means greater knowledge about the target language in terms of grammar and vocabulary, as well as improved ability for use of that knowledge. As learners have more linguistic tools available, they are able to move away from clearer, more efficient but more openly disaffiliative formats (such as *no* or *but*) to obscuring the disaffiliative action by means of delay, indirectness, and giving accounts, all the while recognizably doing a refusal.

While proficiency is influential and has a strong impact if learners at clearly distinct levels of L2 proficiency are compared, proficiency is not to be equated with IC—it merely acts as a constraint on IC. Roever and Dai (2021) reported that in L2 Mandarin role plays involving disaffiliative actions, some native speakers were judged to be less successful than some L2 speakers, despite native speakers' invariably higher target language proficiency. However, to investigate how IC changes as learners have more linguistic resources at their disposal, comparing learners at different proficiency levels is a useful strategy, and one that we will adopt in this study.

Another target feature of our study has so far received very little attention in L2 IC research—namely, how learners develop in their ability to adapt their social actions to the social status of the interlocutor and the contingencies of different initiating social actions. Only Al-Gahtani and Roever (2012) touched upon this in their study of L2 requests, where only their advanced group showed a possible orientation to social status in one scenario. While other role play studies of IC (e.g., Bella, 2014; Taguchi, 2013; Youn, 2015, 2020) also systematically varied social status variables such as power, distance, and imposition (following Brown & Levinson, 1987), no differences between learners at different levels have been described, and no study has investigated the effect of different initiating actions.

As our study will look at refusals in Mandarin Chinese as a target language, it is important to review previous research into refusals in native (L1) and L2 Mandarin.

## <A>Refusals in Mandarin Chinese L1 and L2

Previous work on refusals in Mandarin Chinese is limited and mostly done from a speech-act perspective, rather than looking at interactional abilities. In a pioneering study, Wang (2001) used discourse completion tasks and distinguished three types of head acts in Chinese refusals: direct acts (e.g., 不行 *bù xíng* ‘no way’), negated ability and willingness (e.g., 不能 *bù néng* ‘can’t’), and indirect acts (e.g., giving accounts or apologizing 对不起 *duì bù qǐ* ‘I am sorry’). In a follow-up study focusing on indirect refusals, Tang (2004) found that salutation, expressing gratitude, and apology are common prefatory moves in Chinese indirect refusals. Additionally, Tang found that Chinese native speakers tend to employ certain exclamation participles as prefatory moves (e.g., expressions of puzzlement, 哎呀 *āiyā*; expressions of hesitation, 嗯 *èn*, 这个 *zhè ge* ‘this’; and acknowledgment tokens, 哦 *ō* ‘oh’). In terms of the lexical devices in indirect refusals, upgraders (e.g., 真的 *zhēn de* ‘really’), downgraders (e.g., 有点 *yǒu diǎn* ‘a bit’), hedges (e.g., 我觉得 *wǒ jué de* ‘I think,’ 听说 *tīng shuō* ‘hear of’), constraint words (i.e., expressing constraints in terms of time, place, or regulations) and pronouns are commonly adopted by Chinese native speakers. For syntactic devices, passive structure, tag questions, interrogatives, and double negation are common.

Until now, only Su’s (2020) study has touched on the interactional aspects of refusals in L1 Mandarin. Focusing on refusals to invitations and offers, Su found that both genuine and ostensible refusals exist in Mandarin Chinese. Genuine refusals are always delayed, mitigated, and realized in extended sequences including detailed accounts and justification with extrinsic forces. By contrast, ostensible refusals usually immediately follow the preceding turn, and are unmitigated and unelaborated. The major function of ostensible refusals is to express concerns about the cost of the offering or invitation. However, Su (2020) employed closed role plays (i.e., role play with predetermined outcome), which are similar to the oral discourse competition test (DCT), as the major data collection method and mainly analyzed the data from the speech-act perspective without focusing on how interlocutors sequentially realized the refusals as dispreferred social actions. Although some other studies also investigated refusals in L1 Mandarin authentic interaction (e.g., Ren & Woodfield, 2016; Pan, 2012), these studies focus on particular types of interactions, such as conversations in dating shows (Ren & Woodfield, 2016) and survey interviews (Pan, 2012), which are beyond the scope of the current study.

Most research on L2 Chinese refusals has adopted a cross-cultural perspective, comparing differences in the refusal strategies between Chinese native speakers and L2 Chinese learners. Findings are normally attributed to differences in cultural perceptions of power, social distance, and politeness (e.g., Chang, 2009; Hong, 2011; Huang, 2016; Xu, 2013). Although learners' nationalities and cultural backgrounds differ between studies (i.e., Hong, 2011, Liao & Jiang, 1996, United States; Huang, 2016, Thailand; Pan, 2013, Russia; Xu, 2013, Western Asia and Northern Africa), findings are similar. For example, native speakers and L2 learners both prefer to provide reasons as indirect refusals (Hong, 2011; Xu, 2013), and L2 speakers use direct refusals more frequently than native speakers (Hong, 2011; Huang, 2016; Xu 2013). Furthermore, some studies have found that the reasons given by native speakers are more specific and convincing than those provided by L2 learners (Hong, 2011; Huang, 2016), which echoes an early finding by Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1993, 1996).

Interactional research on L2 Mandarin remains rare. A small number of studies have investigated aspects of interaction, such as sequential organization of request (Su & Ren, 2017) and discourse markers (Tsai & Chu, 2017), but no interactional studies of L2 Chinese refusals exist.

## <A>The Present Study

The present study addresses the lack of studies on IC in languages other than English by investigating the preference organization of refusals produced by L2 Chinese learners. We adopt a cross-sectional research design and analyze how L2 learners' orientation toward the dispreferred organization of refusals changes as their proficiency level increases. We also investigate whether learners move from a 'passe-partout' approach to increased fine-tuning to the interlocutor and discourse context by including three different initiating actions (invitation, request, offer) and three different power settings (interlocutor has higher, equal, or lower power).

Similar to Al-Gahtani & Roever's (2018) approach, the current study uses the toolset of CA to analyze the data but interprets empirical findings from the perspective of L2 pragmatics to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1. How do learners of L2 Mandarin at different proficiency levels and Mandarin native speakers format and sequentially organize their refusals?

RQ2. Do learners recipient design their refusals based on the initiating action and social status of the interlocutor?

## <A>Methodology

### <B>Participants

The data were gathered from 38 participants, of which 28 were L2 learners of Chinese (16 males and 12 females). The learners came from 15 countries: New Zealand, the United States, France, Korea, Indonesia, Sudan, Kazakhstan, Uganda, Italy, Japan, Egypt, Ethiopia, Canada, Kenya, and Belgium. At the time of the study, all the learners were enrolled in a language program offered by a large university in the north of China. They had around 5–7 months of residence in China and their ages ranged from 20–27. All of them had studied Mandarin in their home countries for 5 months to 2 years, and none were heritage learners of Chinese.

We divided the learners into three levels of Chinese proficiency—namely, lower intermediate ( $n = 11$ ), upper intermediate ( $n = 9$ ), and advanced ( $n = 8$ ). We did not include beginning-level learners, as their ability to participate in an extended interaction is limited to “a simple conversation of a basic factual nature on a predictable topic” (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages [CEFR], 2018, p. 85), according to the CEFR descriptor for the A1 level, which is the “lowest level of generative language use” (CEFR, 2018, p. 35) in the CEFR.

Learners’ proficiency levels were determined by a placement test developed by their university including listening, reading, writing, and speaking. The program references proficiency levels to levels in the *Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi* ‘Chinese Proficiency Test’ (HSK), a standardized test of Mandarin administered by the Office of Chinese Language Council International (Hanban). HSK levels range from 1 (*lowest*) to 6 (*highest*), and these levels have been claimed by Hanban (2014) to be equivalent to the 6 levels of the CEFR (2018), with HSK 1 equal to A1, HSK 2 equal to A2, and so on, up to HSK 6 being equal to C2. However, Hanban provided no evidence of formal equating, and the claimed equivalence has been questioned by several professional organizations (Association of Chinese Teachers in German Speaking Countries, 2010; Bellassen, 2011) as an overestimate. Based on our own experience as Mandarin teachers and learners, this critique is justified, and we follow the equivalencies proposed by the Association of Chinese Teachers in German Speaking Countries (2010). Our lower intermediate learners are around HSK level 3–4, which is equivalent to upper A1

and A2; upper intermediate learners are approximately HSK level 5, which is equivalent to B1, and the advanced group is around HSK level 6, which equates to B2.

Ten native speakers of Chinese (including 5 males and 5 females) participated in this study as well. As all the L2 learners were learning Chinese in Tianjin, which is in Northern China, this study only recruited native speakers who were born in the northern part of China as participants. They came from Heilongjiang (2), Shandong (1), Henan (2), Hebei (1), Shanxi (1), Xinjiang (1), and Tianjin (2). Their ages ranged from 21–25 years, and they were enrolled in undergraduate courses at the same university as the learners.

### <B>Instrument

The instruments in the current study were three open role plays that were designed to elicit refusals in response to invitations, requests, and offers. Although role plays are different from natural conversations as they lack stakes and social consequences (Ewald, 2012; Stokoe, 2013), role plays have the advantage of allowing a certain degree of standardization (Taguchi & Roever, 2017), and the interactional abilities that are shown in role plays are similar to natural conversations (Huth, 2010; Okada, 2010).

The three role play scenarios were designed to vary one contextual variable—namely, power—while keeping social distance low and degree of imposition medium to high (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The scenarios were set in a Chinese university environment and were designed to elicit refusals as responses to an invitation, offer, or request (the request scenario was based on Al-Gahtani & Roever, 2018). Table 1 provides descriptions of the role play situations.

<INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE>

**TABLE 1**

Description of the Role Play Tasks

Scenario	Situation	Power	Social Distance	Imposition
1 – Invitation	A student refuses his professor’s invitation to a family dinner on a mid-autumn day.	High	Low	Middle

2 – Request	A student refuses a roommate’s request to borrow his computer.	Equal	Low	High
3 – Offer	The president of the student union refuses an offer of help from a member to organize.	Low	Low	Middle

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In order to elicit longer conversations and enable post-expansions, each role play involved a complicating factor (Ross & O’Connell, 2013), with the interlocutor insisting on the invitation, request, or offer after the initial refusal.

The role plays were validated with 4 native speakers of Chinese and 2 L2 Chinese learners with advanced proficiency level. Pilot participants confirmed that the situations are authentic in Chinese university contexts, and that the three situations differed in power relations, were low in social distance, and were high in imposition. All participants believed that the insistence from the interlocutor was common and appropriate in Chinese culture.

#### <B>Procedure

The role plays were conducted individually in a quiet room on campus. All the role plays were conducted between an L2 learner of Chinese and one of the researchers, a native speaker of Mandarin Chinese, who strove to treat the participants as similarly as possible while adapting to the contingencies of each individual interaction.

Before commencing the role plays, participants’ demographic information was elicited through a questionnaire and the participants provided consent for their data to be used. They were then given time to read the role play cards and to ask clarification questions. The participants did not know the content of the interlocutor’s role play card.

No time limit was set for the role plays, which were audio-recorded. The total speaking time for all three role plays with one participant typically ranged between 3 and 6 minutes. Altogether, the overall duration of the recordings for the L2 learners was 2 hours 45 minutes. The duration of the audio-recording for the native speakers was 56 minutes.

## <B>Data Analysis

The recorded data were transcribed into Chinese characters and their romanization (pinyin), followed by a literal translation into English, and an idiomatic translation. Transcription followed the conventions of CA developed by Jefferson (2004).

Data analysis was anchored by the first-pair part of invitation, request, or offer by the interlocutor. We focused on the subsequent social action, which was recognizably a refusal and had been thus interpreted by the interlocutor as evidenced by their insistence on the initiating action. We then identified patterns of refusing for each proficiency level and compared them vertically between levels (Zimmerman, 1999), paying particular attention to preference organization. For reasons of space, we did not consider participants' responses to the interlocutor's insistence in this study.

## <A>Results

Overall, this study found that with increasing L2 proficiency, learners more recognizably displayed their orientation to the disaffiliative nature of refusals and marked them as dispreferred by lexical and sequential means. They also showed increased orientation to the social relationship and the differences between initiating actions. However, even the most advanced learners still lacked some tools available to native speakers. In the following section, the findings for each group will be presented. The usage frequency of different refusal formats and interactional devices can be retrieved from the Online Supporting Information.

### <B>Lower Intermediate Level

Unmitigated and immediate negative responses occurred occasionally among lower intermediate learners. Excerpt 1 shows an example of a lower intermediate learner's refusal, which appears like a preferred social action due to its unmitigated negative format and unbroken adjacency to the first-pair part.

<INSERT EXCERPT 1 ABOUT HERE>

EXCERPT 1

Direct Negation and Immediate Response

4 Int 你 看 ↑ 你 能 来 吗 (PAT)?

Nǐ kàn ↑ nǐ néng lái ma (PAT)?

You see ↑ you can come ma (PAT)?

*Can you come to my family party?*

5 Genyong 不 可 以 :::: (1.2) 嗯 :: 我 有 事 .

Bù kěyǐ :::: (1.2) en :: Wǒ yǒu shì .

No can :::: (1.2) um :: I have something.

*No, I cannot um I have something else to do.*

In this segment, after the interlocutor initiates the invitation as the core first-pair part, Genyong provides a type-fitting second-pair part—namely, a refusal—by immediately responding with a straightforward and unmitigated 不可以 *bù keyi* ‘cannot’ with a prolonged final vowel. However, some orientation to dispreference is apparent, such as pauses and a brief account following the direct negative response.

More commonly, the lower intermediates’ refusals were delayed by interturn delays, pauses, prefatory particles, and apologies. In most cases, learners used a single dispreference marker and then produced an explicit negation followed by an account, as in Excerpt 2.

<INSERT EXCERPT 2 ABOUT HERE>

**EXCERPT 2**

**Limited Dispreference Marking**

- 5 Int 你看 ↑你能借我你的电脑用一下吗?  
 Nǐ kàn ↑nǐ néng jiè wǒ nǐde diànnǎo yòng yīxià ma?  
 You see ↑you can lend me your computer use a bit PRT?

*So can you lend me your computer for a bit?*

- 6 Guanghao 对不起 (.) 我不可以借给你,  
 Duì bù qǐ(.) Wǒ bù kěyǐ jiègěi nǐ,  
 Sorry (.) I not can lend you,

*Sorry, I cannot lend my computer to you.*

- 7 我也在写我的论文。  
 Wǒ yě zài xiě wǒde lùnwén.  
 I also am writing my essay.

*I am also writing my own homework.*

Following the interlocutor's request in line 5, Guanghao foreshadows his upcoming refusal with an apology followed by an explicit statement of negative ability and an account.

Lower intermediate learners' refusal organization showed incipient differentiation by interlocutor social status or social action to which the refusal responded. When learners declined the professor's invitation or the roommate's request, apology formulae such as 对不起 *duì bù qǐ* 'sorry' or 不好意思 *bù hǎo yì si* 'sorry' occurred far more frequently than for the case of refusing the club member's offer of help. Also, some lower intermediate learners showed an overt orientation to the interlocutor's status by addressing the teacher as 老师 *lǎoshī* 'teacher.' No other address terms occurred in the other scenarios.

### <B>Upper Intermediate Level

Upper intermediate learners consistently marked their refusals as dispreferred actions by delaying and mitigating their refusals, and they started to combine delay tools. They never produced a straightforward negative response immediately subsequent to the first-pair part, which differentiates them from lower intermediate learners. While their refusals at times still included a negative statement, this was commonly delayed by preliminary moves, such as apologies and accounts. Lisa's response to the teacher's invitation in Excerpt 3 is a typical example.

<INSERT EXCERPT 3 ABOUT HERE>

#### EXCERPT 3

Response to Invitation

3 老师 想 请 你 去 家 里 吃 饭

Lǎoshī xiǎng qǐng nǐ qù jiālǐ chī fàn

Teacher wants to invite you go family have dinner

*I'd like to invite you to have a dinner at my home.*

4 你 看 ↑ 你 能 去 吗 (PAT)?

Nǐ kàn ↑ nǐ néng qù ma (PAT)?

you see↑ you can come ma (PAT)?

*Can you come to my family party?*

5 Lisa 真 不 好 意 思 我 已 经 和 朋 友 订 好 票 了 (PAT),

Zhēn bù hǎo yìsī wǒ yǐjīng hé péngyǒu dìnghǎo piào le (PAT),

Really sorry I already with friends booked ticket le (PAT),

*I am really sorry, I've already booked the train ticket with my friends.*

6 我 们 要 去 北 京 旅 游,

Wǒmen yào qù běijīng lǚyóu,

We want to go Beijing travel,

*We want to travel to Beijing.*

7 想 好 好 放 松 一 下,

Xiǎng hǎo hǎo fàngsōng yīxià,

want to good good relax for a while,

*To have some good relaxation.*

8           所以   我   可能   没   有   时   间   。

Suǒyǐ wǒ kěnéng méi yǒu shíjiān.

So           I    may   not   have   time.

*So, I probably don't have time to come to your party.*

Lisa's response in line 5 begins with an upgraded apology, which only occurred once among lower intermediate learners, but more commonly at upper intermediate and advanced levels. Lisa then goes on to give an account, which is interestingly not reduced to the bare minimum of information but somewhat elaborated, for example, through mentioning in line 7 that the purpose of the trip is relaxation. Accounts at the lower intermediate level tended to include only one piece of information as a justification for refusing. Lisa concludes with an explicit negative statement, which is mitigated by the adverb 可能 *kě néng* 'probably.' Mitigating a negatively formatted refusal by means of a vague adverb first occurred at this level but was quite rare.

A refusal format that first emerged at this level was *pro forma* agreements ('yes-but' structure), as demonstrated in Excerpt 4.

<INSERT EXCERPT 4 ABOUT HERE>

#### EXCERPT 4

##### 'Yes-But' Structure

5 NS 请 问 我 可 以 帮 忙 吗 (PAT)?

Qǐng wèn wǒ kěyǐ bāngmáng ma (PAT)?

Please ask I can help ma (PAT)?

*Can I offer my help?*

6 (0.7)

7 Coco 嗯:: (0.4) 嗯::: 可::: 以::

èn:: (0.4) èn::: kě::: yǐ::

um:: (0.4) um::: o::: K::

*Um, OK,*

8 但是 现在 很多 人 参加 了:::

Dànshì xiànzài hěnduō rén cānjiā le:::

But now many persons joined :::

*But there are too many people already participating*

9 所以 :: (0.6) 可是 ::: 嗯 ↓:: 你 不 可 以 参加 了.

Suǒyǐ:: (0.6) Kěshì::: èn↓:: Nǐ bù kěyǐ cānjiā le.

So :: (0.6) But::: um↓:: You not can joined.

*so, you couldn't join in.*



After the interlocutor's offer of help, Coco responds with a *pro forma* agreement, which first displays acceptance through an affirmative but very elongated 可以 kěyǐ 'OK/yes' (7), followed by a contrast introduced by 但是 dàn shì 'but,' which opens the account and is followed by an explicit negative statement. The use of *pro forma* agreements, which show *prima facie* alignment with the interlocutor and thereby mitigate the upcoming disaffiliative action, is a breakthrough feature at this level as it never appears in the lower intermediates' performances.

Learners at the upper intermediate level more commonly deployed first-position particles. The most frequently employed turn-initial particle<sup>1</sup> is 哦/噢 'oh' (see Excerpt 5).

<INSERT EXCERPT 5 ABOUT HERE>

EXCERPT 5

Turn-Initial Particle 哦 'oh'

5 Int 你看 ↑ 你能借我你的电脑用一下 吗 (PAT)?

Nǐ kàn ↑ nǐ néng jiè wǒ nǐde diànnǎo yòng yīxià ma (PAT)?

You see↑you can lend me your computer use for a while ma (PAT)?

*So, can you lend your computer to me?*

6 Coco 哦 (PAT) ↑:.....: 我还没写完,

Ó (PAT) ↑:.....: Wǒ hái méi xiě wán,

Oh (PAT) ↑:.....: I yet not write finish

*Oh, I have not finished writing (my homework).*

After the interlocutor's request in line 5, Coco deploys a turn-initial particle 哦 'oh' with a rising intonation and prolongation in line 6. The use of 哦 signals a resistance to the interlocutor's presupposition that the computer is available to be borrowed (Heritage, 1998; Wu & Heritage,

2017). Less commonly, particle 啊 ‘ah’ appeared, also in first position, though native speakers of Chinese normally use 呵呵 as a dispreference marker in sentence-final position (Wu & Heritage, 2018).

In terms of designing their refusals for the interlocutor’s social status or the initiating action, learners at the upper intermediate level showed different deployment of their apology formulae compared to lower intermediate learners. Apologies were more likely to be placed turn-initially when declining the invitation or the offer, but they appeared later in the refusal sequence when refusing the request. As with the lower intermediate learners, some upper intermediate learners addressed the professor as 老师 *lǎoshī* ‘teacher,’ and in a small number of cases, the club member in the offer scenario was addressed as 同学 *tóngxué* ‘classmate.’

### <B>Advanced Level

Advanced-level learners had a similar repertoire of interactional tools to upper intermediate learners, but they frequently combined several of these sequential tools and lexical devices to demonstrate a strong orientation to the need for affiliation. Nearly all advanced learners’ refusals were preceded by prefatory particles, pauses, apologies, or accounts. They also employed sequential devices like insert-expansions and *pro forma* agreements to delay their core refusals, and they more commonly employed adverbs like 可能 *kě néng* ‘probably,’ which makes core refusals vague. Moreover, they demonstrated situational sensitivity and more active reciprocity in interactions. Excerpt 6 shows a comprehensive example.

<INSERT EXCERPT 6 ABOUT HERE>

#### EXCERPT 6

##### Combining Resources

3 Int 老师 想 请 你 去 家 里 吃 饭。  
 Lǎoshī xiǎng qǐng nǐ qù jiālǐ chī fàn.  
 Teacher wants to invite you go family have dinner.

*I'd like to invite you to have a dinner at my home.*

4 Dong 哇 (PAT) ↑  
 Wā (PAT) ↑  
 Wa (PAT) ↑

*Wow.*

5 Int 你 看 ↑ 你 能 去 吗 (PAT)?  
 Nǐ kàn ↑ nǐ néng qù ma (PAT)?  
 you see↑ you can come ma (PAT)?

*Can you come to my family party?*

6 Dong 老师 (.) 什 么 时 候 啊 (PAT)?  
 Lǎoshī (.) Shénme shíhòu a (PAT)?  
 Teacher(.) When time ah(PAT)?

*Teacher, could you please tell me when your family party will be held?*

7 Int 这 周 末。  
 Zhè zhōumò.  
 This weekend.

*This weekend.*

In Excerpt 6, the interlocutor provides a background for the invitation in line 3. Dong responds with an acknowledgment token 哇 *wa* 'wow' in line 4, which shows active recipientship. In line 5, the interlocutor issues the core first-pair part (an invitation). Rather than responding to the invitation, Dong launches a pre-second insert-expansion (Schegloff, 2007), which elicits information necessary for a grant or refusal, by asking the exact time of the family party in line 6. The interlocutor responds to the insert-expansion in line 7. In line 8, Dong repeats the response from the interlocutor with a rising intonation and a prolonged sound. Then, he employs a lexical marker 恐怕 *kǒng pà* 'I'm afraid' followed by a 0.6 second pause in line 8. The interlocutor's question in line 9 displays an understanding that there is a problem with Dong's availability. Dong then provides a raw account followed by an apology and an adverbially downgraded statement that he will not have time. It is notable that Dong uses an explicit negative expression in line 12 but it refers to his availability, thereby only indirectly negating ability. Dong's advanced level of IC is apparent in the combination of a range of lexical and sequential resources, rather than deployment of a small number of them.

Advanced level learners' IC can also be observed in their employment of more diversified repertoire of prefatory particles to mark refusals as dispreferred. In addition to using 啊 *a* 'ah' and 哦 *ou* 'oh' as turn-initial particles, another particle that is frequently employed is 哎呀 *aiya* (see Excerpt 7).

<INSERT EXCERPT 7 ABOUT HERE>

EXCERPT 7

Turn-Initial Particle 哎呀 *aiya*

5 Int 你 看 ↑ 你 能 借 我 你的 电脑  
 Nǐ kàn↑ nǐ néng jiè wǒ nǐde diànnǎo  
 You see↑you can lend me your computer

6 用 一 下 吗 (PAT)?  
 yòng yīxià ma (PAT)?  
 use for a while ma (PAT)?

*So can you lend your computer to me?*

7 Sab 哎呀 (PAT) ::: ↑ 朋友 (.) 好 可惜 ↑  
 Āiyā (PAT) ::: ↑ péngyǒu (.) Hǎo kěxí ↑  
 Aiya (PAT) ::: ↑ friend (.) What a shame ↑

*Aiya, my friend, what a shame!*

8 我:: (.) 明天 有 个 非洲 文化的 课 要 讲,  
 Wǒ:: (.) Míngtiān yǒu gè fēizhōu wénhuàde kè yào jiǎng,  
 I :: (.) Tomorrow have a African culture class will teach,

*I will teach a class named African culture tomorrow.*

After the interlocutor initiates the request in line 5–6, Sabrina utilizes 哎呀 *aiya* with a prolongation of the final vowel and rising intonation, followed by the solidarity marker 朋友 *péngyǒu* ‘mate’ and an expression of regret. Then, she gives a raw account to convey her refusal in

line 8. The use of 哎呀 *aiya* signals a dilemma for the speaker (Tang, 2004), foreshadowing a negative response.

Advanced learners further fine-tuned their responses to different social actions. While turn-initial apologies continued to dominate when refusing the professor's invitation, and apologies also occurred (though less frequently) when refusing the housemate's request, the most common response to the club member's offer was an expression of gratitude, such as 谢谢你的好意 *xiè xiè nǐ de hǎoyì* 'thank you for your kindness.' The expression of gratitude was typically followed by an account prefaced with 但是 *dàn shì* 'but.' No expressions of gratitude occurred in the other scenarios.

The advanced learners almost always addressed the professor as 老师 *lǎoshī* 'teacher,' but the frequency of addressing the club member in the offer scenario as 同学 *tóngxué* 'classmate' remained low.

### <B>Chinese Native Speakers

Chinese native speakers marked their refusals as dispreferred in similar ways as learners, by deploying raw accounts, promising future events, *pro forma* agreements, insert-expansions, apologies, and so on. However, native speakers also deployed linguistic devices and formatting techniques that were rare or not found at all in the learner groups.

The first unique interactional device among native speakers was 这个 *zhe ge* prefacing. Literally meaning 'this,' *zhe ge* is common as a hesitation marker and has been previously reported to occur in first position in disaffiliative actions (Tang, 2004), serving a similar function as *well* in English (Heritage, 2015). Excerpt 8 shows an example.

<INSERT EXCERPT 8 ABOUT HERE>

#### EXCERPT 8

这个 *zhe ge* Prefacing

6 Tian 嗯 (.) 这个 啊 (PAT) ↑ 不好意思 啊 (PAT) ,

èn (.) Zhège a (PAT) ↑ bùhǎoyìsi a (PAT) ,

Um (.) this ah (PAT) ↑ Sorry ah (PAT) ,

*Um, well, I'm sorry.*

7 因为 我 明天 早上 八 点 也 有 一 门 课 的

Yīnwèi wǒ míngtiān zǎoshang bā diǎn yě yǒu yīmén kède

Because I tomorrow morning 8 o'clock also have a subject

8 作业 要 交 ,

zuòyè yào jiāo ,

assignment should submit ,

*Because I also have an assignment that needs to be submitted at 8 a.m.*

*tomorrow morning.*

When Tian responds to the request, he employs a prefatory particle 嗯 èn 'um' plus a pause and another particle 这个 zhe ge. He then issues a raw account that contains details on the deadline for the assignment, implying his refusal. While 这个 zhe ge was common among native speakers, only in one case did a learner use it (Dong, advanced group).

In another difference related to use of particles, Chinese native speakers nearly exclusively employed the particle 啊 a 'ah' in transitional-relevant-place (TRP)-final position, as shown in line 5 in Excerpt 9.

<INSERT EXCERPT 9 ABOUT HERE>

EXCERPT 9

Sentence-Final Particle 啊 ah

4 Int 请 问 我 可 以 帮 忙 吗 (PAT) ?

Qǐng wèn wǒ kěyǐ bāngmáng ma (PAT) ?

Please ask I can help ma (PAT) ?

*Can I offer my help?*

5 Qian 这样 看来 你 之前 没有 报名 啊 (PAT) ↑,

Zhèyàng kànlái nǐ zhīqián méiyǒu bàomíng ah (PAT) ↑,

Well seems you in advance didn't sign up ah (PAT) ↑,

*Well, you seem to not have signed up in advance.*

6 因为 我们 现在 人手 已经 够了,

Yīnwèi wǒmen xiànzài rénshǒu yǐjīng gòule,

Because we now staff already enough,

*Because we have already got enough staff.*

The use of 啊 'ah' in the turn-final position can "be mobilized to problematize the action of previous speakers by marking it as counter to the speaker's expectation" (Wu & Heritage, 2017, p. 273). By doing this, Qian explicitly signals the upcoming refusal as a resistance to the interlocutor's assumption that help is still needed. Learners rarely placed 啊 in the TRP-final position.

In addition to a larger repertoire and different distribution of particles compared to learners, native speakers also showed diversification in the formats of their pro-forma agreements, whose structure was otherwise similar to the learners' exemplars (e.g., in Excerpt 5). Additional formats included, for example, 想+可是 *xiǎng + kěshì* 'want to/would like to + but,' 感谢+但是 *gǎn xiè + dàn shì* 'gratitude + but,' and 可以+但是 *kě yǐ + dàn shì* 'can do + but.'

Native speakers' also overtly demonstrated their orientation to social relationships and their fine-tuned recipient design, for example, when refusing the housemate's request (Excerpt 10).

<INSERT EXCERPT 10 ABOUT HERE>

#### EXCERPT 10

**Solidarity Marker:** 咱俩这关系/ 'Our Relationship'

18 Chen 哎↓你看 ::(.) 咱俩 这 关系 (hh) 我 肯定 会 帮 你的,  
 Āi↓ nǐ kàn::(.) Zánliǎ zhè guānxì (hh) wǒ kěndìng huì bāng nǐde,  
 Ai↓ you see::(.) Our this relationship(hh) I definitely will help you,

*You know, based on our close relationship, I will definitely help you.*

Chen employs an expression 咱俩这关系 *zán liǎ zhè guānxì* 'our close relationship,' enhancing the social solidarity between him and the interlocutor, thereby mitigating the negative consequences of refusal on social solidarity. Such explicit reference to relationships does not exist in the learners' data. Furthermore, every single native speaker participant addressed the professor as 老师 *lǎoshī* 'teacher,' thereby overtly acknowledging the interlocutor's status. However, similar to the learner groups, few native speakers addressed the classmate in the offer or request scenarios as 同学 *tóngxué* 'classmate.'

While none of the learners used expressions of gratitude when refusing the professor's invitation, the majority of native speakers did express their gratitude, often combined with an apology. Native speakers also frequently used vague language when talking to the professor, saying that they 可能没有时间 *kěnéng méiyǒu shíjiān* 'probably won't have time' but they did not use vagueness in the other scenarios, which featured an equal or lower status interlocutor.

Another indication of native speakers' acknowledgment of the social relationship is their orientation toward a resolution of the problem posed in the scenarios, though this was also differentially distributed between scenarios. For declining the professor's invitation or (less commonly) the club member's offer of help, participants frequently concluded the refusal sequence with a promise of future action, as shown in Excerpt 11.

<INSERT EXCERPT 11 ABOUT HERE>

EXCERPT 11

Promise of Future Action

6 Int 你 看 ↑ 你 能 来 吗 (PAT)?

Nǐ kàn ↑ nǐ néng lái ma (PAT)?

you see ↑ you can come ma (PAT)?

*Can you come to my family party?*

7 Jia 哦 谢谢 老师,

Ó xièxiè lǎoshī,

Oh Thanks teacher,

*Thanks, teacher.*

8 真的 特别 感谢 老师 能够 邀请 我 一起去 过节,

Zhēnde tèbié gǎnxiè lǎoshī nénggòu yāoqǐng wǒ yìqǐqù guòjié,

Actually Really appreciate teacher can invite me together holiday,

*Actually, I really appreciate your invitation to enjoy the holiday with you.*

9 嗯 (.)但是 我 之前 就和 同学 约好了 要去 北京

en(.)dànshì wǒ zhīqián jiùhé tóngxué yuēhǎole yàoqù běijīng

um (.) But I before with classmates planned go Beijing

10 一起 去 聚会 ,

yìqǐ qù jùhuì ,

Together go get together,

*Um but I have already planned to go Beijing with my classmates*

*to get together.*

11 所以 时间 可能 有点 排不开,  
 Suǒyǐ shíjiān kěnéng yǒudiǎn páibùkāi,  
 So schedule might a bit tight,

*So my time schedule is a bit tight.*

12 Jia 所以 您 看 能不能 下次 有 机会的 时候  
 Suǒyǐ nín kàn néngbùnéng xiàcì yǒu jīhuìde shíhòu  
 So you see whether next have opportunity time

13 再去 您 那 做客。  
 Zàiqù nín nà zuòkè.  
 go you home visit.

*So if I have an opportunity next time, I will go to your home and visit you.*

Following expressions of gratitude and appreciation for the teacher's invitation as well as an account for her unavailability in the preceding talk, Jia's promise of a future visit implies an acceptance of the social solidarity inherent in an invitation and limits the rejection to the timing.

Native speakers showed a similar orientation to resolution when rejecting the housemates request for borrowing their computer, but they made more concrete suggestions for solution, as in Excerpt 12.

<INSERT EXCERPT 12 ABOUT HERE>

EXCERPT 12

Concrete Suggestions

12 Xiang 我 也是 哎 (.) 怎么 办 啊 (PAT) ?

Wǒ yěshì āi (.) Zěnmē bàn a (PAT) ?

Me too ai (.) How deal ah (PAT) ?

*Me too, how could we deal with this issue?*

13 我 好像 听说 隔壁 小李 那

Wǒ hǎoxiàng tīngshuō gébì xiǎolǐ nà

I seem hear next door Xiao Li that

14 有 空 电脑,

yǒu kòng diànnǎo,

have spare computer,

*I think Xiao Li who lives next door probably may have a spare computer,*

15 要不 去 问 问?

Yàobù qù wèn wèn?

How about go ask ask?

*How about ask Xiao Li for help?*

In the preceding talk, the interlocutor had confirmed that their assignment is due at the same time as Xiang's, and after a rhetorical question in line 12, Xiang initiatively proposes a concrete solution in lines 13 to 15, demonstrating his orientation toward preserving social harmony. While

learners also occasionally made future promises and proposed solutions, native speakers did so much more frequently.

## <A>Discussion

The results of the current study are in line with previous research findings on L2 proficiency and refusals (e.g., Al-Gahtani & Roever, 2018; Bella, 2014; Taguchi, 2013). The findings also reflect findings on IC summarized by Pekarek Doehler and Pochon–Berger (2015) and augment previous research by highlighting how participants orient differentially to initiating actions when refusing.

In this study, learners at lower intermediate level were our most diverse group. Their refusals were occasionally organized as preferred social actions, featuring unmitigated and straightforward negative responses like 不 *bù* ‘no,’ which echoes studies by Bella (2014), Felix–Brasdefer (2009), and Taguchi (2013). However, the majority of interactions showed delays, gaps, accounts, and prefatory particles to mark refusals as dispreferred—though these tools were rarely used in combination. Sequentially, an account preceded an explicit refusal in some cases, delaying it—or the refusal consisted of a raw account, avoiding an explicitly negative response. Prefacing the account with *but* started to emerge in a few cases. However, lower intermediate learners’ refusals frequently showed explicit negation, there was no occurrence of *pro forma* agreement, and explanations or accounts were usually brief.

Overt orientation to initiating actions and social status was limited, pointing to the ‘passe-partout’ effect that Pekarek Doehler and Pochon–Berger (2015) described. However, learners’ awareness of social status differences may have been the reason for the rarer occurrence of apology in the club-member scenario, where the learner is of higher status than the interlocutor. Also, some learners addressed the professor explicitly by title, which shows orientation to social status.

Learners’ repertoire of linguistic and sequential tools to mark refusals as dispreferred expands at the upper intermediate level. They reduced the use of direct negation markers like 不 *bù* ‘no’ and 不能 *bù néng* ‘cannot,’ which never occurred early in the refusal. Instead, their refusals were commonly prefaced by turn-initial particles such as 哦/噢 *ó/ō* ‘oh’ and 啊 *a* ‘ah,’ indicating a contradiction to the interlocutor’s presupposition and projecting the upcoming turns as disaffiliative

responses (Heritage, 1998; Wu & Heritage, 2017). Moreover, upper intermediate learners also used diversified preliminary interactional tools like insert-expansions and *pro forma* agreements ('yes-but' structure) to mitigate the negative consequences of refusals on social solidarity and mark refusals as dispreferred social actions. These preliminary tools were absent in the lower intermediate data but more fine-tuned in the advanced-level learners' corpus, confirming preliminaries as a feature indicative of higher levels of IC.

Learners' production was also more fine-tuned to a specific initiating action, but not as much to the interlocutor's social status. Learners were more likely to front an apology when declining the (higher status) professor's invitation and the (lower status) club member's offer, both of which benefit the recipient and extend social solidarity to them. Some learners also overtly oriented to the professor's social status through addressing him by title.

Advanced level learners' more developed IC can be observed in their greater repertoire of interactional tools, their combining of several such tools, and their higher degree of situational sensitivity. As Al-Gahtani and Roever (2018) also showed, the combination of several devices (such as pauses, insert-expansions, request preemption, accounts, first-position particles, and *pro forma* agreements) is typical of high-level IC. While use of several interactional tools is the most apparent differentiating factor between advanced and upper intermediate learners, the advanced learners also more commonly used particles, which efficiently convey their stance.

Advanced learners' orientation to the situation was also systematically apparent in their foregrounding of expressions of gratitude for the interlocutor's offer of help in the club-member scenario rather than their apology for their own action of declining that offer. Making their appreciation of an offer of cooperation overt prior to rejecting it demonstrates an increased ability among these learners to acknowledge social relationships through their talk. Somewhat surprisingly, however, expressions of gratitude remained rare in responses to the professor, whose invitation also implies social solidarity. Advanced learners consistently marked the professor's social status by using a title as their address term.

Despite advanced learners' well-developed interactional abilities, a clear gap remained between them and native speakers, as Bella (2014) and Al-Gahtani & Roever (2018) also showed. One notable difference is first-position discourse particles. Native speakers employed 这个 *zhè ge* 'this'-prefacing before their core refusals, and utilized turn-final particle 啊 *a* 'ah,' neither of which

occurred with learners. Native speakers also much more clearly and consistently differentiated their responses to initiating social actions and invariably marked social status differences through address terms when talking to the professor. The fact that native speakers and learners rarely used any address terms (except the occasional 同学 *tóngxué* 'classmate') in the other scenarios might be due to the design of the role-play situations where no personal name was given for the interlocutor, thus not offering learners the option of addressing the classmate by name whereas they might do so in real-world interaction.

What accounts for these differences between proficiency levels? We will follow Al-Gahtani & Roever (2018) in explaining learning by augmenting the descriptive, noncognitive tradition of CA with a cognitive-acquisitional perspective informed by interlanguage pragmatics studies.

One obvious explanation for differences between proficiency groups is proficiency itself. Lower intermediate learners have a limited interactional repertoire because their linguistic knowledge and processing ability are still developing, so comprehending interlocutor speech and simultaneously assembling a response is effortful. This leads to shorter responses that focus on getting the message across rather than emphasizing social relationships (see also Taguchi & Roever, 2017). This message focus is supported by the unbroken adjacency of immediate and direct responses, which ensure that the link between the interlocutor's initiating utterance and the learner's response is apparent but lead to a preferred sequential organization. Breaking this adjacency through prefacing occurs for some learners but is limited to high-frequency formulaic expressions, such as 对不起 *duì bù qǐ* 'sorry.'

There is little evidence of contextual sensitivity among lower intermediate learners but some indication of a broader orientation to social status. Some learners referred to the professor by title, which is common in a Chinese context, and likely to be a feature of Chinese pragmatics explicitly taught to learners. In a similar vein, learners were more likely to apologize to the professor, which might indicate an orientation to their lower social status than in the other two scenarios.

Upper intermediate learners undoubtedly have higher proficiency and a broader range of linguistic tools at their disposal but they also show increased contextual sensitivity (Pekarek Doehler & Pochon-Berger, 2015). This sensitivity is evidenced by their differentiating between initiating acts, as they front apologies in response to the invitation and offer but not in response to the request.

Advanced learners did not differ much in their overall practices compared to upper intermediate learners, except by combining more interactional tools. This contrasts with Galaczi (2014), who showed very pronounced differences between B1- and B2-level learners in a study on topic management, possibly indicating that some aspects of IC are more sensitive to proficiency development than others. However, advanced learners did exhibit proficiency-independent recalibration (Pekarek Doehler, 2019) of their interactional tools to the discourse context. The emergence of expressions of gratitude when refusing help shows that learners can demonstrate their acknowledgment of social solidarity inherent in the offer while still rejecting the offer itself. It is curious why this did not happen when rejecting the professor's invitation, where apologies dominated and no gratitude occurred. Did learners feel that the social status difference required the deference inherent in an apology rather than an acknowledgment of the social solidarity extended in the invitation?

Another interesting finding is the emergence of a Chinese-specific particle like 哎呀 *aiya*, which learners are unlikely to have recalibrated from L1 practices or other L2 knowledge. Advanced-level learners may have noticed this particle in the input earlier (there was one instance among upper intermediate learners) but were only confident enough in its function at this level to deploy it.

Comparing learners to native speakers does not imply that learners should necessarily talk or behave like native speakers; however, it offers interesting perspectives on what is challenging to learn in L2 IC. Similar to Al-Gahtani & Roever's (2018) finding of the absence of *well* as a first-position prefatory particle in their ESL learner data, the absence of 这个 *zhe ge* in our learner data, while being common in native speaker data, is striking. First-position occupants are very prominent (such as 哎呀 *aiya*), so they would be easier to notice than TRP-final 啊 *ah* 'ah,' which was also rare in our learner productions. A possible explanation could be the lexical meaning of 这个 *zhe ge* as demonstrative 'this,' which may make it more difficult for learners to recalibrate it for interactional purposes, whereas 哎呀 *aiya* only has a discursive function. Learners' difficulty in acquiring these particles resonates with Tasi and Chu's (2017) study, which found that both L2 and foreign-language learners of Chinese showed inaccurate and inappropriate usage of these elements, which may require more explicit instruction. Still, the challenging nature of some first-position occupants remains puzzling.

The consistent focus among native speakers but not learners on the social solidarity of invitations and offers indicates a lack of social member knowledge among learners about the importance of acknowledging this solidarity to maintain positive relationships in the face of upcoming refusals. Native speakers further supported the relationship through concrete or symbolic moves, such as suggestions for solutions and future promises, which happened less systematically with learners, again indicating a lack of member's knowledge.

A limitation of our study with regard to comparing learners by proficiency is that the levels as defined in the CEFR or implemented in tests like HSK are extremely broad. Especially a level like B1, which the CEFR refers to as the "intermediate plateau" (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 150), can take several years to traverse, so learners at the lower end of B1 may differ quite noticeably from learners at the upper end of B1. This also introduces a problem of contiguity, common with dividing participants into discrete proficiency levels, where learners at the lower end of B1 may be more similar to learners at the upper end of A2 than to their groupmates at the upper end of B1. However, since our focus is on broad differences, we believe such differences will be discernible even if the gaps between learners at different levels are not absolutely controlled.

From a CA perspective, our use of role plays is problematic since they are not natural data. Participants likely orient toward the social situation of the role play scenario and the role play as a social situation, as well as to the social status of the interlocutor in the scenario and in the real world. This is likely to affect their performance, and we cannot claim that they would perform identically in real-world interactions.

Finally, our sample is of modest size, totalling 28 learners and 10 native speakers, rendering 84 learner role plays and 30 native speaker role plays. While larger corpora have the potential to expose rarer or less obvious phenomena, we believe that our study shows some core phenomena of IC in L2 Chinese.

This study has a series of implications for interlanguage pragmatics research and L2 pedagogy. For interlanguage pragmatics research, the current study adds to the set of L2s that have been studied with a view to IC. Moreover, given that most previous studies on L2 Chinese refusals are based on DCTs or closed role plays, the current study provides an interactional perspective.

With regard to L2 Chinese teaching, the findings from this study can contribute to the design of more level-appropriate pedagogical materials for different levels of Chinese learners. It also

highlights that certain aspects like turn-initial-particle (e.g., 这个 *zhe ge* ‘this’)-prefacing are largely neglected in current L2 Chinese teaching materials, a fact that should be heeded by textbook designers. Although the current study did not include any instructional interventions, we suggest that some sequential features like the use of prefatory particles, accounts, and apologies as sequential devices to postpone core refusals would be fruitful targets for pedagogical intervention.

## <A>Conclusion

This study outlined differences in IC by L2 Chinese speakers at different proficiency levels. Our findings add to past research by demonstrating differential orientations to context and social solidarity depending on the initiating action (request, invitation, offer) and proficiency level. The previous interactional study on refusals by Al-Gahtani and Roever (2018) exclusively used requests as initiators. We also contribute to research on Chinese as a L2, and especially L2 Chinese pragmatics and IC, for which very little previous work exists. Our findings identify some interactional features unique to Mandarin Chinese, which has implications for pedagogy and future research. In conclusion, this study supports previous research on L2 IC while highlighting aspects of IC specific to Chinese as a target language.

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