

Study on Teaching of Rhetorical Questions in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language

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Abstract The rhetorical question is a widely used sentence pattern in modern Chinese. It is not only a key point in teaching Chinese as a foreign language, but also a difficult point for foreign learners in learning Chinese. Focusing on the rhetorical questions in teaching Chinese as a foreign language, this paper studies the teaching and acquisition of foreign students' rhetorical questions. Based on analysis of selected textbooks for teaching Chinese as a foreign language and difficulties of foreign students in learning rhetorical questions from the perspective of the textbooks, a questionnaire is designed to examine the situation of foreign students in acquiring rhetorical questions. After analysis of difficulties that students from different countries encounter in learning rhetorical questions, this paper proposes targeted teaching suggestions accordingly.

Keywords: *teaching Chinese as a second language, rhetorical question, textbook, acquisition*

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1. Introduction

The particularities of the rhetorical question always make it attract the attention of scholars in different fields in the teaching of modern Chinese. At the same time, the rhetorical question is also an important language point for foreign students as a hot spot for HSK. This paper intends to study and analyze the foreign students' understanding and mastery of rhetorical questions based on the existing research results, summarize the errors and causes of such errors that appear in the acquisition, and propose targeted teaching suggestions.

2. The Rhetorical Questions in Modern Chinese

2.1. Conceptual Definition of Rhetorical Questions

Huang Borong and Liao Xudong pointed out: Rhetorical questions are also questions with answers obvious. They are questions asked by people who know the answers and also known as "questions for evoking something. Feng Jianghong pointed out in the *Pragmatic Study of Rhetorical Questions* that "a rhetorical question is an indirect statement and is used to make assertions and perform directives by inducing the listener to accept or comply with its implied meaning. This study contends that the rhetorical question is a question with strong mood that expresses negation, implies emotions, and has its answer obvious to the person who raises this question.

2.2. The Unique Syntactic Structure of Rhetorical Questions

The main types of rhetorical questions include yes-no rhetorical questions, positive-negative rhetorical questions, selective rhetorical questions, and specially-pointed rhetorical questions. In addition, there are also some subcategories. Take the yes-no rhetorical question for example, it can be subdivided into such types as "不(bù) ...吗(ma)", "岂(qǐ)...", "难道(nán dào)...吗(ma)", "不就(bù jiù)...", and "能(néng)...?". Another example is specially-pointed rhetorical questions which can be subdivided into such types as "谁(shuí)(who)...", "哪(nǎ)(where)...", and "什么(shén me)(what)...".

2.3. Pragmatic Values of Rhetorical Questions in Modern Chinese

As a sentence pattern widely used in Chinese, the pragmatic value of rhetorical questions in modern Chinese cannot be ignored. For example, when making the same statement, the contextual effect and infectious power of the rhetorical question is stronger than the declarative sentence. When we inquiry about the nature and characteristics of rhetorical questions, we find that "to strengthen the tone" is the universally recognized value of rhetorical questions. In the *Syllabus for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language*, rhetorical questions are directly classified as emphasized statement sentences. The so-called value of a sentence pattern lies in its characteristics and meaning that other sentence patterns do not possess. The reason why people would choose to use the rhetorical

questions in some contexts is precisely because the rhetorical questions have the expected semantic effects that their characteristics can properly express. Firstly, the rhetorical question can be used to express the dissatisfaction of the speaker, including the resultant meaning such as urging, reminding, and reproaching. Secondly, the rhetorical question can also be used to express the speaker's opinion, including his/her attitude and evaluation of people, events and things. Additionally, the rhetorical question can strengthen the tone and language strength so that the speaker can produce a clear "constraint force" for the listener.

In general, the functions of rhetorical questions include judgment, negation, dissatisfaction, rebuking, ridicule, demands, warnings, and threats. These emotions are the deep meaning of sentences, that is, implications of the rhetorical questions, which are what the listener needs to understand and what the speaker wants to express.

3. Examination of Rhetorical Questions in Commonly Used Textbooks

Textbooks for teaching Chinese as a foreign language are a concentrated expression of the syllabus and an important source for foreign students to acquire linguistic knowledge. Textbooks play an irreplaceable role in teaching. They are also an important factor that affects foreign students' acquisition of Chinese. This study analyzes the distribution of rhetorical questions in textbooks with *Developing Chinese* (Second Edition) as the object of the study.

The textbooks of *Developing Chinese* are divided into three levels of elementary, intermediate, and advanced according to the foreign students' level of learning. The textbooks are divided into five series of comprehensive course, listening, speaking, reading, and writing according to the learning contents. Comprehensive courses are the main textbooks of the series of *Developing Chinese*. They are the most important courses for both teachers and students. There are a total of 374 rhetorical questions in all six comprehensive course textbooks. As a grammar item that is more difficult to acquire, rhetorical questions are distributed in textbooks with different proportions: elementary textbooks (29%), intermediate textbooks (32%), and advanced textbooks (39%).

With reference to the distribution of rhetorical questions in the textbooks, it can be found that the content of the rhetorical questions is mostly concentrated in the elementary textbooks. There are six sentence patterns of rhetorical questions for study. This kind of too concentrated distribution makes it easy for the learners to be afraid of difficulties.

Generally speaking, many sentence patterns of rhetorical questions are reflected in the textbooks, but they are not introduced as main language points. Each sentence pattern is usually introduced with a few examples in order to help students understand and consolidate the sentence patterns. Among the example sentences of the rhetorical question in the textbooks, 90% of the example sentences have a context close to life, making them easy for students to learn. However, there are also individual example sentences in the textbooks, which do not have sufficient context. Such example sentences need complement to context based on

daily experience and language sense. For example, in *Advanced Speaking Course I*, the example given for the sentence pattern of "不是(bù shì)...吗(ma)?" is: 您不是要惩罚遗老吗?为什么还不见有惩罚? *Aren't you trying to punish the old man? Why hasn't the punishment been seen?*

This example sentence is relatively more difficult for foreign students to understand what the speaker meant. Appropriate example sentences should be chosen for teaching.

4. Survey of Chinese Learners' Mastery of the Use of Rhetorical Questions

In this study, the questionnaire is prepared by selecting questions related to rhetorical questions from such sources as Chinese textbooks for foreign students, HSK examination questions, and worksheets. A total of 55 questionnaires were distributed and 30 valid questionnaires were retrieved. Respondents of the valid questionnaires come from Germany, Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Tanzania, South Korea, Japan and other countries. In terms of Chinese learning period, one has learned Chinese for the longest period of 10 years. The shortest learning period is 1-2 years and nine respondents fall into this group. In terms of Chinese proficiency, there are 14 students who have reached HSK-Level 3. Seven students are at the HSK-Level 4. The number of students who have reached HSK-Level 5 and 6 is four respectively. Only one student is at the HSK-Level 1. The overall level of Chinese is relatively high.

4.1. Questionnaire Design and Description

The questionnaire is divided into two parts. The first part is test questions of rhetorical questions, which include multiple choice questions and true-or-false questions. Typical and common sentence patterns of rhetorical questions are evenly distributed in the test paper, including "难道(nán dào)...?", "怎么(zěn me (How)...?)", "不(bù)...吗(ma)?", "哪(nǎ (where)...?" as well as some commonly-used rhetorical questions in communication. The questions are mainly for examination of the foreign students' understanding of rhetorical questions, including understanding of both sentence meaning and speaker's attitude.

The second part is a questionnaire survey, which is mainly used to understand the participants' personal information and the acquisition of rhetorical questions in Chinese.

4.2. Questionnaire Analysis

It can be seen from the results of the questionnaire that there are many problems in the understanding and recognition of rhetorical questions for foreign students. Most students have 4-7 questions answered incorrectly. Up to 53.2% students answered more than half of the questions incorrectly.

Specifically, questions of No. 5 and 7 show the highest error rate. For each of the two questions, there are 20 students who failed to give the correct answer, accounting for 66.6% of the total number of students. Both of these questions examine the understanding of the tone

expressed by atypical rhetorical questions with less obvious characteristics. With an error rate of 56.6%, the question of No. 6 examines the conversion of synonymous sentences of rhetorical questions and requires the selection of the correct reference. By observing the three questions with a relatively higher error rate and lower recognition degree, the writer finds that the three sentences all have the following characteristics:

- 1) The sentence structure appears to be an interrogative sentence or a declarative sentence, which can easily make foreign students make wrong judgment. For example, in the question of No. 4, the sentence is “咳，不就是一年嘛！(Isn't it a year?)”. What it expresses is that one year passes very fast. The tone of rhetorical questioning is used to emphasize that one needn't worry about the length of one year. Because the sentence itself is not a question, it is a common error of understanding among foreign students. For example, a misunderstanding of this sentence is that “我不是去一年。(I am not going to stay there for a year.)”.
- 2) The meaning of the sentence depends on the restrictive relationship among surrounding sentences. For example, in the question of No. 5, the sentence is “怎么走 (how to get there)”. Without the context and stress, it may be a question of asking for the way, or an expression of “no way to get there”. With reference to the following sentence of “车都没气了(The tire is flat)”, it can be known that the answer to the question expressed by the preceding sentence of “我们明天到底走不走？(Shall we leave tomorrow or not?)” is negative, even with a certain degree of dissatisfaction. Therefore, the meaning of “no way to get there” is expressed clearly without any doubt. To some extent, such a restrictive relationship depends on different personal concepts and expresses one's emotions and attitudes in certain situations. With a high error rate, the question of No.7 shows students' misjudgment and misunderstanding of the conventional rhetorical questions. “Some rhetorical questions are often used in a certain language environment. A fixed connection is established between their pragmatic meanings, functions, and certain forms of structure, with the process of being established by popular usage in verbal communication. Take the sentence in the question of No.7 for example, the response to “你表现得很出色！(You did really well!)” is “哪里哪里”. Such response is an accepted usage for expression of modesty. This kind of rhetorical question needs certain recognition of language sense. Apparently foreign students still have some difficulties in mastering such sentences.

The question of No.8 shows the lowest error rate, asking students to choose the sentence which is not a rhetorical question. The right answer is “你不告诉我，我怎么能知道呢 (你不告诉我，我就知道了) If you don't tell me, how can I know it? (If you don't tell me, I will know)”. In contrast to other rhetorical question options with the characteristics of rhetorical questions, it is easier to identify the conversion in parentheses is wrong. It can be seen that the typical means of identification is an

important criterion to judge whether a sentence is a rhetorical question or not.

The remaining questions of No.1, 2, 3, 4 and 9 all examine students' understanding of typical rhetorical questions, including the sentence meaning and speaker's attitude. Questions of No. 1 and 9 examine the tone and attitude expressed by the speaker of the rhetorical question. Questions of No. 2, 3 and 4 examine the understanding of the meaning of rhetorical questions. The error rate of the five questions ranges from 26.6% to 30%. No questions in the questionnaire show an error rate of zero.

5. Analysis of Difficulties in Foreign Students' Acquisition of Rhetorical Questions

The second part of the questionnaire is a questionnaire survey on the difficulty of acquisition of rhetorical questions. After completion of the test questions, respondents finish this part in combination with their own Chinese learning. Among them, 32% of the foreign students say: I have a good command of the rhetorical questions, but I can't use them skillfully in oral communication. 36% of foreign students say: I seldom use the rhetorical question and do not pay too much attention to it. I am more willing to use other sentences to replace it. Another 30% of foreign students say: I can identify relatively more obvious rhetorical questions. If they are a little more complicated, I cannot understand them in reading and listening. Most students will make errors in judgment, and only 2% of foreign students are quite confident, saying: I have basically mastered the grammar of rhetorical questions and can use them skillfully.

In terms of the most difficult rhetorical questions to understand, among the respondents of foreign students, 43% of them choose the special rhetorical questions (“谁(shuí)...?”, “哪里(nǎ li)...?”, “何(hé)...?”, “岂(qǐ)...?” etc.); 28% of them choose the positive-negative rhetorical questions (“V not V?”, etc.); 12% of them choose selective rhetorical questions (是(shì)...还是(hái shì)...?); another 11% choose yes-no rhetorical questions (“不是(bù shì)...”, “难道(nán dào)...” etc.); and 6% of them cannot accurately classify rhetorical questions that have been learned. It can be found through combined analysis that the main reasons for difficulties in learning rhetorical questions are:

- 1) The rhetorical question has various kinds of sentence patterns, and the tone is special. Many foreign students expressed that they didn't know exactly when to use the rhetorical question. Although it is learned, due to its closeness to the question sentence, they always feel that there will be errors in using it. Moreover, rhetorical questions express the tone of “dissatisfaction” and “reproach” in many communications, so they do not know how to use it and to whom it is appropriate to use the rhetorical questions.
- 2) Compared with the wide usage shown in daily communication, the involved contents of the textbooks are limited. As the main source of knowledge for foreign students to learn Chinese,

rhetorical questions in the textbooks are mostly presented in the form of example sentences without a specific context. Therefore, students can easily forget what they have learned after classes. They will face problems in practice.

- 3) The rhetorical questions in the mother tongue of some foreign students are quite different from those in Chinese. This has caused certain problems.

6. Suggestions on the Teaching of Chinese as a Foreign Language

6.1. Suggestions on Textbook Writing

After our survey on the acquisition of rhetorical questions, we found that the textbook still needs to be improved in the arrangement of grammar points of rhetorical questions.

- 1) The content of rhetorical questions is mostly concentrated in the elementary level textbooks, which is not conducive to Chinese beginners. For Chinese learners at the elementary level, it is difficult to master rhetorical questions through concentrated learning. Such concentrated learning can easily make learners feel afraid of difficulties. It does not conform to the law of Chinese learning for foreigners. Students should learn new sentence pattern of rhetorical questions step by step starting from specially-pointed rhetorical questions and yes-no rhetorical questions with highlighted indicators.
- 2) The proportion of rhetorical questions should be increased in the textbooks. Different courses such as comprehensive course, listening, reading, writing, and speaking should be complementary to each other and have their own characteristics. For example, reading and writing should pay attention to the characteristics of written language, and increase the reoccurrence of the sentence patterns of “何(hé)...” and “曷(qǐ)...” introduced in the comprehensive course to provide students with the opportunity to consolidate and become familiar with the rhetorical questions in written form. Textbooks of speaking and listening courses should focus on the teaching of rhetorical questions in spoken form, which is conducive to the learning oriented to achieving the ultimate goal of daily communication.
- 3) Pay attention to the teaching of commonly used high-frequency rhetorical questions. In addition to meeting the requirements of syllabus, the textbooks should focus on sentence patterns of rhetorical questions commonly used in daily life as shown in statistics and survey. “不是(bù shì)...吗(ma)?” and “哪(nǎ)...?” are high-frequency sentence patterns of rhetorical questions and required to be mastered in the syllabus. Such sentence patterns of rhetorical questions should be the focus of teaching.

6.2. Teaching Strategies

(1) Provide context for the teaching of rhetorical questions. Providing foreign students with a suitable

language environment can help them understand the significance of rhetorical questions, and apply what they have learned to communication.

(2) Attach importance to the combination of rhetorical questions and cultures of various countries. In teaching, teacher should pay attention to guiding students to summarize the differences between the sentence patterns learned and their mother tongues. Teachers should make efforts to provide explanations specific to the different situations faced by foreign students of different mother tongues.

(3) Coordination of rhetorical questions used in written and spoken language. In the advanced stage, the differences in the style of the rhetorical questions that students encounter are more and more obvious. Students may easily get confused about such differences. Some sentence patterns such as “何不hé bù (Why not)...?” and “曷qǐ (How)...?” usually appear in the written language. They seem complicated but not difficult actually. Teachers should clarify the differences between styles.

7. Conclusions

The rhetorical question has always been the focus of attention of language workers in the field of modern Chinese and the field of Chinese for foreigners. Therefore, it is necessary to study the teaching and acquisition of the rhetorical question. This paper looks into the rhetorical question acquisition of foreign students, analyzes causes of their errors, and proposes suitable teaching strategies and methods.

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