Discourse-pragmatic Functions of a Chinese Topic-comment Construction and L2 Teaching Strategies Based on Authentic Media Materials

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Abstract

The seemingly optional use in discourse and rich discourse-pragmatic functions make the Mandarin topic-comment construction a challenging structure for L2 learners of Chinese. Beginning and intermediate level learners tend to display a lack of use of it (Jin 1994; Cao et al. 2006). Drawing upon linguistic and applied linguistic findings, this study discusses five discourse-pragmatic functions of the double-nominative topic-comment construction and introduces a pedagogical design using authentic media materials like film clips and TV shows to teach elementary and intermediate level learners when and how to choose this topic-comment construction in specific contexts. The study aims to explore some possibilities and methodologies of providing lower-level L2 learners an opportunity to know how a certain language structure is used in specific contexts in L1 discourse, and in so doing, teach learners how to make informed linguistic choices right from the beginning level.

(All relevant video clips used in this article can be found at this website: https://www.danjiesu.com/research/)

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1. Introduction

Chinese is often considered a topic-prominent language (Chao 1968; Li and Thompson 1981; Huang 1984; Tao, forthcoming), in which the concept of topics is “crucial in explaining the structure of ordinary sentences” (Li and Thompson 1981:15-16). A notable feature with regard to the use of the topic-comment construction is its seemingly “optional” use in discourse. Therefore, it is important to
“find out what speakers do with it in interactive contexts” (Tao, forthcoming) when they do use it in L1 discourse. As for L2 discourse, between the choices to use and not use a particular grammatical structure (Su 2017a), compared to L1 speakers, L2 learners of Chinese at the elementary and intermediate levels often demonstrate a lack of use of the topic-comment construction (Jin 1994; Cao et al. 2006). Whether to use a topic-comment construction depends mainly on context. Whereas constructed texts in conventional textbooks often lack naturalistic contextual information (McCarthy 1991; Carter, Hughes, and McCarthy 2000; Tao 2005), authentic materials such as film clips, which are produced for non-language teaching purposes (Nunan 1989:54), can provide the specific contexts that favor the use of a particular grammatical construction (Su and Tao 2018a, 2018b). In this study, I will discuss five pedagogically-oriented categories of the discourse-pragmatic functions of a type of topic construction: double-nominative topic-comment construction. I will also provide a pedagogical design using media clips such as film clips and short clips of TV shows as authentic teaching materials to teach elementary and intermediate level learners when to choose this topic-comment construction in the real-world context. I will analyze the matching authentic materials that can be used to illustrate the contexts for the usage categories.

Hence, this article describes a lower-level language pedagogical design that uses authentic materials to teach a sentence pattern in Mandarin Chinese (hereafter referred to as “Chinese”) – the topic-comment construction. I take the position that it is important to provide learners, including lower-level learners, the opportunity to know how a certain language structure is used in L1 discourse so that they can have a better understanding of how L1 speakers choose a particular structure in context. Through this study, I wish to explore some possibilities and methodologies of providing lower-level L2 learners an opportunity to know how a certain language structure is used in specific contexts in L1 discourse, an effort towards teaching learners how to make informed linguistic choices even from the beginning level.

1.1 Topic-comment Construction

The Chinese topic-comment construction refers to clauses that have a topic at the “speaker turn transition place” (Tao, forthcoming) to indicate what the sentence is about. “Turn transition places refer to the actual transition places of turns, including both the end of the previous speaker turn and the beginning of the following speaker turn” (Tao, forthcoming). Below is an example of a topic-comment construction in natural conversation, cited from Tao (forthcoming).
1. A: 身體好，有錢就行了。
   ‘So long as (he is) healthy and rich, that’d be okay.’

2. B: 啊，啊，啊，那麼錢嘛他也不是很多。
   ‘Ah, ah, ah, well, speaking of money, he doesn’t have much.’

In example (1), the entity 錢 qian ‘money’ is first mentioned at the end of the previous speaker turn and then treated as a topic by the subsequent speaker at the beginning of the turn. In this case, the topic is marked by the use of a particle 麼 me, although such explicit topic marking is optional (Li and Thompson 1981:86-87; Shi 2000:384).

Unlike the subject of a sentence, a topic does not need to have a direct semantic relationship with the verb as the one that performs the action or exists in the state named by the verb (Li and Thompson 1981:15). A topic is “typically a noun phrase (or a verb phrase) that names what the sentence is about, […] and may be followed by a pause or a pause particle” (Li and Thompson 1981:87). For example,

(2) 那棵樹葉子很大。‘That tree, (its) leaves are very big.’

In (2), the topic is 那棵樹 na ke shu ‘that tree’, which is what the sentence is about. The comment is 葉子很大 yezi hen da ‘(its) leaves are very big’, which is a description and an evaluation of the topic. As Li and Thompson (1981:85) put it, “a topic sets a spatial, temporal, or individual framework within which the main predication holds.” The comment, then, is the main predication. In this example, the topic (‘that tree’) and the subject (‘leaves’) form a whole-part relation.

There are different topic structures (for linguistic studies on topic structures in Chinese, see Chao 1968; Teng 1974; Li and Thompson 1981; Xu and Langendoen 1985; Jiang 1990; Her 1991; Chen 1996; Zhang and Fang 1996; Xu and Liu 1998; Shi 2000; Liu 2004; Li 2013; Tao, forthcoming; for L2 studies, see Jin 1994; Yuan 1995, 2017; Jung 2004; Liu 2015; Li 2006), as well as a discourse pattern called topic chains (Shi 1989; Li 2004, 2005, 2006). “A topic chain is a chain of clauses sharing a single topic. […] The topic is usually mentioned once at the beginning of a chain in the first clause. Subsequent mentions of the same topic are left unspecified” (Li 2004:26). In this study, I will not be primarily concerned with topic chains. Readers interested in the teaching of Chinese topic chains1 are referred to Li (2005, 2006) and Tao (forthcoming) for extensive and in-depth treatments.

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1 Empirically grounded in natural conversational data, Tao’s (forthcoming) study reveals that “topical elements function quite differently depending on whether they are self-initiated, self-repeated, or
The notion of topics is a broad one. For example, sentence-initial time and locative phrases (such as examples (3a), (3b), (3c), and (3d)) are considered to be topics in Li and Thompson (1981:94-95).

(3) a. 上個月天氣非常悶。 ‘Last month the weather was extremely humid.’
   b. 在臺北可以吃得很好。 ‘(In Taipei) one can eat really well.’
   c. 牆上爬著很多壁虎。 ‘The wall has a lot of salamanders crawling on it.’
   d. 信封裡裝不進這些照片。 ‘These photos won’t fit in this envelope.’

While these examples may be considered topic sentences, there do not seem to be strong reasons to believe that sentences like (3c) and (3d) should be taught to L2 learners under the umbrella of topic sentences. An empirical study (Su 2010) shows that sentences such as 3c are better taught as existential sentences where the semantic relation between the locative semantic chunk and the nominal semantic chunk is that of “existential location” and “existential entity.” Sentences such as (3d) could be taught as an accommodation construction where the semantic relation between the two nominal semantic chunks is that of “accommodator” and “accommodatee” (Su and Lu 2010).

Li and Thompson (1981:89) also think that sentences such as (4) are topic-comment sentences and not passive constructions – the reason being that in these sentences, the subject of the verb is not present.

(4) 房子造好了。 ‘The house, (someone) has finished building it.’

I agree that sentences such as (4) can be considered topic-comment sentences; however, they are best treated as a type of passive construction in which the passiveness is unmarked, hence “unmarked passives” (Tao and Liu 2010; Su 2017b). For language teaching purposes, unmarked passives are better treated separately as a major grammatical construction, due to their high frequencies in L1 discourse and unique discourse-pragmatic function – factuality (Su 2017b). I will explain the concept of factuality in Section 2.
Li and Thompson (1981:88) also consider SVO sentences such as (5) topic sentences in which the subject and the topic are identical.

(5) 我喜歡吃蘋果。 ‘I like to eat apples.’

SVO sentences such as (5) are not included in the discussion of the current study due to their common status in Chinese.

As the focus of the current study is on language pedagogy at the lower levels, I will focus on a topic construction that is commonly taught in the lower level curricula. In particular, I will address the discourse-pragmatic functions and pedagogy of the kind of topic-comment sentences that include both a topic and a subject, namely, double-nominative topic-comment sentences. In such sentences, the topic and subject can be either non-coreferential (as in (6a)) or coreferential (as in (6b)) (Jin 1994).

(6) a. 那個人他媽病了。 ‘That man’s mother is sick.’
   b. 那個孩子他很淘氣。 ‘That child is very naughty.’

The topic (as in (7a)) can also be a constituent of the argument structure of the verb (as illustrated in (7b)).

(7) a. 數學作業我已經做完了。 ‘The math assignment, I already finished it.’
   b. 我已經做完了數學作業。 ‘I already finished the math assignment.’

1.2 Existing Textbook Explanations Based on Non-authentic Materials

Existing textbooks typically start introducing the topic-comment construction from the beginning level. For example, in a widely adopted Chinese textbook, Integrated Chinese (Liu et al. 2009), the topic-comment construction is introduced in Level 1, Part 1, Lesson 10 (pp. 256-257). Below are the grammar notes from the textbook.

When a noun or noun phrase has become established as a known element in a conversation, it can occur at the beginning of the sentence as the “topic,” with the rest of the sentence functioning as a “comment” on it. This forms what is known as a “topic-comment sentence.” In such a sentence the object of the verb can be brought forward to serve as the topic of the sentence.

An isolated example (8) in the textbook is cited below:

(8) A: 你有朋友嗎？
   ‘Do you have friends?’

   B: 朋友我有很多，可是都不在這兒。
   ‘I have many friends, but none of them are here.’
Such explanations are valid but far from adequate in that the explanations do not address the question of when to use a topic-comment sentence. For example, speaker B in (8) could also respond with a non-topic-comment sentence, as in (8b) and (8c).

(8b) A: 你有朋友嗎？
   ‘Do you have friends?’
   B: 我有很多，可是都不在這兒。
      ‘I have many (friends), but none of them are here.’

(8c) A: 你有朋友嗎？
   ‘Do you have friends?’
   B: 我有很多朋友，可是都不在這兒。
      ‘I have many friends, but none of them are here.’

What difference does it make when speakers choose to use the topic-comment construction (when they could have chosen other grammatical constructions)? More generally, this question has to do with the Alternative Puzzle (Su 2017a), namely, given alternative grammatical options, how do native speakers make the choice in a given communicative context? Without addressing questions such as this and providing concrete contexts within which speakers do choose to use a certain grammatical structure, learners are left uncertain about when to use a particular structure. I will elaborate on this issue in the following section.

I believe that a combination of both conventional textbook materials and authentic materials would be a better solution than having only conventional textbook materials (Su and Tao 2014). This is because conventional textbooks provide extensive drills on structural elements and authentic materials provide concrete contexts where the choice among alternative grammatical structures (Su 2017a) is made clear.

1.3 Acquisition of Topic-comment Construction

As a number of SLA studies have shown (see Jin 1994; Cao et al. 2006; a review in Liu 2015), English speakers learning L2 Chinese, in general, have difficulty with topic structures. Compared to L1 speakers, they produce far fewer structures; their error rate is high in grammatical judgment tasks. Sometimes they show little improvement until they reach the very advanced stage where they have had several years of immersive study in Mainland China or Taiwan (Yuan 2017). The major issue that learners have is “omission” (Ellis 1994:56) of use when the context favors it.
“Omission” (Ellis 1994:56) of use refers to the L2 linguistic situation where an L2 learner does not use a particular linguistic structure when the context calls for it.

Based on L2 data from an oral interview, a story retelling, and a composition, Jin (1994) finds that learners at the beginning stage treat Chinese as a subject-prominent (SP) language like English. Their language production lacks double nominative constructions – a type of topic construction; only 2 uses versus 36 uses in the L1 group. Jin (1994:115) summarizes that “when learning Chinese, English learners go through a process of systematically transferring English SP features to Chinese until they reach a requisite proficiency when the concept of topic emerges.”

Similar results are reported in Cao et al. (2006). Using both test data and production data, Cao and her colleagues compared the patterns displayed by learners of different L1 backgrounds in comprehending and using different topic constructions. The findings reveal that at early stages, learners seem to use the simplest SVO structure to process sentences and their discourse is marked by a lack of topic sentences. Topic prominence in the learner’s first language, such as Japanese and Korean, does positively transfer to a topic-prominent target language (i.e., Chinese), but this transfer is more obvious at later stages as learners reach advanced levels.

Using grammatical judgment tasks, Liu (2015) examines English speakers’ L2 acquisition of seven Chinese topic structures:

a) topic is a constituent of the argument structure of the verb;
b) topic and subject forming a possessive relation;
c) topic and subject forming a whole-part relation;
d) topic and subject forming a kind-unit relation;
e) topic and the object form a whole-part relation;
f) topic corresponds to an empty object which is in an embedded question;
g) topic corresponds to an empty object which is in a sentential subject.

In Liu’s (2015) study, 64 subjects enrolled in second-year to fourth-year Chinese classes at two US universities as well as 20 Chinese L1 speakers participated in a grammatical judgment task. The subjects were asked to judge each of the 60 sentences on a scale – completely unacceptable, probably unacceptable, not sure, probably acceptable, and completely acceptable. The results show none of the learner levels performed correctly for all these types of topic structures, and neither did any of the levels fail in all sentence types. In other words, they judged the grammaticality of some types of topic structures incorrectly while judging the other types correctly. The
types of topic structure that learners performed better were sentences where the topic is a constituent of the argument structure of the verb and sentences where the topic and the subject form a whole-part or kind-unit measure relation. Types (e), (f), and (g) present a challenge to the learners, especially lower-level ones. The results suggest that these learners do have some knowledge about topic structures, especially the structures in which the topic and the subject exhibit a whole-part relation or a kind-unit relation.

Using grammatical judgment tasks, Yuan (2017) finds that highly proficient L2 speakers of Chinese, who had an average stay of 6.3 years in Mainland China or Taiwan have native-like ability to comprehend the kind of topic sentences where the topic is not a constituent of the argument structure of the verb (such as 水果我最爱吃香蕉 ‘As for fruits, I like to eat bananas the most’).

Taken together, the above-cited L2 acquisition studies suggest that: 1) overall learners have difficulty with topic structures; 2) compared with L1 discourse, L2 discourse, in general, is marked by a lack of topic structures, especially at the lower levels; 3) it is not entirely impossible to develop some knowledge about topic structures even in lower-level learners; 4) the more learners are exposed to L1 discourse, the better they master topic structures. In light of these findings, it is important to provide learners, especially lower-level learners, an opportunity to learn about how the topic-comment construction is used in L1 discourse. To this end, I am using authentic materials to explore some possibilities and methodologies for exposing lower-level learners to L1 discourse.

2. Theoretical Background and Methodology

2.1 Discourse-pragmatic Functions of Topic-comment Construction

Exposing L2 learners to L1 discourse starts with a linguistic task – figuring out how L1 discourse works. Building on Li and Thompson’s (1981:100-103) and Tao’s (forthcoming) findings on the discourse functions of topic constructions, this section discusses five categories of the discourse-pragmatic functions of the double-nominative topic-comment construction, from which I draw implications for the pedagogical design in the following section.

The reason I focus on the discourse-pragmatic functions of the topic-comment sentence is that “the topic is essentially a discourse element and functions in a special way in the discourse” (Li and Thompson 1981:100). Discourse refers to “the context
in which a given sentence occurs, whether it is a conversation, a paragraph, a story, or some other kind of language situation” (Li and Thompson 1981:100). Li and Thompson (1981:100-101) outline the following two discourse functions of topic constructions. The first function is linking the preceding discourse (as in example (9)).

(9) A: 我在新國學校教書。
   ‘I teach at Xinguo School.’
   B: 哦！新國學校，那兒有一位張先生你認識不認識？
   ‘Oh! Xinguo School. Do you know a Mr. Zhang there?’

There are three ways of linking: The topic relating one sentence to a preceding one; introducing a subtopic – an idea that is related to what has been discussed but not explicitly mentioned in the prior speech situation; reintroducing a topic that had been mentioned earlier but then dropped.

The second function is contrasting two items by placing them as the topics of contrasting sentences (as in example (10)).

(10) 衣服新的好，朋友舊的好。
   ‘Clothes, new ones are good; friends, old ones are good.’

These two categories (Li and Thompson 1981:100-101) are integrated into the current study with modifications to further capture the discourse-pragmatic functions of the construction in question.

Contrary to commonly held beliefs that the topic always refers to something definite or generic (Li and Thompson 1981:85) and that the topic is “always definite” (Shi 2000:384), Tao (forthcoming) finds that “topical elements do not have to be definite, identifiable, or shared.” This empirical finding, based on natural conversational data, sheds new light on our understanding of what speakers actually do with topic constructions in conversational interaction. Namely, speakers “start with an indeterminate referent and work their way toward a shared understanding and an agreed upon topic” (Tao, forthcoming). Tao gives an example of how the name of a city – Luoshanji ‘Los Angeles’ – is mentioned for the first time in a conversation (thus new information, indefinite) yet identifiable (thus definite) because it is the city where the conversation took place. Tao’s (forthcoming) positions are adopted in the current study.

Before I proceed to introduce the specific categories of the discourse-pragmatic functions of double-nominative topic-comment construction, it is important to note that topic-comment sentences in all the categories listed below express a certain
degree of factuality (Su 2017b). Su (2017b) finds that the unmarked passive construction – a type of topic construction – is a linguistic device for the expression of the “factuality” lens, namely, “the unmarked passive construction prototypically marks the result of a transitive event as a fact or a truth” (p.131). Lens refers to “speakers’ subjective evaluation of reality, especially their attitudes toward an event” (Su 2017a:204). If the speaker wants the addressee to accept a statement or the occurrence of an event as a fact or a truth, the speaker needs to resort to the use of language structures that can express factuality. The unmarked passive construction is a single-nominative topic construction in which the topic and the verb form a patient-action semantic relation. As a type of topic construction, the double-nominative topic construction shares some similar features with the unmarked passive construction. As I will show in Section 3, the double-nominative topic-comment sentences are used to state or inquire about a fact or a truth. This is something that should be kept in mind and made clear to the learners, which I will ensure in my treatment of the authentic materials discussed in the next section.

Below are five categories of the discourse-pragmatic functions of the double-nominative topic-comment construction. The example for each usage category, which comes from authentic materials, will be explained in Section 3 where I discuss how to teach these discourse-pragmatic functions with the use of media clips.

**Category #1. The topic relates to a prior turn and is the speaker’s primary concern in the current turn**

The entity denoted by the topic has either been explicitly or implicitly mentioned in a prior turn of the current conversation (Li and Thompson 1981:100-101); the current speaker pays special attention to this entity and treats it as the primary concern of the current turn by framing it as a topic.

Example (authentic material, see Section 3.3 for the analysis):

#1. 春嬌你就要問一下你愛人了。

‘(As for who) Chunjiao (is), you need to ask your husband.’

**Category #2. The topic refers to an obvious non-verbal entity in the context**

The entity denoted by the topic is something obvious in the non-verbal context (Tao, forthcoming) and thus is made accessible (Chafe 1987) to the addressee.

Example (authentic material, see Section 3.4 for the analysis):

#2. 這兩件衣服，哪個好看？

‘(Speaking of) these two outfits, which one is nicer?’
Category #3. The topic first mentioned in current conversation but established through prior interaction

The entity denoted by the topic is mentioned for the first time in the current conversation (Tao, forthcoming), but it is a piece of known information to the addressee through prior interaction with the speaker. By placing a first-time mentioned reference (which is new information to people who, unlike the intended addressee, do not have prior interaction with the speaker regarding this piece of information) at the initial position of the clause – a typical position for known information – the speaker is acknowledging the addressee’s epistemic right to possess such information (see the analysis of epistemic territories in Raymond and Heritage 2006; Heritage 2012). In so doing, the speaker is acknowledging the prior interaction with the addressee and evoking the understanding of their social relationships in the current interactional framework.

Example (authentic material, see Section 3.5 for the analysis):

#3. 答應你的我做到了。
‘I’ve done what I promised you.’

Category #4. Highlight an attribute of the topic

The juxtaposition of an entity in the topic position and an attribute in the comment position highlights the salience of an attribute of the entity. The construction can be used to emphasize an attribute of an entity.

Examples (authentic material, see Section 3.6 for the analysis):

#4a. 帥文他很喜歡數學。
‘(Speaking of) Shuaiwen, he really likes math.’
#4b. 我數學最厲害！
‘My math is the best!’

Category #5. Contrast two ideas to emphasize the latter

The juxtaposition of two topic-comment clauses contrasts two ideas to emphasize the latter: the first clause denotes an obvious idea and sets up a contrasting context to make the second idea denoted in the second clause convincing (Li and Thompson 1981:101).

Example (authentic material, see Section 3.7 for the analysis):

#5. 洗碗誰都能洗，音樂可不是誰都能會的。
‘Anybody can wash dishes. Music though, not everyone can do it.’
This list is by no means an exhaustive one. Nonetheless, these discourse-pragmatic functions are among the common usages of the topic-comment construction that could be introduced in all levels of L2 Chinese curricula. Also, note that there can be multiplicity in one single case. Namely, a single token/sentence can be of more than one of these five categories. For learners, as Su and Tao (2018a) explain, the goal is not to distinguish between one category from another, but rather whether or not to use a particular language structure and sometimes whether to apply one or multiple categories.

2.2 Methodologies

An increasing number of studies have shown that authentic materials have advantages over non-authentic teaching materials (Mishan 2005; Tao 2005; Gilmore 2007, 2011; Webb 2010; Pinner 2013; Zyzik and Polio 2017). Authentic materials preserve genuine discourse patterns and are widely adopted at the advanced level. However, their use at lower levels (McGinnis 1990; Su and Tao 2014; Zyzik and Polio 2017; Su and Tao 2018a, 2018b) is a challenging issue, due to the notorious difficulty and complexity associated with authentic materials. For example, complex grammatical structures and elusive usages, high density of unlearned words, subtle pragmatic implications, rich cultural references, and fast speech speed. In addition, according to Tao (2005), there may be “issues of control and systematicity with natural speech samples” (p.16), namely, the difficulty of finding “a natural speech sample that fits into the pedagogical focus of the lessons” (p.16), and the issue of having “too many features appearing in a single sample to be taught appropriately at a particular stage” (p.16). Despite these challenges, carefully selected and annotated authentic materials are much needed for language teaching at the lower levels. This is because it is important to provide lower-level learners the opportunity to know how a certain language structure is used in L1 discourse so that they can have a better understanding of how to use the structure in question when they are first introduced to it. This is especially important for the teaching and learning of Chinese as a second language because, as Li (2005:book description page) summarizes, “Chinese is a discourse-oriented language. It has relatively few morphological and syntactic rules, but more constructions and strategies at the discourse level for the organization of text.” It is, therefore, no surprise that some applied linguists who work on the pedagogical grammar of L2 Chinese particularly value the teaching of discourse-pragmatic functions of grammatical structures (see Zhou 2002).
The pedagogical design will also draw upon a finding (Su 2016) in interactional linguistics regarding how language patterns emerge. Namely, language emerges through social interaction among language users who are constantly reusing and modifying prior utterances. Reuse refers to speakers’ repetition of the words and/or grammatical constructions used in a prior conversational exchange/turn; modification means that speakers modify the lexical item in an open slot of a grammatical construction by substituting the previous lexical item with a new one that fits the current communicational situation. Su’s (2016) findings hold direct implications for developing learners’ language capacity through interactional activities that incorporate reuse and modification of L1 authentic discourse. A Reuse and Modification activity will be incorporated into the pedagogical design discussed in the next section.

Another source of implication comes from the finding that speakers’ knowledge of grammar includes not only the use of a particular grammatical construction in a given context but also the “non-use” of it (Su 2017a). “Non-use” (Su 2017a) refers to the L1 linguistic situation where the context does not favor the use of a particular linguistic structure even though the use of it might well be grammatical. Essentially, the concept of “non-use” differs from the concept regarding the linguistic situation where a particular language structure “should not be used” (Teng 2003) in the sense that “non-use” includes both the situation of ungrammatical use (i.e., “should not be used”) and the situation of being grammatical but not preferred in the given context. “Non-use” is an outcome of linguistic choice-making (Su 2017a). In the pedagogical design, I will address why a topic-comment sentence is chosen over a non-topic-comment sentence to express the intended meaning (see also Su and Tao 2018a).

In what follows, I will make use of media clips in video format to describe a pedagogical design for teaching these discourse-pragmatic functions of the double-nominative topic-comment construction at the elementary and intermediate levels.

3. Pedagogical Design

Based on the methodologies and the discourse-pragmatic functions of the double-nominative topic-comment construction discussed in the previous section, this section delineates the treatments of the matching authentic materials that can be used to illustrate the contexts for the usage categories.

3.1 Objectives, Proficiency Levels, and Instructions for Use
This teaching unit is designed for students in a beginning-level/first-year language class and/or an intermediate-level/second-year language class\textsuperscript{2}. There are two major learning objectives: 1) can identify the double-nominative topic-comment construction based on its structural properties; 2) can produce a topic-comment sentence in a conversation by reusing and modifying the language materials provided in the authentic conversations.

To better suit the instructional conditions in varying Chinese language programs, instead of designing an entire pedagogical package to teach all the usage categories in one go, I will provide independent teaching “molecules”, each addressing one usage category. A teaching molecule is the implementation of the instructional guidelines (see Section 3.2) with the use of a specific authentic material (see Sections 3.3 through 3.7). Instructors could then choose and use the molecules according to local pedagogical conditions.

Each molecule will take approximately 30 minutes of classroom instructional time. The instructional time can be shortened by asking the students to preview the transcript at home before coming to class. The foci of the preview will be on content comprehension of the dialogue (English translation is provided), oral reading of the transcript, as well as the meaning and pronunciation of new vocabulary. If students come to the classroom having previewed the transcript, Step 2 Transcript Comprehension can be skipped in the classroom instruction, and the overall instructional time for each teaching molecule can be shortened to approximately 20 minutes (may vary depending on students’ actual language background).

A general guideline is for instruction at the elementary level to focus on Categories #1, #2, and #3 and for instruction at the intermediate level to focus on Categories #4 and #5. This is mainly due to the consideration of comprehension difficulty and usage complexity. Category #1 (The topic relates to a prior turn and is the speaker’s primary concern in the current turn), Category #2 (The topic refers to an obvious non-verbal entity in the context), and Category #3 (Topic first mentioned in current conversation but established through prior interaction) are relatively straightforward.

\textsuperscript{2}This study has a relatively wide span of the target proficiency levels – including both elementary and intermediate. Different institutions may have notably different curricula at these levels. For example, Integrated Chinese Level 1, Part 2, Lesson 16 is taught in the elementary curriculum at a public university in Los Angeles but intermediate curriculum at a private university in the same city. For these considerations, I will not attempt to mark the “unlearned” words in the transcripts and add pinyin (instructors will know which ones are new words for their students), nor will I attempt to give a set of assessment materials in addition to the exercises that I will provide, due to the consideration of space and focus. Readers interested in how authentic materials can be used for language assessment are referred to Su and Tao (2018a, 2018b) for sample assessment materials.
and the discourse functions denoted in these three categories are more connected. Category #4 (*Highlight an attribute of the topic*) and Category #5 (*Contrast two ideas to emphasize the latter*) are relatively complex in terms of the rich pragmatic implications they carry. For instructors who prefer to teach all of the five categories, the recommended sequence is to follow the order from #1 to #5, due to their increasing complexity.

As for the coordination of these authentic materials with existing textbook materials, a general principle is to introduce the textbook material first and then use the authentic materials provided here to expand students’ understanding of the language structure as to how it is used in L1 discourse. This is because textbook materials typically stress structural properties of a given linguistic construction and provide ample exercises and drills to raise structural awareness, which could serve as a useful point of departure, though not absolutely necessary, for the use of authentic materials. In cases where the textbook explanations are invalid and cannot stand linguistic facts, the solution is to use the authentic materials provided in this study solely because they address both structural properties of the construction in question as well as its functional usages and why L1 speakers choose it in a given context. As for specific textbooks, I will not attempt to determine how these materials can be used with individual textbooks (even the major ones), for the consideration that different parts of the world often use different textbooks for Chinese teaching. In addition, different institutions (for instance, high school versus college-level) and different programs (school systems, commercial language programs, etc.) may use different textbooks or may even not use any textbook at all (as is the case of some online Chinese teaching websites). The authentic materials provided below can also be used independently without combining them with the use of existing textbooks. The analysis of the five functional categories can also be used in any supplementary materials, such as readers and online Chinese teaching programs that focus on authentic materials.

3.2 Instructional Guidelines: Understanding Topic-comment Construction through Authentic Materials
The goal of this section is to outline a pedagogical design that can illustrate the specific contexts where the double-nominative topic-comment construction can be used for the discourse-pragmatic functions summarized in Section 2.

**Step 1: Video Play**

First, tell the students that the following teaching material is about a type of context where they can use a unique Chinese sentence pattern – the topic-comment sentence. Then tell the students that they are going to watch a video clip from a movie/TV show and they do not have to worry about completely understanding everything said there and that all they need to do at this point is to get an overall sense of what the video is about (Su and Tao 2018a). Then play the video clip twice.

**Step 2: Transcript Comprehension**

Have the students study the transcript of this video clip. Walk the students through the transcript. The focus of this step is on content comprehension. Both Simplified and Traditional Chinese character versions are provided in the transcripts so that instructors can choose the relevant one(s).

1) Display the transcript on a screen or give students a handout. Give the students some time to read the “Description.”

2) Teach new vocabulary as necessary for understanding this teaching material.

3) The teacher can first read each line in the transcript and ask the students to repeat.

4) The teacher can then ask the students to read the lines working in groups. (If there is not enough time, this step could be skipped.)

5) While displaying the transcript, play at a slower speed (if necessary because of the students’ proficiency level) the video clip without displaying the video and point to the corresponding lines on the transcript for the students. This could potentially help the students establish the connection between sound comprehension and character recognition pertaining to the content of the teaching material.

6) Play the video clip twice, first at a slower speed (if necessary because of the students’ proficiency level), then at normal speed.

**Step 3: Structural Awareness**
Raise learners’ awareness of the structural properties of the topic-comment construction. This step addresses Learning Objective (1).

Point to “Target Structure” in the transcript and ask students to focus on the target structure – the topic-comment sentence.

1) Tell the students that this kind of sentence has a topic at the beginning, which is what the sentence is about. It could often be translated as “as for …” in English. There could be a pause in speech after the topic, but it is optional. The topic can be a noun/pronoun, a noun phrase, or a verb phrase. The comment itself could be a sentence. The comment expresses what the speaker would like to say about the topic.

**Step 4: Understanding Context**

1) Use the information provided in “Usage Context” in the transcript for instruction.

**Step 5: Exercises with Authentic Materials**

1) Play the video clip; pause after each line and have students repeat the line. Ask the students to imitate the prosodic features of the speakers (Tao 2011).

2) Play the video with the sound muted at a slower speed and ask students to read the lines as in a role play, mimicking the manner of speaking in the video.

3) Play the video with the sound muted at normal speed and ask students to read the lines as in a role play, mimicking the manner of speaking in the video.

4) If a group of students would like to volunteer to do the oral reading of the video clip (while the video clip is played with the sound muted) in front of the class, invite them to do so. If not, move on to the next activity. (If there is not enough time, this step could be skipped.)

5) Play the video and pause before the topic-comment sentence and ask students to say the next line without looking at the transcript.

6) Ask students to use the dialogue in “Reuse and Modification” (Su 2016) to make their own dialogue in a role play.

Steps 4 and 5 address Learning Objective (2).
3.3 Authentic Material and Analysis of Category #1 of Topic-comment Construction

Category #1. The topic relates to a prior turn and is the speaker’s primary concern in the current turn

The entity denoted by the topic has either been explicitly or implicitly mentioned in a prior turn of the current conversation; the current speaker pays special attention to this entity and treats it as the focus of the current turn by framing it as a topic.

Transcript of Video Clip #1: Chunjiao – You need to ask your husband

Description: The husband has been physically blind for many decades. After a successful eye surgery, he finally sees light. This is the first time he is able to see how his wife and his crush (who he actually loves) look like. His crush asks him how she looks. He responds that she is even prettier than Chunjiao, a girl he considered extremely attractive when he was a young man (before he lost his vision).

| Husband: | 1. 我终于看到你了！ |
| Wife: | 2. 那我的样子跟你想的一样吗？ |
| Husband: | 3. 比我想象中漂亮多了。 |
| Husband’s crush: | 4. 那我呢？ |
| Husband: | 5. 比春娇好看多了！ |
| Wife: | 6. 谁是春娇啊？ |
| Husband’s crush: | 7. 春娇啊？ |
| 8. 春娇你就要问一下你爱人了。 |
| Husband’s crush: | 4. How about me? |
| Husband: | 5. Much prettier than Chunjiao! |
| Wife: | 6. Who is Chunjiao? |
| Husband’s crush: | 7. Chunjiao? |

Target Structure:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chunjiao</td>
<td>You need to ask your husband.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘(As for who) Chunjiao (is), you need to ask your husband.’
Usage Context:

1) Co-text: Lines 5 through 7 in the transcript.

2) Why a topic-comment sentence is used here:
   - The topic relates to a prior turn and is the speaker’s primary concern in the current turn. Namely, the person denoted by the topic (Chunjiao) has been explicitly mentioned in a prior turn of the current conversation (lines 5 and 6); the current speaker (the husband’s crush) pays special attention to this person (Chunjiao) and treats it as the speaker’s primary concern in the current turn (line 8) by framing it as a topic.
   - The topic-comment sentence here also implies that this is a fact – that is, in order to know who Chunjiao is, the wife would need to ask her husband.

3) Why a non-topic-comment sentence such as the following is not chosen:
   你要问一下你爱人春娇是谁。
   你要問一下你愛人春嬌是誰。
   ‘You need to ask your husband who Chunjiao is.’

Because this special person – Chunjiao – has been mentioned in the preceding context, a non-topic-comment sentence like the one above would not be able to connect with the previous utterances coherently, nor could it imply that the speaker pays special attention to this mysterious girl (Chunjiao).

Reuse and Modification:

| A: 我终于见到你了！ | A: 我終於見到你了！ |
| B: 那我的样子跟（你想的／照片）一样吗？ | B: 那我的樣子跟（你想的／照片）一樣嗎？ |
| A: 比（我想象中／照片）（好看／漂亮／帅／酷／可爱）多了。 | A: 比（我想像中／照片）（好看／漂亮／帥／酷／可愛）多了。 |
| C: 那我呢？ | C: 那我呢？ |
| A: 比春娇（好看／漂亮／酷／可爱）多了！ | A: 比春嬌（好看／漂亮／酷／可愛）多了！ |
| B: 谁是春娇啊？ | B: 誰是春嬌啊？ |
| C: 春娇啊？ | C: 春嬌啊？ |
| 春娇你就要问一下你（同学／朋友／老师）了。 | 春嬌你就要問一下你（同學／朋友／老師）了。 |
3.4 Authentic Material and Analysis of Category #2 of Topic-comment Construction

Category #2. Topic refers to an obvious non-verbal entity in the context

The entity denoted by the topic is something obvious in the non-verbal context and thus is made accessible to the addressee.

Transcript of Video Clip #2: Which one is nicer

Description: The girl in black is asking her friend Guanguan which outfit is nicer to wear to a class where a guy she likes is also going.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Girl in black:</th>
<th>Guanguan:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. 快快快，你快帮我看看。</td>
<td>2. Hurry up, hurry up, hurry up. Help me take a look immediately.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. 你觉得，</td>
<td>3. What do you think –</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. 这两件衣服，哪个好看？</td>
<td>4. These two outfits, which one is nicer?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. 这件好看，还是这件？</td>
<td>5. This one is nicer, or this one?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. 我看看啊，</td>
<td>6. Let me see.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. 我感觉这套好看一点儿。</td>
<td>7. I feel that this one is a bit nicer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Target Structure:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>求这两件衣服，哪个好看？</td>
<td>What is it that the speaker is saying about the topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>求这两件衣服，哪个好看？</td>
<td>Which one is nicer?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>These two outfits, which one is nicer?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Speaking of) these two outfits, which one is nicer?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Usage Context:

1) Non-verbal context: The two outfits that the girl is holding in her hands and showing to the addressee Guanguan.

2) Why a topic-comment sentence is used here:
   - Topic refers to obvious non-verbal entities in the context. Namely, the things denoted by the topic (the two outfits) are something obvious in the non-verbal context (the girl in black is holding the two outfits in her hands and showing them to the addressee) and thus are known to the addressee.
   - The topic-comment sentence here also implies that the speaker is seeking a factual answer, as opposed to a more subjective and personal perspective.

3) Why non-topic-comment sentences such as the following are not chosen:
   这是两件衣服。哪个好看?
   这是兩件衣服。哪個好看?
   ‘These are two outfits. Which one is nicer?’
   Non-topic-comment sentences such as the ones above would appear as redundant because the speaker is literally holding the things and showing them right in front of the addresses. As such, it is not linguistically economical to say “These are two outfits.”

Reuse and Modification:

| A: (Actual name of the addressee)。 | A:（Actual name of the addressee）。
| 快快快，你快帮我看。你覺得， | 快快快，你快幫我看。你覺得，
| 這（兩件衣服／actual items at hand），哪個（好看／好／漂亮／方便／好用／合适……）？ | 這（兩件衣服／actual items at hand），哪個（好看／好／漂亮／方便／好用／合适……）？
| 这（件／……）（好看／……），还是这（件／……）？ | 這（件／……）（好看／……），還是這（件／……）？
| B: 我看看啊，我感觉这（件／……）（好看／……）（一点儿／得多）。 | B: 我看看啊，
| 我感觉這（件／……）（好看／……）（一點兒／得多）。 | 我感覺這（件／……）（好看／……）（一點兒／得多）。
3.5 Authentic Material and Analysis of Category #3 of Topic-comment Construction

Category #3. Topic first-time mentioned in the current conversation but established through prior interaction

The entity denoted by the topic is mentioned for the first time in the current conversation, but it is a piece of known information to the addressee through prior interaction. By using a topic-comment construction in this way, the speaker is acknowledging the prior interaction with the addressee and evoking the understanding of their social relationships in the current interaction.

Transcript of Video Clip #3: I’ve done what I promised you

Description: The dialogue takes place between two former lovers. The man wants to get back with the girl, but she tells him that she is about to marry someone else.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Girl</th>
<th>1. 什么意思啊？</th>
<th>1. What do you mean?</th>
<th>1. 什麼意思啊？</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Man</td>
<td>2. 答应你的我做到了。</td>
<td>2. I’ve done what I promised you. (lit. What I promised you, I’ve done (it).)</td>
<td>2. 答應你的我做到了。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. 我自由了。</td>
<td>3. I’m single again (lit. I’m free now).</td>
<td>3. 我自由了。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man</td>
<td>5. 回到我身边，</td>
<td>5. Come back to me.</td>
<td>5. 回到我身邊，</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. 嫁给我吧。</td>
<td>6. Marry me.</td>
<td>6. 嫁給我吧。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>7. 我们不可能了。</td>
<td>7. There’s no way we can be (together) anymore.</td>
<td>7. 我們不可能了。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man</td>
<td>8. 还在生我的气？</td>
<td>8. (You’re) still mad at me?</td>
<td>8. 還在生我的氣？</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10. 还是别的什么原因？</td>
<td>10. Or is there another reason?</td>
<td>10. 還是別的什麼原因？</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>11. 因为我要结婚了。</td>
<td>11. Because I’m getting married.</td>
<td>11. 因為我要結婚了。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man</td>
<td>12. 你要结婚？！</td>
<td>12. You are getting married?!</td>
<td>12. 你要結婚？！</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Target Structure:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What the sentence is about</td>
<td>What is it that the speaker is saying about the topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>答应你的</td>
<td>我做到了。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>答應你的</td>
<td>我做到了。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What I promised you</td>
<td>I’ve done (it)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I’ve done what I promised you.’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Usage Context:

1) Previous context: Previously the man promised the girl that he would regain his single status by divorcing his wife so that the two could be together.
2) Why a topic-comment sentence is used here:
   - Topic first-time mentioned in the current conversation but known to the addressee through prior interaction. Namely, the thing denoted by the topic (‘what I promised you’) is mentioned for the first time in the current conversation, but it is a piece of information known to the addressee through their prior interaction.
   - By using a topic-comment construction in this way, the speaker (the man) is acknowledging the prior interaction (their former romantic relationship) with the addressee (the girl) and evoking the understanding of their social relationship (especially their former relationship as lovers) in the current interaction. The decision to choose a topic-comment sentence here is driven by the communicative goal of the speaker (the man) to convince the addressee (the girl) to return to and marry him.
   - The topic-comment sentence here also implies that this is a fact (that the speaker has done what he promised the girl).
3) Why a non-topic-comment sentence is not chosen here:
   - 我做到了答应你的事。
   - 我做到了答應你的事。
   - ‘I’ve done what I promised you.’
   The non-topic-comment sentence above does not appear as natural, due to the reason that the object 答應你的事 ‘the things that I promised you’ is a piece of known information to the addressee. As such, a topic-comment
sentence is more appropriate. In addition, the topic-comment sentence can also achieve the communicative goal analyzed above (see: “Why a topic-comment sentence is used here”).

Reuse and Modification:

| A: 这是什么？ | A: 這是什麼？ |
| B: （你想看的电影的票／你想去的饭馆／你想看的书……）我（买到了／订到了／找到了）。 | B: （你想看的電影的票／你想去的飯館／你想看的書……）我（買到了／訂到了／找到了）。 |
| A: 所以呢？ | A: 所以呢？ |
| B: 我们一起（去看电影／去吃晚饭／看书）吧。 | B: 我們一起（去看電影／去吃晚飯／看書）吧。 |
| A: 不好意思。我去不了。 | A: 不好意思。我去不了。 |
| B: 为什么？ | B: 為什麼？ |
| A: 因为我…… | A: 因為我…… |

3.6 Authentic Material and Analysis of Category #4 of Topic-comment Construction

Category #4. Highlight an attribute of the topic

The juxtaposition of an entity (e.g., person) in the topic position and an attribute in the comment position highlights the salience of an attribute of the entity. The construction can be used to emphasize an attribute of an entity.

Transcript of Video Clip #4: This kid, he really likes math

Description: The main TV host is introducing to the audience a little boy who likes math a lot. Upon hearing this, the co-host jokingly says that his math is the best and gives the boy an easy math quiz. The boy responds with the correct answer immediately.

| Host 1 (glasses): | 1. 帅文他很喜欢数学。 1. (Speaking of) Shuaiwen, he really likes math. |
| Host 2 (Oudi): | 2. 哦？ |
| | 3. 我数学最厉害！ |
| | 4. 来，欧弟叔叔考一个。 |
| Host 1 (glasses): | 4. Uncle Oudi, give (him) a quiz. |
| Host 2 (Oudi): | 5. 1+1? |
| Boy: | 6. 2 |
| Host 2 (Oudi): | 7. 好快！ |
| | 7. So fast! |
Target Structure:

Topic-comment sentence (line 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>帅文</td>
<td>他很喜欢数学。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>帅文</td>
<td>他很喜歡數學。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shuaiwen</td>
<td>he really likes math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘(Speaking of) Shuaiwen, he really likes math.’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Topic-comment sentence (line 3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>我</td>
<td>数学最厉害！</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>我</td>
<td>數學最厲害！</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>(my) math is the best!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘My math is the best!’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Usage Context:

1) Conversation setting: The main host is introducing the little boy to the audience and thus is likely to describe some characteristics of the boy.

2) Why a topic-comment sentence is used here:
   - Highlight an attribute of the topic. Namely, the juxtaposition of an entity (the person) in the topic position and an attribute in the comment position (‘he really likes math’ and ‘my math is the best’) highlights the salience of an attribute of the person. The topic-comment construction is used here to emphasize the attribute of the person.
   - The topic-comment sentences here also imply that the speakers want the addressees to accept these statements as truths; namely, to agree that these are indeed salient attributes of the persons described in the topics.

3) Why non-topic-comment sentences such as the following are not chosen:
   帅文很喜欢数学。Or: 他很喜欢数学。
   帅文很喜歡數學。Or: 他很喜歡數學。
   ‘Shuaiwen really likes math.’ Or: ‘He really likes math.’
   我是数学最厉害的人。Or: 数学最厉害的人是我。
   我是數學最厲害的人。Or: 數學最厲害的人是我。
‘I am the one who is best at math.’ Or: ‘The one who is best at math is me.’
Non-topic-comment sentences such as the above would not be able to emphasize the salience of the attribute, and therefore, would not appear as convincing to the addressees.

**Reuse and Modification:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A: XX（someone’s real name）（他／她）很喜欢（数学／……）。</th>
<th>B: 是吗？你怎么知道？ A:（他／她）告诉我的。</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A: XX（someone’s real name）（他／她）很喜歡（數學／……）。</td>
<td>B: 是嗎？你怎麼知道？ A:（他／她）告訴我的。</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3.7 Authentic Material and Analysis of Category #5 of Topic-comment Construction

**Category #5. Contrast two ideas to emphasize the latter**

The juxtaposition of two topic-comment clauses contrasts two ideas to emphasize the latter: the first clause denotes an obvious idea and sets up a contrasting context to make the second idea denoted in the second clause convincing. Such a construction could be used in persuasive contexts.

**Transcript of Video Clip #5: Music, not everyone can do it**

*Description:* The grandma offers to help the grandson wash dishes so that he can practice his music, but the grandson politely declines. Seeing the two keep insisting, the mother, despite not really intending to do so, offers to do the dishes herself. The grandma thus lets the mother do it, saying that anybody can wash dishes, but not anyone can do music. The grandson gladly accepts the mother’s offer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grandma: 1. 来，奶奶帮你洗。</th>
<th>A: (Let) grandma help you wash (the dish).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boy: 2. 唉，不用不用。</td>
<td>1. 来，奶奶帮你洗。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. 奶奶我来吧，没事儿。</td>
<td>2. 它’s okay. (lit. Oh, no, no.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandma: 4. 排练要紧。</td>
<td>3. 奶奶，(let) me do (it). (It’s) okay.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. 奶奶帮你洗。</td>
<td>4. (Your) rehearsal matters more.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. (Let) grandma help you wash (it).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**SU: Discourse-pragmatic Functions of a Chinese Topic-comment Construction and L2 Teaching Strategies Based on Authentic Media Materials**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Boy:</th>
<th>6. 我来吧。奶奶。&lt;keeps insisting&gt;</th>
<th>6. (Let) me do (it), grandma. &lt;keeps insisting&gt;</th>
<th>6. 我来吧。奶奶。&lt;keeps insisting&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mom:</td>
<td>7. 妈，妈，妈。</td>
<td>7. Mom, Mom, Mom.</td>
<td>7. 媽，媽，媽。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. 怎么能让你洗呢？</td>
<td>8. How can (I) let you wash dishes?</td>
<td>8. 怎麼能讓你洗呢？</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mom:</td>
<td>11. 啊？</td>
<td>11. Ah?</td>
<td>11. 啊？</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandma:</td>
<td>12. 洗碗谁都想洗，音乐可不是谁都想会的。</td>
<td>12. Anybody can wash dishes. Music though, not everyone can do it. (lit. Washing dishes, anybody can do it; music, not anyone can do it.)</td>
<td>12. 洗碗誰都能洗，音樂可不是誰都能會的。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy:</td>
<td>13. 谢谢奶奶。</td>
<td>13. Thank you, grandma.</td>
<td>13. 謝謝奶奶。</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Target Structure:**

**Topic-comment sentences (line 12)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic 1</th>
<th>Comment 1</th>
<th>Topic 2</th>
<th>Comment 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>洗碗</td>
<td>谁都能洗，</td>
<td>音乐</td>
<td>可不是谁都能会的。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>洗碗</td>
<td>誰都能洗，</td>
<td>音樂</td>
<td>可不是誰都能會的。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washing dishes</td>
<td>anybody can do it;</td>
<td>music</td>
<td>not everyone can do it.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘Anybody can wash dishes. Music though, not everyone can do it.’

**Usage Context:**

1) Co-text: Lines 6 through 8 in the transcript.

2) Why a topic-comment sentence is used here:
   - Contrast two ideas to emphasize the latter. Namely, the juxtaposition of two topic-comment clauses contrasts two ideas to emphasize the latter (‘music though, not everyone can do it’). The first clause (‘anybody can wash dishes’) denotes an obvious idea and sets up a contrasting context to make the second idea denoted in the second clause convincing. The sentence is used in a persuasive context.
   - The topic-comment sentence here also implies that the speakers want the addressees to accept the statement as a truth, namely, to agree that ‘anybody can wash dishes; music though, not everyone can do it.’

3) Why a non-topic-comment sentence such as the following is not chosen:
Who can wash dishes, but not everyone can do music.

‘Anybody can wash dishes, but not everyone can do music.’

A non-topic-comment sentence such as the above would not have the special effect to present the statements as a truth, and therefore, would not appear as convincing to the addressee.

Reuse and Modification:

| A: 来，我帮你（洗衣服／做饭）。 | A: 来，我帮你（洗衣服／做飯）。 |
| B: 谢谢，不用不用。 | B: 謝謝，不用不用。 |
| A: 练习（音乐／足球／跳舞）要紧。我帮你（洗／做）。 | A: 練習（音樂／足球／跳舞）要緊。我帮你（洗／做）。 |
| C: 我来吧。 | C: 我來吧。 |
| A: 你（洗／做）。 | A: 你（洗／做）。 |
| C: 嗯？ | C: 嗯？ |
| A:（洗衣服／做饭）谁都能（洗／做），（音乐／足球／跳舞）可不是谁都能会的。 | A:（洗衣服／做飯）誰都能（洗／做），（音樂／足球／跳舞）可不是誰都能會的。 |
| B: 谢谢 XX（A’s name）！ | B: 謝謝 XX（A’s name）！ |

4. Conclusions

The Chinese topic-comment construction is a challenging language structure for L2 learners of Chinese, especially learners at the lower levels, who often do not use it even when the context calls for it. This is in part because of the seemingly “optional” use of this construction, its rich discourse-pragmatic functions, and the lack of a counterpart in English. This study discusses five discourse-pragmatic functions of the double-nominative topic-comment construction and provides a pedagogical design using authentic materials (e.g., film clips and TV shows) to teach these functions to learners at the elementary and intermediate levels. The goal is for learners to be exposed to L1 discourse in a guided manner so that they can be made aware of how L1 speakers make linguistic choices in certain contexts.

This study focuses on the functional analysis of the construction in question as well as the analysis of matching authentic materials that can illustrate the contexts for these functional categories. Future studies on the development of comprehensive assessment materials as well as extensive experiments to quantitatively test these methods in various educational settings would be useful. In addition, this study only focuses on one type of topic-comment constructions. As I noted earlier, there are
different types of topic structures. How to effectively teach the other types of topic structures with authentic materials is a topic worth pursuing.

Through this study, I have attempted to explore some possibilities and methodologies to provide lower-level learners an opportunity to learn how a certain language structure is used in specific contexts in L1 discourse. This is an effort that is situated within a larger context of integrating linguistics research and language teaching (see Tao 2016; Li 2005). It is important for learners to have a more realistic understanding of the basic language structures in the target language when they are first introduced to them. It is this belief that motivates me to illustrate in this study how authentic materials can be used to teach the discourse-pragmatic functions of the Chinese topic-comment construction in a lower-level language course. What I have explored here (see also Su and Tao 2018a, 2018b) are just some preliminary efforts towards the greater endeavor of making language teaching at the lower levels more authentic, an area that needs much more exploration.

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References


Chen, Ping. 1996. Pragmatic interpretations of structural topics and relativization in


Su, Danjie and Hongyin Tao. 2018a. Teaching the Mandarin utterance-final particle le


SU: Discourse-pragmatic Functions of a Chinese Topic-comment Construction and L2 Teaching Strategies Based on Authentic Media Materials


Appendix

Sources of the original video clips:

#1. Chunjiao – You need to ask your husband
   Movie 《聽風者》
   http://www.mianbao99.com/videos/45656vod-play-id-45656-sid-1-pid-0.html

#2. Which one is nicer
   TV drama 《歡樂頌》Ode to Joy 第二集(Episode 2)
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PN5IEVi8

#3. I've done what I promised you
   TV drama 《北京愛情故事》
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LMq0U2GzRVk&list=PLUg6CGAXr7ploD1AS

#4. This kid, he really likes math
   TV variety show 《天天向上》 Day Day Up, episode 20131213
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mSaVrxjNd8U

#5. Music, not everyone can do it
   Movie 《重返 20 歲》20 Once Again
   http://www.mianbao99.com/videos/45656vod-play-id-45656-sid-1-pid-0.html
一類漢語話題構式的語用功能及基於真實媒體語料的二語教學策略

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摘要

由於在話語篇章中「可用可不用」同時又具有豐富的話語語用功能，漢語話題評論構式是第二語言習得的一個難點句法格式，初中級學習者往往迴避使用（Jin 1994; Cao et al. 2006）。基於語言學和應用語言學的研究發現，本文討論雙名詞話題評論構式的五種話語語用功能，並介紹一套使用影視真實語料教授初中級學習者如何在真實語境中選用該話題評論構式的教學設計。本研究著力於探索如何利用真實語料使初中級學習者了解某一語言結構在第一語言話語語境中的語用用法，從而使學習者從初級階段就開始學習如何作出適當的語言選擇。

關鍵詞：雙名詞話題評論構式、真實語料、語言選擇、初級中級漢語習得、教學語法