

Representative Speech Acts of Chinese ESL Students in Deliberative Discussion

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Abstract: With the increasing proliferation of collaborative activities in English learning classes, deliberative discussions centered around achieving shared objectives are more likely to emerge during classroom conversations conducted in English. Through the lens of Speech Act Theory, this study examined and analyzed the English speech performance as second language of Chinese college students' deliberative dialogues in groups. In discussion, the participants demonstrate sufficient pragmatic proficiency to reach a consensus on contentious issues through their deliberative speech acts, which involve four stages: proposing ideas, providing reasoning and arguments, responding to others' viewpoints, and modifying or reformulating ideas. The analysis reveals that students can achieve an optimal deliberative dialogue through a congenial and supportive attitude. In their collaborative consultations, they diligently worked towards reaching a consensus that aligned with the collective interest, albeit failing to determine a feasible course of action. It is evident that students tend to overlook their communicative purposes amidst the process of test-oriented second language acquisition. Further English teaching should shift the focus from standard grammar and semantic accuracy to satisfying pragmatic functions.

Keywords: speech acts, deliberative discussion, Chinese ESL students

1. Introduction

Due to the extensive history of test-oriented English learning, Chinese students learning English as a second language (ESL) tend to prioritize language accuracy over communicative proficiency. In order to foster pragmatic communication skills, ESL classes in China are dedicated to promoting collaborative classroom activities. Collaborative problem-solving significantly contributes to cultivating students' advanced cognitive abilities and their capacity for problem-solving and information processing. The deliberative discussion serves as the primary mode of communication dialogue within this collaborative process.

A deliberative dialogue is a collaborative discussion among a group of individuals aimed at achieving a shared objective. Distinguishing itself from persuasive dialogue, this form of discourse facilitates the fulfillment of communicative functions through shared cooperative goals among discussants [1]. In an ideal deliberative dialogue, participants proffer new ideas and arguments. Their objective is not only to alter the audience's position but also to complement and refine the viewpoints of other participants, thereby attaining collective interests. Deliberative dialogues mainly occur in official democratic deliberative conferences where participants follow strict language and discussion

protocols; however, achieving unanimous consensus may not always be possible after such discussions [2].

Deliberative dialogue also occurs in informal settings. In instruction, collaborative learning promotes informal deliberative dialogue, enhancing individual students' communication abilities and reinforcing their focus on language's pragmatic functions. By observing and analyzing ESL students' speech acts during a deliberative discussion in target language, the research can further emphasize second language learners' proficiency in expressing themselves pragmatically, thereby providing valuable insights for future pedagogy.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Argumentation and Deliberative Discussion

In the field of interpretative pragmatics, argumentative speech acts do not neatly fit into any specific category among the basic speech acts identified by Austin and Searle. Argumentation is typically regarded as an illocutionary act; however, it distinguishes itself from other illocutionary acts in that it involves more than a mere expression of positions. The speaker not only presents personal claims and opinions but also employs persuasive techniques to convince others of these viewpoints [3]. Argumentation theorists Doug Walton and Erik Krabbe classified human dialogues into six types based on the dialogue objectives and the utilization of argumentation [4]. The notion of deliberation is understood as a type of cooperative dialogue in which the acts of proposing a course of action, of giving reasons and criticizing those reasons are an essential part of it, and of considering how the exchange may and should proceed, if the dialogue is to answer to its aims [4].

In terms of communication processes for resolving conflicts of opinion, persuasive dialogue shares similarities with deliberative dialogue among the six types of dialogue. Both involve speech acts to express opinions and proof, with the common objective of persuading others to change their positions. However, beyond influencing other parties to alter their stances, cooperation stands out as the most notable characteristic of deliberative dialogue. Deliberative dialogue serves as an essential collaborative approach for reconciling differences and manifests in various contexts. It encompasses language acts aimed at persuading recipients or resolving disputes [5]. Without a unified purpose and cooperative strategy, deliberation can transform into negotiation dialogues focused on coordinating conflicting interests. Therefore, a successful deliberative discussion has to reach four characteristics following characteristics: (1). the departure from the initial situation that requires action; (2). cooperative dialogue; (3). the aim to coordinate objectives and actions; (4). the goal to agree on the best actions to implement [1].

2.2. Speech Acts of Deliberative Discussion

For deliberative dialogue tends to be conducted collaboratively, its speech can still be divided into two categories, presumptions and argumentation. Presumptions are kinds of directive and commissive speech acts, that is, making a proposal to be committed to advocacy and lead the respondent to accept the proposal [6]. Although it is required that a new proposal different from the original should be raised at the end of the deliberative dialogue, if the presumption can be proved in an appropriate and felicitous form, then the presumption can be regarded as a verdictive [6]. At the same time, when using this verdictive speech act, the interlocutor needs to undertake the corresponding obligation of proof, which is called the burden of proof. However, some researchers believe that in such dialogues, the function of presumption is to facilitate the conversation to proceed more smoothly, thus reducing the argument burden of the proponent [6,7]. In other words, it is of no necessity to provide the evidence and reason to the other parties once the presumption has been accepted because of the proposer's authority or authoritativeness.

On the contrary, argumentation is the intention caused by the other party's inappropriate speech acts and expressions, aiming to prove that the other party is wrong or improper [8]. However, four characteristics of deliberation determine that the dialogue needs to be continuously promoted through refutations or partial refutations and then arguments. At the same time, the interlocutor relationship should be cooperative rather than antagonistic; therefore, the interlocutor's goal-setting should be consistent. Such dialogues would eventually lead to new proposals based on old issues and finally to arguments, refutations, and modifications around these new proposals.

Walton categorizes interlocutors as proponents (speakers who propose) and respondents (addressees who respond to the proposal in various ways) [1]. However, this classification shows limitations in practice because the conversation no longer carries turn-based, especially in discussions with multiple participants. McBurney et al. divide the formal deliberative dialogue steps into open dialogue, enter dialogue, propose, assert, prefer, ask&justify, move, reject, retract, and withdraw dialogue [4]. Participants engage in dialogues by entering them, proposing and evaluating new solutions while expressing their support or opposition. On the other hand, making a new proposal should be a verdictive act, which, if approved by the interlocutors, exempts the proposer from self-evidence [6]. However, if questioned, it is his responsibility to prove the truth. The discussion process focuses on presenting new proposals and adjusting them based on responses from other participants until a collectively accepted action plan is formed.

2.3. Case Study in Deliberative Discussion

In despite of rich theoretical studies on deliberative dialogues, limited case studies mainly focus on politically deliberative system or deliberative democracy. The recording and analysis of speech acts are partial of the existing research on deliberative democracy, centered around legislative and political issue debates, with distinct speech acts, such as verdictive speech acts, objective and counterarguments. Landwehr and Holzinger, in the process of analyzing the discursiveness and coordinateness of the deliberation in the Bundestag forum and citizen conference under the same topic, found discussants tended to exclude deliberation as the primary mode of communication during the forums [2]. Discussion and debate usually replace deliberative dialogue. Within them, the function of discussion is to exchange information, hence leading to the absence of "explicit decision" consideration; the function of the debate is not to coordinate to reach an agreement. Attendees prepared their own views in advance and attacked other different views. This prepared attitude means that participants' preference is not easily persuaded to change. In other words, these two modes of communication are not committed to achieving an effective unified result, which do not conform to the feature of ideal deliberation. In this public situation, the speaker is less likely to express relatively controversial opinions unless he was willing to make argumentation. As a result, the study argues that such deliberative democratic forums do not achieve high-quality deliberative dialogue.

Chen investigates a successful deliberative discussion on Ghana's agriculture and the environment [9]. In the labeling corpus, the researcher divides participants' speech acts into opinions and responses. Different from the above German deliberative democracy, Ghana's deliberation provided sorts of videos in advance. Participants of the deliberative poll unanimously agreed with experts' opinion in the videos, and put forward additional arguments. 90.3% gave reasons to support their opinion, and some supplement reasons for or against their peers' views. When it comes to response aspects, participants not only give reasons for their opinions, but also respond to other's arguments with justifications, which been regarded as "the essence of deliberation". Few attendees (2.6%) gave the simple response for or against, and most gave specific responses, such as providing facts or making assumptions or conditions.

Owing to the characteristics of the collaborative and shared purpose of deliberation dialogues, they can also occur in ordinary work, school, and life circumstances, although informally. Given the

emphasis on collaborative learning in modern higher education, this type of dialogue deserves attention in teaching activities. Laurine & Marttunen observe that collaborative dialogue among students facilitates the achievement of a shared understanding and problem-solving by incorporating diverse perspectives, propositions, arguments, and refutations [10]. Such discourse fosters the enhancement of critical thinking abilities and argumentation skills.

2.4. The Purpose of Study

In addition to persuasive debates, collaborative deliberative dialogue is a prevalent form of interaction in English classes at Chinese universities. The broad purpose of this study is to investigate the pragmatic performance of Chinese ESL students in deliberative dialogues. A more specific focus of this study is on the speech acts students adopt to obtain a unified action plan in communication, and the discrepancy between students' performance in English (the target language) and Chinese (L1) context. The research questions that this study aims are able to answer are:

1. What are the features of Chinese ESL students in deliberative discussion?
2. What difference between the speech acts between their L1 and L2 discussion?
3. What are the implications for English teaching?

Answers to these questions will contribute to existing knowledge of interaction performance of second language acquisitions in discussion by analysing the speech acts of adult Chinese ESL learners in (un)successful deliberative dialogues.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants consisted exclusively of females and non-male individuals, aged between 19 and 20 years old. All of them had taken the College English Test Band 4, achieving scores ranging from approximately 480 to 550 (equivalent to B2 Level). Despite having studied English for over six years, their pre-college language education primarily focused on rote memorization of vocabulary and grammar rules, recitation of texts, with limited emphasis on practical application and communication skills. Consequently, their proficiency in spoken English and communicative abilities remain at a rudimentary stage.

3.2. Group Discussion

Participants were organized into groups of five to engage in discussions on two issues, one in English and the other in Chinese. The researcher's role was solely observational, refraining from active participation.

Prior to the discussion, students randomly selected two controversial topics related to regulations or aspects of college life and collaboratively deliberated to propose solutions. This approach aligns with the fundamental characteristics of deliberative discourse as participants consider appropriate actions for individuals or groups within specific situations while employing a sharing strategy that benefits all parties involved [4]. These issues primarily focus on:

- A. Rationalize university scholarship evaluation criteria.
- B. Implement group grading for university courses.
- C. Establish corresponding clubs to hold star-chasing activities.
- D. Implement student autonomy and teacher-facilitated teaching method.
- E. Propose student donations for economically disadvantaged students.

4. Findings

No comments from researchers were made regarding the content of the discussion. The three groups consisted of 4, 5, and 5 participants respectively. Among these groups, Group B exhibited active participation in the discussion, resulting in a more comprehensive discourse process compared to the other two groups. The Chinese discussions within the three groups lasted approximately 25-30 minutes and yielded a total of 166 data messages. Conversely, English discussions had relatively shorter durations ranging from about 17-25 minutes with a collection of 115 data messages. Notably, these textual data were categorized based on semantic clusters rather than sentence counts for distinct purposes.

4.1. Frequency of Speech Acts

Table 1: Representative speech acts of deliberative dialogues.

Stage	Speech Acts	Description
Open Stage	Open dialogue	Open the governing issue.
	Enter dialogue	
Propose stage	Propose	Suggest feasible actions to the governing question.
	(The burden of proof)	(hidden) The obligation of warranty.
Consider stage	Direct acceptance	Express agreement to actions.
	Express doubt	Express doubt on actions.
	Request justification	Ask for justification of actions.
Recommendation stage	Partial acceptance	Agree to partial actions.
	Corrections/ reformulations	Correct the unreasonable part.
	Objections/ counterarguments	Express objection to actions.
Close stage	Withdrawal dialogue	Conclude the final actions.

Table 2: The types of speech acts performed in group discussions.

Representative Speech Acts	Chinese Discussion		English Discussion	
	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Open dialogue	2	1.1	0	0
Propose	70	40.2	39	33.9
(The burden of proof)	36	20.7	26	22.6
Direct acceptance	25	14.4	18	15.7
Express doubt	1	0.6	0	0
Request justification	0	0	1	0.9
Partial acceptance	3	1.7	4	3.5
Corrections/reformulations	4	2.3	4	3.5
Objections/counterarguments	5	2.9	3	2.6
Retraction	0	0	0	0
Withdrawal dialogue	9	5.1	0	0
Others	19	10.9	20	17.4
Total	174	100	115	100

Regarding representative speech acts in deliberative discussions, consensus exists among researchers regarding the roles of proposers and responders in dialogue [4,7,11]. However, certain disputes arise during the stage of proposing new issues and substantiating them. To ensure comprehensive coverage of experimental data analysis through speech acts, Table 1 presents adjusted representative acts based on Mcburney's model and Corredor's model.

Table 2 presents the specific speech acts performed by participants during group discussions. While there is a slight variation in language frequency among participants, discernible differences still persist in their nuanced expressions.

4.1.1. Open Stage

The first move in the process of deliberation involves the commencement of an open dialogue. During this phase, the leader will open the governing issue. For the purpose of this experiment, the researcher provided this particular aspect of content, resulting in a lack of such speech acts from participants during discussions. In Chinese discussions, there were only two instances (1.1%) where a participant reintroduced a question.

4.1.2. Propose Stage

In a deliberative discussion, the proposing raises feasible actions to the governing question and subjects them to critical assessment by other participants. After proposing, the discussion will move to the Consider stage. To ensure acceptance by other interlocutors, it is ideal for the interlocutor to bear the burden of proof in making their claims.

Table 3: The propose stage performed in group discussions.

Frequency (%)	Group A		Group B		Group C	
	Chinese	English	Chinese	English	Chinese	English
Propose	37.7	39.5	38.9	30	50	31.8
Proof	16.9	13.9	23.7	24	24	36.3

Regardless of the language use, proposing speech acts had the highest proportion of discussions, accounting for 42.2% and 33.9% of conversations in Chinese and English respectively. Participants felt freer in Chinese discussion, due to their native proficiency, enabling them to comprehend and respond promptly to the topics at hand. Moreover, if a proposal gained widespread acceptance, participants seamlessly transitioned towards exploring new aspects.

However, the English discussion exhibited significant disparities. Firstly, the topics deliberated by participants were relatively limited. Despite some proposals having been previously raised, many participants still rephrased them as their own suggestions. In other words, certain speech acts proposing ideas should semantically be classified as accepting acts. Second, in order to emphasize their point of view, participants will use speech markers as a reminder in the discussion, such as *I think, I believe*.

In the process of proof, whether in Chinese and English discussions, participants consciously justified any point of view they put forward. Even when they expressed acceptance towards others' presumptions, they still made the proof to support their ideas. Moreover, they tended to prove only for themselves during the argument, but did not evaluate the reasonableness of others' views. Only one of the participants in Group B also gave reasons for the statements' reliability when she agreed with the opinions of others.

"{Direct accept} Yeah, I think your opinion is really nice...{Proof}Because if you give money (to students) directly. It looks like, if you seem to be poor, you can get money. Then everyone

may try to find whatever way to prove their poverty. This may deviate from their original intention.”

In addition, in the process of proof, students mainly adopted their own experience and factual evidence as support for their proposal. In this respect, they easily make an agreement in a short time. The following example is a dialogue in Group B.

A: “I have some experience. When I work in the group, our group members always depend on others. They often think others will do everything. If the final grade is based on the group performance, it will be unfair.”

B: “Yes, it’s unfair. I agree.”

Given their shared experiences, the interlocutors’ agreement was facilitated by B’s rapid concurrence with A’s ordinary declarative statement.

4.1.3. Consider Stage

Consider stage refers to commenting on proposals, consisting of direct acceptance, doubt, and request justification. McBurney et al. set Assert as the prerequisite for the following response [4]. However, the function of asserting to evaluate whether the proposal is feasible or appropriate may not obviously be present in the dialogue. The most obvious manifestation of this move should be the approval or objection of the other interlocutors.

Table 4: The consider stage performed in group discussions.

Frequency (%)	Group A		Group B		Group C	
	Chinese	English	Chinese	English	Chinese	English
Direct acceptance	20.7	9.3	18.6	24	5.5	9.1
Express doubt	1.8	0	0	0	0	0
Request justification	0	0	0	2	0	0

Direct acceptance signifies endorsement of others’ proposals, whereas the other two approaches indicate skepticism towards them. Expressing doubt involves questioning the validity of the other party’s proposal, while requesting justification entails seeking evidence, data, or other substantiation for their conclusion. Whether in Chinese or English, Participants show more support behaviors but less questioning. The only doubt speech occurred when a Group A participant doubted a fact on “*a certain celebrity ruins his reputation*”, rather than doubting the facticity of others’ statements.

4.1.4. Recommendation Stage

This stage in the deliberative discussion can be seen as further processing in order to reach a more rational consensus view. If the interlocutors partially support the proposed statement, then the next step can move to seek further correction and improvement of measures in the discussion. In contrast, if interlocutors disagree with the proposed statement, a new proposing stage will be opened again, or the proposal may be withdrawn.

Table 5: The recommendation stage performed in group discussions.

Frequency (%)	Group A		Group B		Group C	
	Chinese	English	Chinese	English	Chinese	English
Direct acceptance	20.7	9.3	18.6	24	5.5	9.1
Express doubt	1.8	0	0	0	0	0
Request justification	0	0	0	2	0	0

From the performance in the previous considering stage, it can be seen that the participants in the experiment mainly have shown a favorable attitude toward communication. Consequently, this section primarily emphasizes speech acts associated with acceptance.

In the previous discussion, although there were no doubt acts and request acts for justification, there were some refutations in this stage.

The situation is more evident in English discussions. Another prominent concern was that the discussion quickly moved to a new topic after a participant raised objections. Therefore, there was no immediate speech such as defense or correction. A typical example is provided in Group C.

"{propose}...Independent thinking I think it's important for a college student. If studying in groups, it actually, um, gave us some useful opinions. {objection}But it can't develop our independent thinking ability. {new propose} If the final grade is based on group performance rather than individual performance. It is quite inequality."

Participants in both Group B and C considered making corrections to unreasonable expressions. Actually, Group A did not show blatant argumentation acts in the discussion, and they were more inclined to change the discussion to other aspects after expressing their personal statements.

4.1.5. Close Stage

McBurney et al. explain that the close stage of a formal deliberative discussion requires interlocutors to explicitly express their intention to end the discussion unless only the last participant is left without announcing his withdrawal from the dialogue [4]. However, in the more ordinary course of deliberative dialogue, the end mark should reach the essential characteristics of deliberative dialogues, that is, whether the discussants have accomplished the purpose of the discussion and made a final proposal. Despite making it clear to the participants at the beginning of the research that the purpose of the discussion was to come up with a reasonable solution and measure based on the reality of the situation, none of the three groups achieved this purpose. Rather than treating the discussion as a purposeful deliberation, participants are more likely to join in a debate that does not require a final conclusion.

4.2. Non-Participant Observation

Besides data analysis, it is worth mentioning two phenomena that appeared in the English discussion. First, unlike Chinese discussion, participants paid more attention to using speech markers. For example, when expressing their views, they will use markers, such as *"in my opinion, I agree, I oppose,"* to express their views. In proof, they take the initiative to adopt cohesive markers like *"firstly, secondly, and for another."* When they recognize that they forget to tag these words during the discussion, they will immediately rephrase and add cohesive markers.

Furthermore, in both Chinese and English discussions, the dialogue stage is initiated followed by a prompt agreement reached within a brief period. Participants then provide supplementary perspectives in support of this unified conclusion during the remainder of the discussion. While these viewpoints may potentially alter the agreed-upon proposal, they typically do not significantly deviate from it despite introducing novel ideas. This phenomenon was observed across all three groups to varying degrees, particularly among those who posed questions seeking responses from others. One possible explanation for this trend is participants will initially ensure that reaching a consensus can enhance the efficiency of discussions, and subsequently refine the details while maintaining a conclusive outcome.

5. Discussion

The speech acts of Chinese intermediate-level ESL students in English and Chinese discussions exhibit a considerable degree of similarity. These students demonstrate sufficient proficiency to engage in discussions and achieve consensus on contentious issues. The discussion process entails four stages, namely presenting opinions, expanding upon them, responding to others' viewpoints, and modifying or revising ideas. While none of the three groups proposed a concrete course of action ultimately, they did manage to reach a consensus on the controversial topic at hand. Thus, it can be argued that the requirements for deliberative dialogue were essentially fulfilled.

5.1. Features of Chinese ESL Students in Deliberative Discussion

After analyzing the three sets of deliberation dialogues, three main characteristics of the dialogues in which Chinese ESL students cooperate to discuss the best solution are embodied in: proposing with reasons, responding with a supportive and shared attitude, and the initiative to reach a unified attitude.

5.1.1. Orderly Proposing with Reason

The Chinese ESL students adhered to a sequential approach in expressing their personal perspectives and reasoning during the discussion. Once all participants had initially shared their views, they proceeded to respond to opinions that intrigued them. Throughout the discourse, they maintained an orderly demeanor, with each individual adequately prepared with premeditated viewpoints. While attentively listening to speakers, students consistently assumed the role of attentive audience members without interruption. However, unlike the conventional deliberative system described by Landwehr & Holzinger, listeners were not passive recipients of information but actively evaluated the validity of others' opinions and adjusted their own ideas accordingly [2].

Furthermore, in order to enhance persuasiveness, Chinese ESL students proactively presented reasons aimed at altering listeners' perspectives. These statements primarily relied on factual evidence or widely accepted experiences before introducing assumptions or conditions [9]. Rather than relying on logical reasoning or expertise as grounds for argumentation, they often employed relatable common experiences to evoke empathy among the audience members. This inclination may be attributed to influences from structured English Speech and Debate courses as well as China's public democratic deliberative system and discussion practices. Simultaneously, these students demonstrated proficiency in utilizing effective arguments to impress their peers.

5.1.2. Responding with a Supportive and Shared Attitude

Chinese ESL students are usually supportive hearers when they are not speaking. Although in some cases they do not directly express their agreement or opposition, if they agree with the speaker, they implicitly accept these opinions as premises for further decisions. Unless they have come up with a firm opposing proposition during the discussion, they will consider the other person's point of view with a partial agreement and revise their original proposition during the discussion. Habermas differentiates the listener and the hearer in dialogues where the listener is confined to a passive role, where they judge the speaker's rationality but cannot question or challenge speakers' viewpoints. In contrast, the hearer is committed to generating discussion outcomes. They have to take a stance on the speaker's content: if they do not question the speaker's commitments, it implies the hearers simply agree with those commitments, and considers for further reasoning and discussion [2].

In order to achieve a cohesive plan, Chinese ESL students prioritize the collective interest and are willing to support conclusions that benefit more people, even if it entails personal costs. During the discussion on topic B, participants from both group B and group C initially expressed clear opposition;

however, they subsequently changed their stance after considering the supporting reasons presented by others. This also explains, to a certain extent, why Chinese ESL students quickly reach a unanimous conclusion in the discussion process.

5.2. “Considerate Expression” in English Discussion

Chinese ESL students attempt to adhere to standard written English rules with indicative speech markers. However, in complex argumentation, speakers may prioritize grammatical and linguistic accuracy over maintaining interaction continuity, potentially due to English teaching requirements or a desire for clearer expression. Following the experiment’s conclusion, some participants explained their intention to avoid audience misunderstanding or lack of comprehension.

Another considerate expression lies in the manner in which opposition is conveyed in English. Due to their proficiency in L1, overt counterarguments are eschewed in Chinese discussion. However, when expressing themselves in English and aiming to avoid conflict arising from direct opposition, individuals often begin by acknowledging partial agreement before subsequently refuting opinions they disagree with. It is possible that students with intermediate English proficiency lack strategies to effectively manage face-threatening situations arising from refutation, leading them to resort to the mitigating approach of “partial acceptance” in expressing their disagreement.

5.3. Implications for English Teaching

The effectiveness of deliberation as a collaborative dialogue method in teaching activities is determined by its pragmatic function. A clearly defined objective and actionable conclusion promotes spontaneous group cooperation among ESL students. Despite potential limitations in a mismatch between target language ability and speakers’ intent, active student participation and effective conclusions are achieved through the process of dialogue.

One noticeable drawback is that although the dialogues of each group proceeded smoothly, they did not achieve their intended purpose of giving a feasible plan. May because of a lack of status or power, participants recognize that their final proposal cannot truly resolve actual problems or disputes; thus, they approach discussions with hypothetical scenarios in mind. Nevertheless, this suggests a neglect of target language communication in the process of English acquisition. The objective of English acquisition teaching should no longer be limited to grammatical correctness; it also requires learners to attain felicity conditions or pragmatic appropriateness for specific purposes. This poses new challenges for English teaching in China, which should shift its focus from standard grammar and semantic accuracy to satisfying pragmatic functions.

6. Conclusions

The study observed and analyzed the speech acts of Chinese ESL students in deliberative discussions conducted in both Chinese and English. It was found that these students demonstrate friendliness, supportiveness, and a strong desire to reach a consensus aligned with collective interests. As speakers, they actively seek agreement and introduce different perspectives based on this foundation. To effectively persuade their audience, they take responsibility for argumentation and adeptly employ factual evidence to substantiate the rationality of their viewpoints. Drawing upon shared experiences as a means to gain listener support, their factual arguments primarily derive from common ground. As responders, they are not passive recipients of the speaker’s statements; instead, they willingly adjust or modify their own position when encountering agreeable ideas. Their responses are predominantly supportive; even when objections arise, they rarely challenge or request further defense of the speaker’s standpoint.

In the English discussion, despite their limited oral skills, students were able to successfully engage in collaborative discussions and reach a consensus by employing standard English and speech markers. However, their deliberative discussions fell short of reaching a final solution, indicating that while students prioritize communication quality, they tend to overlook the purpose of communication. This suggests that they focus on achieving agreement on the topic's conclusion rather than considering the ultimate pragmatic goal of discussion. Although English education in China has started emphasizing language interaction, students still struggle to break free from exam-oriented learning and neglect communicative purposes. Therefore, further English teaching should shift the emphasis from grammar correctness and semantic accuracy towards satisfying pragmatic functional requirements.

This study contributes to the performance of speech acts in discussion among Chinese ESL students, further confirming the significance of interaction purpose and pragmatic function in English language instruction. However, it should be noted that this study is a preliminary investigation with limited research participants, requiring additional evidence and research for further explanation and confirmation. Second, the participants' oral proficiency was found to be inadequate, as they encountered difficulties in effectively articulating intricate concepts and tended to excessively dwell on revising their grammar during the discussion. Moreover, certain issues discussed failed to provide a sense of identity among students, potentially hindering their ability to propose actionable plans during the deliberations.

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