



Politeness in language teaching: A case study of textbooks for Chinese as a second/foreign language ^{☆,☆}

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to offer a critical overview of how politeness is presented in a sample of textbooks used in teaching Chinese as a second/foreign language. The importance of politeness in second language acquisition has long been recognized in the literature; previous research in this area on the acquisition and teaching of CSL/CFL has focussed e.g. on language socialization, on pragmatics, and on the development of intercultural communicative competence. However, specific research on how politeness and politeness-related topics and skills are introduced in textbooks and other works used by learners and teachers of CSL/CFL suffers from a lack of systematicity. To this end, we analysed a sample of teaching materials designed for non-native speakers which are widely used in China (and beyond). We shall show that explicit discussion of politeness is limited, and that often the dialogues do not offer enough indirect evidence for a thorough understanding of politeness. We shall argue that this is suggestive of an approach to language pedagogy in which politeness is not really seen as linguistic *sensu strictu*, and hence teaching the structures of the language is not effectively integrated with the pragmatic aspects related to politeness in interaction.

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Keywords: Politeness; Chinese as a second/foreign language; Language textbooks

Abbreviations: CFL, Chinese as a foreign language; Chin, (Standard Mandarin) Chinese; COS, change of state; CSL, Chinese as a second language; DE, marker of modification and nominalization 的 de; EFL, English as a foreign Language; EXP, experiential aspect; FL, foreign language; POLITE, polite form; SFP, sentence-final particle

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1. INTRODUCTION

Politeness functions as a fundamental lubricant in social communication, essential for maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships, eliminating conflicts and promoting cooperation (Gu, 1992). However, as a fundamental part of the pragmatic component of language, politeness may prove to be especially challenging for learners of a L2/FL. As Kecskes (2014: 63) puts it,

[p]ragmatic competence in the L1 is the result of language socialization. Language and social development in the L1 go hand in hand, and are inseparable. However, this is not the case in L2 or subsequent languages [...]. The sociopragmatic norms concerning appropriateness developed through L1 are very influential and difficult to change. L2 learners see things in L2 through their L1 socio-cultural mindset.

This issue is far from trivial: as pointed out in Kecskes (2014: 62), among others, while 'traditional' language teaching focusses heavily on grammar and vocabulary,

[g]rammar contains facts and rules about the given language system that must be followed (at least loosely), otherwise the language is unrecognizable. This is something that can systematically be acquired by the language learner. Pragmatic rules (language use rules), however, are different: not following them may cause misinterpretation of linguistic behavior. If grammar is bad, the utterance may not convey the right message or any message while if pragmatics is bad, the utterance will usually convey the wrong message.

Indeed, Fraser (2010: 15) defined 'pragmatic competence' as "the ability to communicate your intended message with all its nuances in any socio-cultural context and to interpret the message of your interlocutor as it was intended". Leech (1983) and Thomas (1983) distinguish between 'pragmalinguistics competence', i.e. "knowledge and performance of the conventions of language use or the linguistic resources available in a given language that convey 'particular illocutions' in contextually appropriate situations" (\approx knowledge of linguistic strategies), and 'sociopragmatic competence', i.e. "knowledge about and performance consistent with the social norms in specific situations in a given society, as well as familiarity of variables of social power and social distance" (\approx knowledge of the social and contextual factors in the choice of strategies; Félix-Brasdefer and Mugford, 2017: 490). In the literature on L2 pragmatics, however, we may find countless examples precisely of how second language speakers can fail to convey the 'right message', i.e. to express their communicative intention correctly, and to do it in a way that is considered proper in the community of users of the target language; also, they can fail in assigning the correct interpretation to a speech act not because of lacunae in their grammatical or lexical competence, but, rather, due to the limits in their pragmatic competence. See, for instance, this excerpt on the perception of ritual expressions of rejection in Chinese by English-speaking learners (Kasper and Zhang, 1995: 6-7):

[s]everal learners observed that Chinese would sometimes say "yes" when they mean "no". The evidence for the intended "no" is that they would not follow up expressed compliance with action. It took one learner quite a while to find out that her Chinese supervisor in Taiwan meant "no" in response to her request without saying a word. When she confronted the supervisor with the problem, the supervisor appeared surprised and puzzled. Apparently, she did not expect her responses to be understood any other way.

[...] one learner was once asked to give a lecture while in China. To a Chinese, it was more of an invitation, a compliment, an honour, to the person invited. However, the learner did not feel up to it and repeatedly declined the request by saying that he did not know what to talk about, that he was not good enough, etc., etc. To a Chinese, it sounded like compliment-response situation: a purely ritual process of self-denigration. The more he declined in this way, the more escalated became the request.

It thus comes as no surprise that the importance of politeness in second language acquisition has long been recognized in the literature: for an overview, see e.g. Pizziconi and Locher (2015), and Félix-Brasdefer and Mugford (2017). As for CSL/CFL, previous research in this domain has focussed e.g. on language socialization (Duff and Doherty 2018), on pragmatics *senso strictu* (Li, 2018b), including research on specific pragmatic functions (Gao, 2017), and on the development of intercultural communicative competence (Chang and Haugh, 2017). Less attention has been given to the analysis of textbooks, although some studies do exist (see below, Section 2.1, 2.2): however, as pointed out e.g. by Miłkowska-Samul (2020: 82; our translation), (especially) in classroom language teaching, textbooks are one of the "main sources of knowledge" for learners, besides the teacher(s): hence, she suggests, how pragmatics is integrated in language coursebooks is a topic worth exploring. And, indeed, previous research has shown that the integration of pragmatics (including politeness) in textbooks is often unsatisfactory, as we shall see below.

Thus, in this paper, we present the results of a survey of popular Chinese L2/FL textbooks, designed chiefly for classroom use, which are commonly used in China (and beyond). We shall show that key politeness formulas are often introduced without sufficient explanations, that the language reflected in textbooks appears to be often distant from actual

native use, with a limited variety of constructions and contexts of use, and that the guidance on the pragmatic functions of polite expressions, especially polyfunctional ones, is lacking. We shall argue that this is suggestive of an approach to language pedagogy in which politeness is not really seen as linguistic *senso strictu*, and hence teaching the structures of the language is not effectively integrated with the pragmatic aspects related to politeness in interaction.

The paper is organised as follows. In [Section 2](#), we shall provide a concise overview of previous research in politeness in L2/FL teaching, with a focus on Chinese, and on textbooks, and we shall illustrate our methodology. In [Section 3](#), we shall present the results of our survey, including quantitative and qualitative analyses of polite language in the textbooks of our sample. Lastly, in [Section 4](#), we discuss our results, and in [Section 5](#) we summarize our conclusions.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

2.1. Politeness in L2/FL acquisition: a concise overview

Research on politeness in L2 acquisition is abundant, particularly concerning English as a L2/FL. Scholars have explored politeness in English as L2 from various perspectives. For instance, [Harada \(1996\)](#) explores how Japanese ESL learners perceive and produce polite speech in American English. She finds that while both languages adjust politeness based on the addressee, they weigh factors like age and status differently: differences between learners and typical native speakers in usage thus stem from negative transfer, and also from developmental factors. [LoCastro \(1997\)](#) observes the connection between the perceived lack of politeness competence of Japanese learners of English as a foreign language and the input they find in senior high school textbooks. He believes that pedagogical aims and objectives should take into consideration the context of communication, the speaker's interpersonal and strategic goals, and the specific sociopragmatic features. Teachers must take the learners beyond the textbooks and help them become observers of everyday conversation in the target language, and observe the ways people use politeness in naturally occurring conversations. [Wang \(2007\)](#) approaches the teaching of politeness in the EFL class for Chinese (junior) secondary school students by focusing on the speech acts of requesting, analyzing some activities in the textbooks. The study suggests that pragmatics should be taught via a principled, functionally coherent syllabus, rather than fragmentary politeness items scattered across units. [Peng et al. \(2012\)](#) and [Peng et al. \(2014\)](#) explore the factors influencing students' interpretation of teachers' politeness strategies and teachers' practical application of positive and negative politeness strategies in EFL classroom respectively. Both studies underscore the significant impact of consciously applied politeness strategies in creating a productive and positive EFL learning environment. [Pizziconi and Locher \(2015: 2\)](#) highlight that much less work has focused on the teaching aspect of politeness, and list some of the inadequacies in politeness research circles: they suggest that

the vast majority of studies which emerged from the field of second language acquisition gave politeness theory a minor role, or discussed politeness almost perforce, as (sometimes unproblematized) explanatory principles for interlanguage pragmatic difficulties, typically in speech act realizations [. . .]. The applied fields of first and/or second language acquisition and language pedagogy were more concerned with the operationalization of the Hymesian concept of "communicative competence" and saw politeness as one of many indices of that competence.

[Bella et al. \(2015\)](#) emphasize that linguistic politeness must be explicitly taught because, unlike native speakers who may be socialized into politeness in their native language, learners of foreign languages will have to learn how to behave politely (echoing [Kecskes's 2014](#) quote we proposed in the Introduction). They also stress the fact that, while general research on politeness has seen a "tremendous expansion" ([Bella et al., 2015: 23](#)), very little has been done on the teaching of politeness: indeed, in their contribution, they do offer their own proposal for a model for bringing politeness into the language classroom, suggesting that it should be presented "not as a set of prescriptive rules or as reified inventories, but as options available in specific contexts" ([Bella et al., 2015: 45](#)). Furthermore, [Khosh et al. \(2022\)](#) stress that politeness, a crucial factor in cross-cultural communication, varies culturally: thus, the same acts may be seen as polite or impolite depending on the specific culture, based on distinct values. This is because while politeness is universally seen as a social norm, its expressions and judgment standards differ culturally. For L2 learners, mastering politeness needs both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic awareness, as mentioned in the Introduction. For effective L2 politeness teaching, [Khosh et al. \(2022\)](#) advocate a practical intellectual approach, raising awareness via cross-linguistic comparisons and intercultural case discussions to avoid communication misunderstandings. However, besides those generic suggestions, [Khosh et al. \(2022\)](#) do not offer a more specific framework for teaching L2/FL politeness.

Besides the considerable number of studies concerning politeness in English as L2/FL, scholars also directed their attention to issues of politeness in the teaching and learning/acquisition of other languages. For instance, [Ismail et al. \(2014\)](#) investigate politeness-related concepts in French, English and Spanish language textbooks, and they observe the lack of explanation in the textbooks regarding politeness usage, and the absence of politeness strategies presented

contextually. [Marantika et al. \(2020\)](#) explores the use of politeness by Indonesian students learning German as L2: her findings suggest that although they achieved general proficiency in German, including its communication culture, students still use Indonesian patterns in communication. [Miłkowska-Samul \(2020\)](#) analyses a sample of ten textbooks for learning Italian as a L2/FL: she concludes that

[p]oliteness as content to be taught does appear in Italian textbooks, but in a fairly limited way; it almost always takes shape as a secondary aspect of communication, which must give way to grammar and vocabulary expansion. [...] Manifestations of the phenomenon of politeness can be observed in textbooks at two levels: mainly as part of the linguistic material offered to the learner in a given textbook for other purposes, and also as an explicit and deliberate study of certain phenomena related to politeness. The first form of contact the learner has with polite content definitely prevails, that is, exposure to correct communicative models (also from the point of view of politeness) to be followed, but without any commentary or conscious reflection, in the hope instead that the student will spontaneously learn to speak that way” ([Miłkowska-Samul, 2020: 86](#); our translation).

[Miłkowska-Samul \(2020: 86\)](#) also remarks that in all of the textbook series she considers, she could find polite speech functions as greetings, compliments, apologies, requests, expressions of opinion, invitations, congratulations, good wishes, and thanks: nevertheless, she argues,

the distribution of these acts in the textbooks appears to be only minimally guided by a plan within a carefully designed instructional sequence. This plan, rather, concerns the teaching of grammar and vocabulary, while pragmatic content — especially that related to politeness — is presented only as a by-product of strictly linguistic elements.

Thus, to sum up, the existing research generally seems to suggest that while politeness is a crucial component for developing communicative skills in a L2/FL, it does not appear to receive enough attention in language teaching. Particularly, L2/FL textbooks for English and other languages of Europe appear to consider politeness as something which does not require explicit instruction, nor systematic presentation: while grammar and vocabulary are obviously the ‘building blocks’ of the design of the instructional sequence, politeness (and, more generally, pragmatics) is, as [Miłkowska-Samul \(2020\)](#) puts it, a ‘by-product’, introduced mostly indirectly through the insertion of polite speech acts in texts. In the next section, we shift our focus to research on L2/FL politeness specifically concerning Chinese, the main object of the present paper.

2.2. Politeness in L2/FL acquisition: the case of Chinese

Research on politeness in Chinese L2/FL acquisition has engaged with this pragmatic concept from several crucial angles. Firstly, a substantial body of work is dedicated to contrastive analysis, outlining the differences between Chinese politeness principles (e.g. [Gu’s 1992](#) notions of ‘self-denigrating and other-elevating’ Chin. 贬己尊人 *biǎn jǐ zūn rén*) and those of other cultures, such as Anglophone ([Li, 2012](#)) and Korean cultures ([Yang, 2021](#); [Li, 2022](#)). These studies highlight potential areas of pragmatic failure stemming from deep-seated cultural values. Secondly, scholars have investigated teaching methodologies, proposing practical strategies for the classroom. These include using scenario-based situational teaching ([Wang, 2023](#)), emphasizing the important role of teacher talk and the conscious application of politeness principles by instructors to model appropriate behaviour ([Li, 2022](#); [Zhang and Peng, 2014](#); [Wen and Wang, 2020](#)). A third research focus has been learner acquisition and errors in the use of basic Chinese polite expressions, such as honorifics ([Zhang, 2022](#); [Zeng, 2022](#)), compliment responses ([Gao, 2017](#); [Hong, 2022](#)), and politeness-related euphemisms ([Wang, 2022](#); [Deng, 2023](#)). Through surveys and empirical studies, researchers have identified common pragmatic errors made by students, such as e.g. confusion about whether the Chinese apologetic expression of gratitude 不好意思, 给您添麻烦了 *bùhǎoyìsi, gěi nín tiān máfan le* ‘I am sorry for the trouble I’ve caused to you’ is actually an expression of apology, or of gratitude. They also analyse the causes for their mistakes, including negative transfer from their mother tongue and an insufficient understanding of the Chinese ‘cultural logic’ ([Zhou, 2013](#); [Luo, 2015](#)). Generally speaking, what the existing research shows is that the prevailing approach to politeness in language teaching is often fragmented and unsystematic: teaching politeness is frequently limited to isolated vocabulary points (e.g. 谢谢 *xièxiè* ‘thank you’, 请问 *qǐng wèn* ‘may I ask’) or scattered expressions, rather than approaching it as a coherent, teachable pragmatic system rooted in a culture-specific worldview ([Zeng, 2015](#)).

Within the body of research on pragmatics in Chinese L2/FL teaching, we also find studies focussing on textbooks, the topic of the present paper. Specifically, several researchers have begun to analyse how CFL textbooks present polite language: consistently with what we highlighted above, the existing research often shows that politeness is not systematically explained in teaching materials, neither is it sufficiently integrated into the cultural elements of the learning units ([Fan, 2012](#); [Li, 2022](#)): textbook analyses of polite language are particularly inadequate, and they often reveal a superficial treatment. For instance, [Li \(2018a\)](#) examines polite language in four conversational textbooks for learning Chinese from the Republican period, proposing a classification of politeness-related expression into typical

(i.e. honorifics, idioms) and quasi-typical (i.e. adverbs, particles). Besides highlighting period- and culture-specific traits of polite language in the textbooks of his sample, Li (2018a) suggests that pedagogy should integrate vocabulary, context, and politeness awareness to develop the learners' pragmatic systems. Shi (2017) investigates compliments and responses to them in the elementary and intermediate level of three series of textbooks: on the one hand, she shows that the distribution of subtypes of compliments in dialogues does reflect to an extent Chinese pragmatic conventions, since they are more often used to praise people's talents, rather than physical appearance; on the other hand, the objects and contexts for compliments do not appear to be wide enough, thus lacking representativity. Also, she highlights that response expressions may not reflect accurately individual differences among language users: for instance, the generic expression in response to a compliment 哪里哪里 *nǎlǐ nǎlǐ* 'not at all' (lit. 'where, where'; see below, Section 2.3) is used also by young characters in the dialogues, but in reality this (rejection of the compliment) is a more common choice for older speakers, while younger ones might readily accept the compliment (see Gao, 2017). Thus, the picture painted by Shi (2017) is one of textbooks which cannot effectively meet the demands of authentic communication due to their partial coverage of actual contexts of use, and to their failure to account for individual variation in polite language use. Li (2015) analyses differences in politeness between China and the Western world, and identifies issues in CFL teaching, including outdated methods, inadequate textbooks, and, also, a perceived lack of cross-cultural competence for teachers. Proposed solutions include innovative teaching integrating cultural elements, updated, contextualized materials, and enhanced teacher training. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the cultural annotations provided are frequently shallow: textbooks often fail to move beyond simple translation equivalents to explain the underlying cultural logic, such as the deep-seated Chinese cultural norms of Chinese honorifics (Su, 2023). Indeed, Su (2023) finds that there is a scarcity of honorific or humble expressions in two of the elementary-level textbooks she examined, and, also, insufficient cultural annotations linking the language to Chinese customs. This lack of cultural depth prevents learners from developing genuine pragmatic awareness. He (2025) conducted a study of responses to compliments in the dialogues from 17 CFL textbooks, and compared them to native speaker habits (based on a survey of the literature): she suggests that, while rejection and expression of modesty is the response found in nearly 90% of the cases for her textbook sample, in actual native speaker performance acceptance is the overwhelmingly dominant response (we will get back to this below, Section 3.1.1).

While the contributions mentioned above do offer valuable insights, generally speaking, the topic of politeness in CFL still remains understudied (He, 2025). Also, the approach to the analysis of politeness-related content in the existing studies does have some shortcomings. The existing studies generally lack systematicity, both in terms of the sample (i.e. they often do not analyse full sets of textbooks) and of their methodology: they mostly offer frequency counts, but not much in terms of contextualised analyses of polite language, or lack thereof, sometimes also due to their limited extension. Also, more extensive and detailed studies often focus on individual subcategories of polite language (like the above-mentioned Shi, 2017), rather than offering a more complete picture, also highlighting differences between pragmatic functions. Thus, in order to address these critical gaps, the aim of the present study is to conduct a comprehensive and systematic analysis of politeness representation within a selection of mainstream dialogue-based CFL textbooks. Our study will move beyond mere frequency counts of polite lexicon to investigate how polite expressions are presented and used in textbooks, in terms of their functions, focussing on their multifunctionality, and on the relationship with typical native usage. Also, we shall examine how politeness is contextually framed, and how its cultural underpinnings are explained. By identifying the specific shortcomings and omissions in current materials, this research aims to formulate concrete, actionable suggestions for the future compilation of CFL textbooks and the development of teaching methodologies. Our ultimate goal is to provide the foundations for a robust framework for textbook and lesson design that integrates politeness as a core, systematic component of language instruction, thereby genuinely enhancing learners' pragmatic competence and cultural understanding.

2.3. Research design and data sources

This study employed a qualitative and quantitative content analysis approach to investigate the representation of Chinese polite expressions in two widely used textbook series for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language: *Developing Chinese* (2nd Edition) and *Hanyu Jiaocheng* (3rd Edition).¹ For *Developing Chinese*, we considered only the textbooks on the spoken language (口语 *kǒuyǔ*). The primary body of data comes from the conversational texts within these

¹ For both series, we aimed at including in our sample the most recent version. However, in the case of *Developing Chinese*, a third edition of the spoken language volumes was released in mid-2025: by then, we had already concluded our analysis, so we decided to consider the previous available edition.

textbooks, since dialogues are supposed to better reflect pragmatic conventions in language use: however, we shall also mention data from exercise and other sections of the textbooks, whenever needed. Specifically, the analysis covered eight volumes:

- A. *Developing Chinese* (发展汉语 *Fāzhǎn Hànyǔ*): Elementary Speaking Course I and II (Wang et al., 2012a,b) and Intermediate Speaking Course I and II (Cai, 2011; Lu, 2012; 4 volumes; in what follows, we refer to them as *Developing Chinese* Vol. 1, 2, 3, and 4 respectively).
- B. *Hanyu Jiaocheng* (汉语教程 *Hànyǔ Jiàochéng*): First volume, Part 1 and II (Yang, 2016c,d) and Second Volume, Part I and II (Yang, 2016a,b; 4 volumes; in what follows, we refer to them as *Hanyu Jiaocheng* Vol. 1, 2, 3, and 4 respectively).

These textbooks were selected for their prominence in Chinese L2/FL instruction, particularly in Chinese learning institutions, thus providing a significant sample of the linguistic input learners may receive in the language classroom. Also, in order to highlight possible differences in the treatment of politeness, the four volumes of each series were also divided into groups according to their level: Vol. 1 and 2 for each of the two series are classified as ‘elementary’, while Vol. 3 and 4 as ‘intermediate’. We chose to include in our sample elementary and intermediate level textbooks, to the exclusion of those for the advanced levels, as we decided to focus on the stage of instruction in which learners are taught the most essential communicative skills. This, we believe, can indirectly show the importance that textbook writers (and, arguably, curriculum designers) assign to the development of pragmatic skills in language learning: even if polite language is properly illustrated in advanced textbooks, it means that it is not considered a fundamental need for language learners. Moreover, we may add, elementary and intermediate level teaching materials are particularly relevant for Chinese L2/FL learning, since many students (especially in FL settings) never reach very advanced proficiency (Chang and Haugh, 2017).²

In our quantitative analysis, the identification and categorization of polite expressions were guided by a two-tier analytical framework. This framework distinguishes between the communicative function (what is being done) and the linguistic strategy (how it is done), thereby addressing the inherent conflation of analytical levels in single-plane taxonomies. The first tier comprises core Speech Acts or interactive functions, which represent the primary polite communicative goals in interpersonal interaction. Our analysis focusses on eight such acts, derived from an adaptation of Zeng’s (2015) taxonomy, and aligned with core polite speech acts in Chinese (Gu, 1990): Greetings (Chin. 问候语 *wèn hòuyǔ*), Farewell (告别语 *gàobiéyǔ*), Thanking (感谢语 *gǎnxièyǔ*), Apologies (道歉语 *dàoqiǎnyǔ*), Requests (请求语 *qǐngqiúyǔ*), Compliments (恭维语 *gōngwéiyǔ*), Response to compliments (对赞美的回应 *duì zànměi de huíying*), and Well-wishing (祝福语 *zhùfúyǔ*).³ The second tier includes key linguistic strategies or resources frequently employed to realize the above speech acts, focussing on how they convey politeness. This tier includes also some categories that were listed alongside speech acts in Zeng (2015), but which, we believe, are more accurately described as implementation devices⁴: Terms of Address (称呼语 *chēnghūyǔ*), Euphemisms (委婉语 *wēiwǎnyǔ*), Mitigation devices (缓和手段 *huǎnhé shǒuduàn*), and Honorifics (敬语 *jìngyǔ*). Note that the list of strategies is not meant to be exhaustive, but merely considers what we believe are some of the most important (and common) ones for Chinese (we will get back to this below). In order to illustrate our classification, we present below these categories, along with illustrative examples from the textbooks considered.

² An anonymous reviewer pointed out to us that ‘general’ Chinese teaching materials are often designed with the assumption that they should not focus on more ‘specialized’ pragmatic uses; however, textbooks for teaching Chinese for specific purposes (e.g. business Chinese) typically contain a significant number of polite expressions since the beginning. Hence, s/he suggests, including in our sample a set of manuals for Chinese for specific purposes might have shown a notable contrast in the use of polite language. While we appreciate the reviewer’s suggestion, and we believe it should be considered for future research, in this paper we decided not to expand our sample in that direction: this is because, as stated above, we want to focus on the type of teaching materials which can have a very broad impact, also considering the fact that many learners never attend courses in Chinese for special purposes, and hence may never make use of the related textbooks.

³ We use capitalized initials when a term is used to refer to the categories we use in the present survey, while the generic use of the same term will not be capitalized (e.g. ‘Requests’ vs. ‘making a polite request’).

⁴ We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out to us.

Speech acts**(a) Greetings**

Greeting expressions serve to open a conversation and establish a friendly tone. The textbooks primarily feature two types: the standard neutral greeting and context-specific, relationally-oriented greetings.

- (1) 你好! / 您好!
nǐhǎo nínhǎo
 hello hello.POLITE
 ‘hello! (informal)’ ‘Hello! (formal)’ (*Hanyu Jiaocheng*, Vol. 1)
- (2) 认识你很高兴
rènshi nǐ hěn gāoxìng
 meet 2SG very happy
 ‘nice to meet you’ (a culture-specific phatic expression used as a greeting among acquaintances) (*Developing Chinese*, Vol. 1)
- (3) 王老师, 好久不见了!
Wáng lǎoshī hǎojiǔbùjiàn le
 Wang teacher long.time.no.see cos
 ‘Teacher Wang, long time no see!’ (*Hanyu Jiaocheng*, Vol. 1)

(b) Farewell

Farewell expressions are used to conclude interactions politely. The textbooks in our sample show a progression from simpler to more ‘concern-oriented’ forms.

- (4) 再见!
zàijiàn
 ‘Goodbye!’ (*Hanyu Jiaocheng*, Vol. 1)
- (5) 明天见!
míngtiān jiàn
 tomorrow see
 ‘See you tomorrow!’ (*Hanyu Jiaocheng*, Vol. 1)
- (6) 慢走!
màn-zǒu
 slow-walk
 ‘Walk slowly!’ (A common expression from a host to a guest, expressing care) (*Hanyu Jiaocheng*, Vol. 3)

(c) Thanking

This category includes expressions for thanking, ranging from simple to more elaborate forms which imply an apology for burdening someone.

- (7) 谢谢! / 谢谢你!
xièxie xièxie nǐ
 thank thank you
 ‘Thanks!’ ‘Thank you!’ (*Hanyu Jiaocheng*, Vol. 1)

(8) 感谢您的惠顾!

xièxie nín de huìgù

thank 2SG.POLITE DE patronage

'Thank you for your patronage!' (Developing Chinese, Vol. 3)

(9) 辛苦你了, 小林! 还麻烦你跑一趟

xīnkǔ nǐ le xiǎo-Lín hái

work.hard 2SG COS young-Lin Also

máfan nǐ pǎo yī tàng

trouble 2SG run one time

'Thank you for your hard work, Xiao Lin! And sorry to have made you make this trip' (Hanyu Jiaocheng, Vol. 3)

(d) Apologies

Apology expressions are used to acknowledge a fault or offense and restore social harmony.

(10) 对不起

duìbuqǐ

'I'm sorry'

(Hanyu Jiaocheng, Vol. 1)

(11) 不好意思, 这粥要是端下去就该没了

bùhǎoyisi zhè zhōu yàoshi duān-xiàqù

sorry this porridge if take-away

jiù gāi méi le

then should disappear COS

'I'm sorry, but if I take this porridge away, it will likely be gone' (implying that it will likely be sold to others; a polite and soft apology) (Developing Chinese, Vol. 3)

(e) Requests

Request expressions are face-threatening acts that are commonly softened using polite markers.

(12) 请进

qǐng jìn

please enter

'Please come in'

(Hanyu Jiaocheng, Vol. 1)

(13) 请问, 超市在哪儿?

qǐng wèn chāoshì zài nǎr

please ask supermarket be where

'May I ask, how do I get to the supermarket?' (请问 qǐng wèn 'may I ask' is used to politely frame a question) (Developing Chinese, Vol. 1)

(14) 麻烦您给我换成零钱

máfan nín gěi wǒ huàn-chéng língqián
trouble 2SG.POLITE to 1SG change-into small change

'could I trouble you to change [this] into small bills for me?' (麻烦 máfan 'trouble, bother' is used to make a soft request)

(Hanyu Jiaocheng, Vol. 3)

(f) Compliments

This category includes giving compliments and praise.

(15) 你唱歌唱得真好

nǐ chàng-gē chàng-de zhēn hǎo
2SG sing-song sing-ADV real good

'You sing really very well'

(Developing Chinese, Vol. 1)

(16) 这幅《红梅图》画得真好!

zhè fú Hóng-méi-tú huà-de zhēn hǎo
this CLF red-plum-blossom sing-ADV real good

'This "Red Plum Blossom" painting is really well done!'

(Hanyu Jiaocheng, Vol. 4)

(g) Response to Compliments

This type of speech acts includes a speaker's reactions to compliments from an interlocutor. In pragmatics, this is a key area of study because it reveals how language use is shaped by cultural norms, politeness strategies, and social relationships. Especially in the Chinese 'linguaculture', it is often said to be governed by the principle of self-denigration and other-elevation (see Gu, 1992), rooted in Confucian modesty.

(17) 哪里哪里

nǎlǐ nǎlǐ
where where

'Where, where?' (a humble response to a compliment, meaning 'not at all'; see above, Section 2.2) (Developing Chinese, Vol. 1)

(18) 您过奖了

nín guò-jiǎng le
2SG.POLITE exceed-prize COS

'You overpraise me'

(Developing Chinese, Vol. 4)

(h) Well-wishing

These expressions are used to convey good wishes for the future.

(19) 祝您用餐愉快!

zhù nín yòng-cān yúkuài
wish 2SG.POLITE have-meal happy

'Enjoy your meal!' (lit. 'wish your meal is happy')

(Developing Chinese, Vol. 3)

(20) 祝你生日快乐!

zhù nǐ shēng rì kuài lè
wish 2SG birthday happy

'Wish you a happy birthday!' (Hanyu Jiaocheng, Vol. 2)

(21) 祝你成功!

zhù nǐ chéng gōng
wish 2SG success

'Wish you success!' (Developing Chinese, Vol. 2)

Politeness strategies

(i) Terms of Address

Using appropriate terms of address is a fundamental aspect of showing respect in Chinese.

(22) 王老师

Wáng lǎo shī
Wang teacher

'Teacher/Professor Wang' (Hanyu Jiaocheng, Vol. 1)

(23) 关经理

Guān jīng lǐ
Guan manager

'Manager Guan' (Hanyu Jiaocheng, Vol. 1)

(24) 阿姨, 您好!

ā yí nín hǎo
auntie hello.POLITE

'Hello, auntie!' (a kinship term used for a non-related person to express familiarity and respect) (Hanyu Jiaocheng, Vol. 3)

(ii) Euphemisms

Euphemisms are used to discuss sensitive topics indirectly. In our sample of textbooks, we find few, but significant examples.

(25) 身体不舒服吗?

shēn tǐ bù shū fu ma
health NEG comfortable Q

'Are you feeling uncomfortable?' (不舒服 bù shū fu 'uncomfortable' is used as a euphemism for being sick) (Developing Chinese, Vol. 2)

(26) 请问, 洗手间在什么地方?

qǐng wèn xǐshǒujīān zài shénme dìfang
please ask washroom be what place

'Excuse me, where is the washroom? (洗手间 *xǐshǒujīān*, lit. 'hand-washing room' is used as a euphemism for 'toilet') (Developing Chinese, Vol. 1)

(27) 二位有什么忌口的吗?

èr wèi yǒu shénme jíkǒu
two CLF have what avoid.food

de ma?

DE Q

'Do either of you have any dietary restrictions or allergies?' / 'are there any foods you cannot eat?' (忌口 *jíkǒu* 'avoid food, be on a diet' is used to refer to something one is allergic to, or does not like eating) (Developing Chinese, Vol. 4)

(iii) Mitigation devices

This category includes all syntactic or lexical softeners (e.g. interrogative moods, modal particles, etc.) used to reduce the imposition of face-threatening acts, similarly to House and Kádár's (2021) 'downgraders'.

(28) 汉娜, 我想问一个问题, 可以吗?

Hànnà wǒ xiǎng wèn yī
Hannah 1SG want ask one

ge wèntí kěyǐ ma

CLF question can Q

'Hannah, I want to ask a question, is that okay?' (Developing Chinese, Vol. 2)
(a typical example of a syntactic mitigating device, where the interrogative tag "可以吗? *kěyǐ ma?*", lit. 'may I?', softens the imposition of a request by seeking the hearer's consent)

(29) 我们得登记一下您的信息, 这样方便您以后订餐, 您看行吗?

wǒ-men děi dēngjì yíxià nín de
1SG-PL must register a.while 2SG.POLITE DE
xìnxī zhèyàng fāngbiàn nín yǐhòu dìng-cān
details thus convenient 2SG.POLITE later order-meal
nín kàn xíng ma
2SG.POLITE see fine Q

'We need to register your details, which will make it easier for you to order meals in the future. What do you think, is that okay?' (Developing Chinese, Vol. 3)
(a compound mitigating device combining a consultative phrase "您看 *nín kàn*", lit. 'you see', functioning as 'from your perspective', with an interrogative tag "行吗?" *xíng ma?* 'is it okay?'. This structure explicitly invites the hearer's opinion and approval, thereby significantly softening the face threat of an obligatory administrative request and enhancing politeness through involvement)

(iv) *Honorifics*

Lexical items that elevate the other or humble the self.

(30) 请问您贵姓？

qǐng wèn nín guì-xìng
 please ask 2SG.POLITE valued-surname

‘May I ask, what is your (honourable) surname?’ (a formal honorific expression combining the polite request marker “请问 *qǐng wèn*” ‘may I ask’, the honorific second-person pronoun “您 *nín*”, and the honorific prefixoid “贵 *guì*” ‘valued’ attached to “姓 *xìng*” ‘surname’) (Developing Chinese, Vol. 3)

To ensure reliability and minimize individual bias, a double-blind coding procedure was implemented. Two researchers independently analysed the textbooks: one is a native speaker of Chinese with a background in pragmatics, and a former instructor of Chinese as a foreign language, while the other is a non-native, advanced L2 speaker of Chinese (a European university professor of Chinese and linguistics), thus providing a cross-linguistic perspective sensitive to potential learning difficulties. The coding process focussed first on identifying and classifying instances of the eight Tier 1 speech acts. While Tier 2 strategies — the specific linguistic means used to realize these acts — were noted during annotation, they were not systematically tallied for comparison. This decision was made because Tier 2 strategies are highly culture-specific and language-specific; their realizations vary considerably across speech communities, and the inventory of strategies in Chinese, in particular, is exceptionally rich and complex. Quantifying them uniformly would not yield meaningful comparative data. Therefore, the analysis presented here focusses solely on the frequency and distribution of the Tier 1 acts themselves. Following their own independent analysis, the two coders conducted a reconciliation meeting to compare their findings. Any discrepancies in identification or categorization were discussed until a consensus was reached. This process ensured the accuracy and consistency of the final dataset, which was then quantified for each textbook. The quantitative data (frequency counts for each category per textbook, considering only dialogue texts) were then compiled accordingly. The analysis focused on comparing the distribution and frequency of polite speech acts both within and across the two textbook series, with particular attention to variations between the elementary and intermediate levels.

Note also that, as is often the case for politeness-oriented expressions, form does not necessarily always match function: we can illustrate this with greeting formulas. The eight volumes of CFL textbooks considered here present a list of greeting expressions that reflect both universal and culturally specific politeness norms. The most frequently taught and universally recognized greetings are direct and formulaic, such as 你好 *nǐ hǎo* (‘hello’), and its honorific form 您好 *nín hǎo*. These expressions are typically introduced in beginner-level textbooks as the standard, unmarked way to initiate a conversation, particularly in formal contexts or among non-intimate acquaintances: their primary function is to acknowledge the other person’s presence and convey a baseline level of politeness. However, we also see a more nuanced and culturally embedded category consists of what appear to be *Requests* but function primarily as ritualistic *Greetings*. These are a hallmark of the Chinese communicative style, especially among people who are familiar with each other. See, for instance the following excerpt (our emphasis; we include the name of the speaker for each turn, following the convention of the original text):

- (31) a. 关经理: 王老师, 好久不见了。
Guán jīnglǐ Wáng lǎoshī
 Guan manager Wang teacher
hǎojiǔbùjiàn le
 long.time.no.see cos
 ‘Manager Guan:’ ‘Prof. Wang, long time no see.’
- b. 王老师: 王老师:啊!关经理, 欢迎!
Wáng lǎoshī ā! Guān
 Wang teacher oh Guan
jīnglǐ huānyíng
 manager welcome
 ‘Prof. Wang:’ ‘Oh!! Manager Guan, welcome!’
- c. 关经理: 您身体好吗?
Guán jīnglǐ nín shēntǐ
 Guan manager 2SG.POLITE health
hǎo ma
 good Q
 ‘Manager Guan:’ ‘How is your health?’
- d. 王老师: 很好。您身体怎么样?
Wáng lǎoshī hěn hǎo nín
 Wang teacher very good 2SG.POLITE
shēntǐ zěnmeyàng
 health how
 ‘Prof. Wang:’ ‘Very good. How about you?’
- e. 关经理: 马马虎虎。
Guán jīnglǐ mǎmǎhūhū
 Guan manager so-so
 ‘Manager Guan:’ ‘not so bad’
- f. 王老师: 最近工作忙不忙?
Wáng lǎoshī zuījīn gōngzuò máng
 Wang teacher recently work busy
bu máng
 NEG busy
 ‘Prof. Wang:’ ‘Have you been busy with work, recently?’

- g. 关经理: 不太忙。您呢?
Guán jīnglǐ bù tài máng
 Guan manager NEG too busy
nín ne
 2SG.POLITE SFP

'Manager Guan:' 'Not too busy. **What about you?**'

- h. 王老师: 刚开学, 有点儿忙。喝点儿什么? 茶还是咖啡?
Wáng lǎoshī gang kāi-xué yǒudiǎnr
 Wang teacher just start-school a.bit
máng hē diǎnr
 busy drink some
shénme chá háishi
 what tea or
kāfēi
 coffee

'Prof. Wang:' 'School has just begun, I am kind of busy. Something to drink? Tea or coffee?'

- i. 关经理: 来杯茶吧!
Guán jīnglǐ lái bēi chá
 Guan manager bring cup
chá ba
 tea SFP

'Manager Guan:' 'Let's have a cup of tea!'

(*Hanyu Jiaocheng*, Vol. 1)

In a context such as the dialogue above, questions like “how is your health?” (您身体好吗? *Nín shēntǐ hǎo ma?*) or “have you been busy with work, recently?” (最近工作忙不忙? *Zuìjìn gōngzuò máng bu máng?*) are not genuine requests for private information. They are conventional, ritualistic greetings used to express concern and maintain social rapport, with no expectation of a detailed, literal answer. For the purposes of the research described in this paper, we categorised examples of those introduced in (31) as *Greetings*, rather than *Requests*.

Moreover, two occurrences of the very same expression may correspond to different categories, again based on their function. This is the case e.g. for the above-mentioned (11) common apology expression 不好意思 *bù hǎoyìsi* ‘I’m sorry’ (lit. ‘(I) feel embarrassed’): while Zeng (2015) lists ‘mild apology’ as its first function, she mentions that it can also be used to introduce a polite request or start a conversation, to convey modesty or embarrassment, and to indicate shyness, or a sense of awkwardness. Among those, introducing a request (falling within our *Requests* category) is a commonly seen function for 不好意思 *bù hǎoyìsi*, which is often used as a mitigation device for face-threatening acts toward the interlocutor, making the request more polite and less abrupt (similarly to English *excuse me*), as in the following (constructed) example

- (32) 不好意思, 能帮我看一下这份文件吗?
bùhǎoyìsi néng bāng wǒ kàn yíxià
 sorry can help 1SG look a.while
zhè fèn wénjiàn ma
 this CLF document Q

'Excuse me, could you please help me look over this document?'

Interestingly, however, in our sample of textbooks we could not find examples as (32), i.e. where the main function of 不好意思 *bù hǎoyìsi* is to soften the tone of a request, attesting to the gap between textbook language and actual everyday use (see below, Section 3.1.2). In addition to that, as mentioned earlier (Section 2.2), 不好意思 *bù hǎoyìsi* is also used as an expression of gratitude, although somewhat apologetic. Generally speaking, whenever there is any mismatch between the typical function of an expression and its actual function in context, we prioritize the latter, in our classification: this is because what ultimately matters to speakers is the communicative target they want to reach, and this is a reflection of the function of an utterance, no matter what form it takes.

3. RESULTS

The analysis of the eight textbooks in our sample revealed a non-trivial number of polite expressions, though with notable differences in distribution across categories and proficiency levels. This dataset provides a foundational corpus for analysing the scope, sequencing, and contextualization of polite language in pedagogical materials. The subsequent analysis will compare the collected data with native speaker communicative habits and pragmatic competence goals. The results of our survey are summarized in Table 1 and Table 2.

3.1. Overall distribution and prominent categories

The data indicates that *Requests* is the most frequently occurring category across all levels and series, with a particularly notable increase in *Hanyu Jiaocheng* Vol. 3 and 4 (54 instances) and *Developing Chinese* Vol. 3 and 4 (73 instances). This is suggestive of a strong pedagogical focus on teaching to learners moving towards the intermediate level of proficiency how to formulate requests, which are indeed a crucial speech act for daily interaction. *Greetings* and *Thanking* also appear as core categories with consistently high frequencies, underscoring their foundational role in basic communicative competence. In contrast, instances of *Farewell* and *Well-wishing* expressions are relatively scarce, indicating they may be underrepresented in the current pedagogical materials: this is particularly surprising for the former category, given that concluding an interaction is, intuitively, a very frequent communicative necessity.

Table 1
Occurrences of politeness-related speech acts in the *Developing Chinese* series.

Category	Developing Chinese Vol. 1 and 2	Developing Chinese Vol. 3 and 4
Greetings	34	24
Farewell	3	4
Thanking	22	35
Apologies	5	15
Requests	38	73
Compliments	22	4
Response to Compliments	3	1
Well-wishing	9	3

Table 2
Occurrences of politeness-related speech acts in the *Hanyu Jiaocheng* series.

Category	<i>Hanyu Jiaocheng</i> Vol. 1 and 2	<i>Hanyu Jiaocheng</i> Vol. 3 and 4
Greetings	14	18
Farewell	4	6
Thanking	10	16
Apologies	4	8
Requests	22	54
Compliments	1	18
Response to Compliments	0	2
Well-wishing	1	4

Response to Compliments is the speech act with the lowest number of occurrences in both sets of textbooks: interestingly, the occurrence of responses is much less frequent than that of compliments (for instance, 22 compliments with only 3 responses in *Developing Chinese* Vol. 1 and 2). This also goes against our expectations (and compare also the data in He, 2025): given the importance of giving a contextually-appropriate response to a compliment, especially in the Chinese context, we would expect to see a number of responses more 'proportionate' to the occurrences of *Compliments*.

Also, the data show that there are some variations across proficiency levels, which may be observed when comparing the first two volumes with the third and fourth volumes in both textbook series, as already noted above for *Requests*. In the *Developing Chinese* series, the frequency of occurrence of *Apologies* increases significantly from the elementary to the intermediate level (5 vs. 15). This reflects an appropriate progression towards more complex and face-sensitive pragmatic strategies at higher proficiency levels. Conversely, the frequency of *Compliments* and *Well-wishing* expressions decreases in Vol. 3 and 4 of this series, a tendency which may imply a shift in pedagogical focus towards more 'transactionally essential' speech acts. A similar progression is evident in the *Hanyu Jiaocheng* series as well. The data from Vol. 3 and 4 show an increase in almost all categories compared to Vol. 1 and 2, most notably in *Requests*, as hinted at above (22 to 54), and *Compliments* (1 to 18). This is suggestive of a systematic effort to expand learners' pragmatic skills as they advance. A particularly evident difference between the two textbook series may be seen in the number of tokens of compliment expressions: in *Developing Chinese*, they go from 22 to 4, while in *Hanyu Jiaocheng*, as said just above, the change between proficiency levels goes in the opposite direction. This may be interpreted as a difference in the trajectory for teaching communicative functions in the two sets: if, as already proposed, a very marked decrease in the occurrence of *Compliments* may suggest a tendency to focus on speech acts which can be deemed to be more 'transactional' in nature, in *Hanyu Jiaocheng* the increase in *Compliments* might be interpreted as a 'postponement' of the introduction of two functions which are crucial in establishing and managing positive social relationship. Incidentally, this seems especially in the Chinese context, where terms of address and ritual compliments are extremely important in interaction.

3.1.1. Superficial treatment of key politeness formulas

As hinted at earlier, textbooks consistently introduce certain core politeness formulas, but the explanations are often 'standardized', and lacking depth. Indeed, despite the common perception of Chinese culture as one that highly values etiquette (but see Pan and Kádár, 2011), the explicit instruction of politeness expressions in CFL textbooks is surprisingly limited. In the teaching materials of our sample, politeness is not treated as a prominent, standalone (or even integrated) pedagogical component: instead, polite expressions are often introduced incidentally, with only occasional (and brief) notes identifying certain vocabulary items as polite terms.

A case in point is the presentation of the honorific second person pronoun 您 *nín*, typically explained as "a term of respect, the polite form of the pronoun '你 *nǐ*'" (*Hanyu Jiaocheng* Vol. 1: 45; our translation). Indeed, a critical finding of our analysis is the significant gap between the rich inventory of honorifics in the Chinese language and their inadequate introduction and illustration in our sample of textbooks. While elementary-level textbooks typically cover basic polite expressions like 请 *qǐng* 'please', 您 *nín* 'you.SG.HON' and 贵 *guì* 'your' (lit. 'precious'), they largely neglect the extensive and sophisticated system of Chinese honorifics as detailed in scholarly works, such as Gu's (1992) above-mentioned (Section 2.3) seminal framework. Textbooks appear to fail to systematically introduce these categories, their structural patterns, and the cultural logic governing their use. Consequently, learners are left with a fragmented understanding of Chinese politeness, mastering simple formulas like 谢谢 *xièxiè* 'thank you', but lacking the pragmatic understanding and linguistic tools needed to navigate more formal or nuanced social interactions where honorifics are essential for demonstrating cultural competence and respect. This omission simplifies the authentic linguistic landscape and hinders the development of advanced pragmatic skills.

We could find several instances of this tendency towards oversimplification in our sample. For example, in *Hanyu Jiaocheng* Vol. 2, when the word 哪里 *nǎli* (lit.) 'where' is introduced as the basis for a polite expression (see above, Sections 2.2 and 2.3), it is followed by a simple note: "'nǎlǐ' or 'nǎli nǎlǐ' is a polite expression in response to a compliment" (*Hanyu Jiaocheng* Vol. 2: 138; our translation). No further discussion on its context of use, communicative functions (besides its basic characterization), etc. is provided, beyond basic examples as the following one:

(33) a. 你学得不错, 有很大进步, 汉语水平提高得很快。

<i>nǐ</i>	<i>xué-de</i>	<i>bùcuò</i>	<i>yǒu</i>
2SG	learn-ADV	good	have
<i>hěn</i>	<i>dà</i>	<i>jìnbù</i>	<i>Hànyǔ</i>
very	big	progress	Chinese
<i>shuǐpíng</i>	<i>tígāo-de</i>	<i>hěn</i>	<i>kuài</i>
level	improve-ADV	very	fast

'You studied very well, you made huge progress, your level of Chinese improved fast'

b. 哪里。

nǎli
where
'I am flattered'

(*Hanyu Jiaocheng*, Vol. 2)

As shown in (33), in *Hanyu Jiaocheng* (Vol. 2) the suggested English equivalent for 哪里 *nǎli* is 'I am flattered', which is normally understood as a form of modest acceptance of a compliment, while 哪里 *nǎli* in Chinese is actually a ritual expression of rejection. While the two different approaches to responding to a compliment in Chinese and English may be considered functionally analogous, differing due to culture-specific interactional customs, students could benefit from more explicit contextualization of the use of 哪里 *nǎli*, also by making reference to general principles of Chinese politeness as the above-mentioned 'self-denigrating and other-elevating' and 'modesty' (see Sections 2.2, 2.3). Also, as already pointed out by Shi (2017) for the textbooks in her sample (Section 2.2), 哪里 *nǎli* is used (also) by young characters in our textbooks as well, and the alternative option of accepting the compliment is never proposed: thus, learners are not exposed to a sufficiently broad range of acceptable options for this function, i.e. response to a compliment. We already pointed out above (Section 2.2) that He (2025), based on a review of the literature, highlighted how the 'preferred' options in actual native speaker usage appears to be acceptance of the compliment (see Table 4 in He, 2025; see also Li and Xing, 2016, for a similar assessment): indeed, Gao (2017: 245) goes as far as questioning the utility of using 哪里 *nǎli* "as a target goal for L2 learners to acquire Chinese pragmatic competence"; similar opinions may be found e.g. in Li and Xing (2016), as well as in He (2025).

Another example is the construction '太 *tài* 'too' + adjective + 了 *le* (a sentence-final particle indicating a current relevant state)'. In *Hanyu Jiaocheng* (Vol. 2: 45), this construction is introduced as expressing either excessive degree, thus (often) dissatisfaction (as e.g. 太贵了 *tài guì le* 'too expensive'), or a high degree, for praise or emphasis, thus falling within the category *Compliments* (as e.g. in 太好了 *tài hǎo le* 'terrific', lit. 'too good' or 太好看了! *tài hǎokàn le* 'too nice'). However, the pragmatic factors which guide the choice between these two radically different interpretations, based on the meaning of the adjective and (crucially) on context, are not really elaborated upon: what is proposed in *Hanyu Jiaocheng* is merely a list of examples having a negative connotation, and a list of examples having a positive connotation, followed by the label "compliment/exclamation" between brackets. In *Developing Chinese* (Vol. 1: 50), the 太 *tài* 'too' + adjective + 了 *le* construction is simply glossed as meaning 'extremely, too', in a dialogue in which it is used in a negative sense (again, 太贵了 *tài guì le* 'too expensive'): in the rest of the textbook, and in the other volumes of this series, the same construction is also used as a compliment (as e.g. 你这些照片太棒了! *nǐ zhè-xiē zhàopiàn tài bàng le!* 'these pictures of yours are really great!'; *Developing Chinese* Vol. 2: 211). What's crucial here, in our view, is that the connection between the literal meaning of such a common construction and its pragmatic function(s) appears to be indeed overlooked, in the textbooks we considered.

The presentation of the adjective 方便 *fāngbiàn* 'convenient' is also worth discussing here. Besides its literal meaning, 方便 *fāngbiàn* is commonly used in spoken Chinese to introduce a request, softening its tone, as in the following example:

(34) 好的, 方便的话, 留一下联系方式, 有合适的房子我跟你联系。

<i>hǎode</i>	<i>fāngbiàn</i>	<i>dehuà</i>	<i>liú</i>	<i>yīxià</i>
good	convenient	if	leave	a.while
<i>liánxi</i>	<i>fāngshì</i>	<i>yǒu</i>	<i>héshì</i>	<i>de</i>
contact	method	there.be	suitable	DE
<i>fángzi</i>	<i>wǒ</i>	<i>gēn</i>	<i>nǐ</i>	<i>liánxi</i>
house	1SG	with	2SG	contact

'Great, if it's convenient for you, please leave your contact details, and I'll get in touch with you if I find a suitable property' (*Developing Chinese* Vol. 3)

In (34), we see the use of the expression 方便的话 *fāngbiàn dehuà* 'if it's convenient' as a mitigation device, with the clear intention of 'softening' the imposition. This pattern is indeed common, and in the same volume of *Developing Chinese* we find a dedicated exercise (Vol. 3: 98), where learners are encouraged to build two sentences introduced by 方便的话 *fāngbiàn dehuà*, i.e. requests. However, there is no explicit mention in this exercise, or anywhere else in the four volumes of *Developing Chinese*, of the fact that 方便的话 *fāngbiàn dehuà* actually is a polite form to introduce a request: its function is only implicitly recovered from the examples proposed. Also, 方便的话 *fāngbiàn dehuà* is not the only formula in which 方便 *fāngbiàn* is used in the context of a request. Compare:

(35) [...] 晚上我请客, 你们方便吗?

<i>wǎnshang</i>	<i>wǒ</i>	<i>qǐng</i>	<i>kè</i>	<i>nǐ-men</i>
evening	1SG	invite	guest	2SG-PL
<i>fāngbiàn</i>	<i>ma</i>			
convenient	Q			

'Tonight I want to buy dinner, is that convenient for you?'

(*Developing Chinese*, Vol. 3)

This is a different, yet also common way of using 方便 *fāngbiàn* as a form of polite language: the speaker is basically asking his addressees whether they are free, and willing to join him for dinner, in the form of an indirect invitation. This usage is also never commented upon in *Developing Chinese*, and it is never framed as polite language, nor is its function highlighted in any way. The learner can thus rely only on the examples to 'extract' the patterns and their functions, and/or on explicit instruction from the teacher, if in a classroom setting. As for *Hanyu Jiaocheng*, in the four volumes in our sample, 方便 *fāngbiàn* is only presented as an adjective meaning 'convenient' (Vol. 3), and no example of its usage in the context of polite formulas are provided.

Similarly, the expression of gratitude 辛苦你了 *xīnkǔ nǐ le* 'thank you for your hard work' (or, more literally, 'sorry to have put you through the trouble'), which has no equivalent in English (Li, 2018b), is attested only once in each of the two textbook series of our sample: in *Developing Chinese* (Vol. 2: 38) and in *Hanyu Jiaocheng* (Vol. 3: 144). In both cases, it is not presented in any way as a way to thank someone, and only the literal translation of the verb/adjective 辛苦 *xīnkǔ* 'hard, to bother' is provided in the textbooks. Once again, the textbook user can only rely on her/his intuition, or on explicit instruction from the teacher, to grasp the pragmatic function of a common polite expression.

Moreover, the CFL textbooks in our sample mostly fail to categorise euphemisms or present them within their proper, authentic pragmatic contexts of use. For instance, they seldom provide euphemistic expressions for sensitive topics (and/or discriminate between alternatives). A notable example is the diverse lexicon for "death," which includes a variety of terms like 去世 *qùshì*, 逝世 *shìshì*, 上天 *shàngtiān* (lit. 'ascend to the sky'), 与世长辞 *yǔshìchángcí* (lit. 'bid farewell forever to the world'), simple euphemistic expressions like 没了 *méi le* and 不在了 *bù zài le* (both meaning 'being no longer here'), and even more specific terms like 牺牲 *xīshēng* 'sacrifice' for martyrs, or 圆寂 *yuánjì*, specific for Buddhist monks. Learners are exposed almost only to the most direct or neutral terms, like the plainest lexeme, namely 死 *sǐ* 'die', which are however often considered taboo, thus limiting their ability to communicate appropriately in varied social situations. The simple equation of the generic term 死 *sǐ* with English 'die' conceals the social, interactional correlates of using it: while it is perfectly acceptable in most situations to say e.g. 笑死了 *xiào-sǐ le* 'I'm dying laughing', a native speaker would not use 死 *sǐ* to refer e.g. to the death of a relative, as it would be considered rude and inauspicious.

3.1.2. A gap between textbook language and contemporary authentic use

Another very significant issue is the inclusion of polite expressions that are infrequent in modern daily communication, or anyway sound old-fashioned, while also neglecting very common ones, thus creating a gap between textbook knowledge and real-world application (Zhou, 2000; Li and Xing, 2016; He, 2025). Take *Greetings* as examples: expressions like 你好 *nǐ hǎo* ‘hello’, as well as its honorific version 您好 *nín hǎo*, are usually introduced at the very beginning of elementary textbooks, where they are presented as being generic forms which may be used in virtually any situation. However, in authentic interactions among friends or close acquaintances, these can sound overly formal: they are more typical among acquaintances who haven’t met for a long time or for first-time encounters, or anyway interactions in more formal settings (e.g. in service providing). The same applies to farewells: the generic form 再见 *zàijiàn* ‘good-bye’, as well as more specific expressions like 明天见 *míngtiān jiàn* ‘see you tomorrow’ are, again, taught as standard, but their frequency in (informal) real-life interactions among native speakers may be lower than textbooks suggest. Chinese native speakers tend to prefer expressions which are specific to the context of the interaction and the relationship between the speakers, as e.g. 改天再聊 *gǎitiān zài liáo* ‘let’s chat some other time’ or else; also, when parting, another Chinese language habit is that of using an expression that shows care for the interlocutor(s), as e.g. 慢走 *mànzǒu* ‘don’t go yet’ (lit. ‘leave slowly’) or 保重 *bǎozhòng* ‘take care’ (Li and Xing, 2016, p. 151). Besides, textbooks also use somewhat outdated terms like 劳驾 *láojià* ‘excuse me’ / ‘may I trouble you’ for making requests, as in (36):

(36) 玛丽: 劳驾, 我打听一下儿, 博物馆在哪儿?

<i>Mǎlì</i>	<i>láojià</i>	<i>wǒ</i>	<i>dǎtīng</i>	<i>yíxià</i>
excuse.me	1SG	ask	a.while	
	<i>bówùguǎn</i>	<i>zài</i>	<i>nǎr</i>	
	museum	be	where	

‘Mary:’ ‘Excuse me, let me ask you something, where is the museum?’

(*Hanyu Jiaocheng*, Vol. 2)

In contemporary spoken usage, 劳驾 *láojià* has largely been replaced by more common phrases like the above-mentioned 不好意思 *bù hǎoyìsi* ‘I’m sorry’, ‘excuse me’, 打扰一下 *dǎrǎo yíxià* ‘may I bother you (for a second)’ or other polite requesting expressions: indeed, as already pointed out earlier (Section 2.3), none of the occurrences of 不好意思 *bù hǎoyìsi* in our sample of dialogues has the function of introducing a request (on the use of 不好意思 *bù hǎoyìsi* as an expression of apology, see Li and Xing, 2016). As for 打扰一下 *dǎrǎo yíxià*, this expression is mentioned only in *Developing Chinese* (Vol. 3), in the form 打扰你一下 *dǎrǎo nǐ yíxià* (with the addition of 你 *nǐ* ‘you’, spelling out the addressee): interestingly, it is presented as a way to address strangers, rather than as something introducing a request. Or, better, it is presented as a way to avoid the problem of choosing the right form of address, i.e. as an all-purpose conversation starter with strangers. Moreover, 打扰一下 *dǎrǎo yíxià*, and variants thereof, never appear elsewhere in this volume, or in any other of the textbooks of our sample, thus having a very marginal presence.

In this connection, the unit in the *Developing Chinese* series where 打扰你一下 *dǎrǎo nǐ yíxià* is introduced (Vol. 3: 15–29) is devoted mainly to the illustration of ways to address people: it stands out as offering a notable list of examples of terms of address, with contextualization, thus providing some degree of explicit (though mediated through the dialogues) instruction on this crucial aspect of politeness in Chinese. However, the dialogue does not introduce a relatively common form of request for information which is needed when meeting strangers, particularly in a formal setting: 我应该怎么称呼您? *wǒ yīnggāi zěnmē chēnghu nín?* ‘how should I address you?’ (and variants thereof). This request expression, obviously tightly connected with the pragmatic problem of knowing how to properly address people, is only indirectly mentioned in *Developing Chinese* (Vol. 3: 16), in the form 我们应该怎么称呼您的家人 *wǒmen yīnggāi zěnmē chēnghu nǐ de jiārén* ‘how should we address your relatives?’. Nowhere in the textbooks of our sample we may find 我应该怎么称呼您 *wǒ yīnggāi zěnmē chēnghu nín*, and the same function is assigned only to 你叫什么名字 *nǐ jiào shénme míngzi* ‘what’s your name’ and 你/您贵姓 *nǐ/nín guì xìng* ‘what’s your (precious) surname’ (either with the plain or with the honorific second person pronoun). However, in actual language use, 你叫什么名字 *nǐ jiào shénme míngzi* is a very direct way of asking a person’s name, and it is mostly appropriate only when talking to someone who is the same age or younger, or in a subordinate position, in an informal setting. As for 你/您贵姓 *nǐ/nín guì xìng*, while this expression is more appropriate in a formal setting, its function is commented upon only in *Hanyu Jiaocheng* (Vol. 1: 56): “[t]his is a very polite name to ask a person’s (family) name”. No such explanation is ever provided in the *Developing Chinese* series, and nowhere we find explicit indications as to the fact that 你叫什么名字 *nǐ jiào shénme míngzi* is a very direct, and even blunt way of asking someone’s name, which sounds appropriate only in specific contexts. Once again, even for a very basic function as asking someone’s name, among the first topics introduced in any language textbook, the learner is given insufficient guidance, and the picture painted does not reflect actual, pragmatically appropriate language use.

Something similar applies to expressions of gratitude. The simple fact that the above-mentioned (Section 3.1.1) Chinese expression of gratitude 谢谢 *xièxiè* is simply equated to its English translational equivalent ‘thank you’ obscures the fact that, compared to English *thank you*, 谢谢 *xièxiè* is relatively more formal and, most importantly it is not as commonly used in interactions with close friends and relatives (Kasper and Zhang, 1995), for ordinary favours: in point of fact, the excessive use of 谢谢 *xièxiè* in a friendly relationship may even sound as implying some sort of distancing, thus failing to achieve the goal of maintaining good social rapport (although, again, this may depend also on the age and background of the speaker). Interestingly, a common expression of gratitude even among people who are close, i.e. the above-mentioned 麻烦你 *máfan nǐ* (lit.) ‘bothering you’, in the textbooks of our sample, is attested only once (*Hanyu Jiaocheng* Vol. 3: 144; see above, Ex. 9). In the ‘Notes’ section of the learning unit at issue, this expression is actually translated into English as “[t]hank you for” (*Hanyu Jiaocheng* Vol. 3: 148), but the object of the note is not this expression, whose function is never made explicit (beyond this incidental translation). We shall get back to the functions of 麻烦你(您) *máfan nǐ(nín)* in the next Section.

Lastly, as for apologies, the main forms introduced by the textbooks in our sample are 对不起 *duìbuqǐ* ‘I’m sorry’ (10) and the above-mentioned 不好意思 *bù hǎoyisi*, used also in utterances to actually express gratitude (see Section 2.2; we shall get back again to the possible pragmatic functions of 对不起 *duìbuqǐ* and 不好意思 *bù hǎoyisi* in the next section). However, the common expression of apology (很)抱歉 (*hěn*) *bàoqiàn* ‘I’m (very) sorry’ is never mentioned in any of the eight volumes we considered. In actual language use, these three expressions of apology have different pragmatic connotations, and they are not always interchangeable: major factors influencing their choice are the context of use, the relationship between the speaker and the addressee, and the reason behind the apology. Thus, for instance, 不好意思 *bù hǎoyisi* tends to be perceived as less formal, and milder (being thus suitable for minor incidents), than (很)抱歉 (*hěn*) *bàoqiàn*: the latter is often used for formal apologies, acknowledging one’s mistake, which is typically a quite significant one. Indeed, (很)抱歉 (*hěn*) *bàoqiàn* is often heard in professional settings, and in the written language. Besides not mentioning (很)抱歉 (*hěn*) *bàoqiàn*, there is only one instance of 不好意思 *bù hǎoyisi* as (part of) an apology utterance in our sample (i.e. Ex. 11, from *Developing Chinese* Vol. 3): this use for 不好意思 *bù hǎoyisi* never appears in the other seven textbooks, and it is not presented as an expression of apology in *Developing Chinese*. Interestingly, in *Hanyu Jiaocheng* 不好意思 *bù hǎoyisi* may be found in the list of new words, translated into English as ‘to feel sorry’. However, there is only one instance of 不好意思 *bù hǎoyisi* in the dialogue of that unit (and, indeed, in the whole book), where it does not appear to be an expression of apology, since it is not uttered by the person who is supposed to be sorry:

(37) [...] 昨天他还来看过我。他也觉得挺不好意思的。

zuótiān tā hái lái kàn guò wǒ tā yě jué de tǐng bù hǎo yì sī de

yesterday 3SG.M also come see-EXP

wǒ tā yě jué de tǐng

1SG 3SG.M also feel very

bù hǎo yì sī de

sorry DE

[...] ‘Yesterday he also came to visit me. He also feels very sorry’

(*Hanyu Jiaocheng*, Vol. 4)

The context of this dialogue is that a fictional student, Mary, is talking about a minor road accident, in which she was hit by another student and fell off her bike. She is now saying that this student helped her on the spot, and he later came to check on her. On that occasion, he felt sorry. Thus, we believe this may not be interpreted as an expression of apology.

3.1.3. Insufficient guidance on patterns of polysemy and multiple pragmatic functions

Another issue we noticed in the CFL textbooks in our sample is that there often appears to be a failure to adequately address the polysemous nature of some politeness expressions and their varying pragmatic functions, leading to potential confusion for the learner. As noted earlier (31), questions concerning one’s health or work actually function as ritual greetings, and they are not genuine requests for information. This aligns with Edmondson et al.’s (2023) typology of speech acts, where what appears, on the surface, as a ‘request-for-information’ may actually be a phatic, ritualistic greeting. Without explicit instruction, learners may misinterpret the speaker’s intention. Compare (31) with the following example (our emphasis).

- (38) a. 工作忙吗?
gōngzuò máng ma
 work busy Q
 ‘Are you busy at work?’
- b. 不太忙。
bù tài máng
 NEG too busy
 ‘Not too busy.’
- c. 身体好吗?
shēntǐ hǎo ma
 health good Q
 ‘Is your health good?’
- d. 很好!
hěn hǎo
 very good
 ‘Very good!’
- (Hanyu Jiaocheng, Vol. 1)

Both (31) and (38) come from the same textbook, namely *Hanyu Jiaocheng* (Vol. 1). Interestingly, in the grammatical notes section, formulae as 身体好吗? *shēntǐ hǎo ma?* ‘is your health good?’ and 工作忙吗 *gōngzuò máng ma?* ‘are you busy at work?’ are presented under the heading 问候 *wèn hòu*, lit. ‘greetings’: however, this label is rendered into English as “[a]sking about someone’s well-being” (Vol. 1:19, 149), which obscures the general function of those expressions as greetings, again used to maintain good social relationships.

Another case in point are *Apologies*, which may actually have several functions. For instance, the word 对不起 *duìbuqǐ* is primarily taught as a form of apology, but, it also functions as a common ‘pre-request’ softener, used to mitigate the imposition of an upcoming question or request. See the following example (our emphasis):

- (39) 玛丽: 每天下午都有课吗?
Mǎlì: měi-tiān xiàwǔ dōu yǒu
 Mary every-day afternoon all have
kè ma
 class Q
 ‘Mary:’ ‘Are there classes every afternoon?’
- 老师: 不, 只一三五下午。
lǎoshī bù zhǐ yī sān
 Teacher NEG only one three
wǔ xiàwǔ
 five afternoon
 ‘Teacher:’ ‘No, only on Monday, Wednesday and Friday afternoon.’
- 玛丽: 对不起, 您能不能再说一遍? 我不懂“一三五”是什么意思。
Mǎlì: duìbuqǐ nín néng bù
 Mary excuse.me 2SG.POLITE can NEG
néng zài shuō yī
 can once.again say one
biàn wǒ bù dǒng
 time 1SG NEG understand
yī sān wǔ shì
 one three five COP
shénme yìsi
 what meaning

‘Mary:’	‘Excuse me, could you please say it once again? I don’t understand what you mean by “one, three, five”’				(Hanyu Jiaocheng, Vol. 2)
老师: lǎoshī	就是星期一、星期三、星期五。 jiù shì xīngqīyī wǔ xīngqīsān xīngqīwǔ just COP Monday Wednesday Xīngqīwǔ Friday				
‘Teacher:’	‘It actually means Monday, Wednesday, Friday’				

In (39), 对不起 *duìbuqǐ* is not really an apology for having done something wrong, but rather a polite preface to a request for clarification.

Another case worth mentioning, in our view, is 麻烦 *máfan* ‘trouble_{NV}, bother, troublesome’, which we introduced before as a possible marker of gratitude (9) and of a request (14). In our sample, the ‘earliest’ mention of 麻烦 *máfan* may be found in the second volume of the *Developing Chinese* series, where it is presented simply as an adjective meaning ‘troublesome, inconvenient’: none of the examples in this volume represent its use as a polite formula. In the rest of the *Developing Chinese* series, we could find only one occurrence of 麻烦 *máfan* to introduce a request:

(40) 王楠: Wáng Nán:	大卫, 麻烦你一件事, 你下午去帮我排队买张火车票可以吗? Dàwèi máfan nǐ yī jiàn David trouble 2SG one CLF shì nǐ xiàwǔ qù bāng thing 2SG afternoon go help wǒ páiduì mǎi zhāng huǒchē-piào 1SG queue buy CLF train-ticket kěyǐ ma can Q					(Developing Chinese, Vol. 4)
‘Wang Nan:’	‘David, could I trouble you with something? in the afternoon, can you queue up for me and buy me a train ticket?’					

This is, as said above, the only occurrence of 麻烦 *máfan* as a request marker in the four volumes of *Developing Chinese*: most importantly, it is found in an exercise, not in the main text of a dialogue, and its function is not made explicit anywhere, nor is any translation into English consistent with this function offered. Indeed, the point of the exercise is to teach learners how to express a guarantee, a promise (保证 *bǎozhèng*), rather than a request. Also, no example of 麻烦 *máfan* for an expression of gratitude may be found in this series. As for *Hanyu Jiaocheng*, we already mentioned earlier that (9) is the only instance of 麻烦 *máfan* as a token of *Thanking*: the same applies to (14), which is the only instance of 麻烦 *máfan* as a request marker in all the volumes of *Hanyu Jiaocheng* we considered. Moreover, just as for *Developing Chinese*, this single instance of 麻烦 *máfan* to introduce a request is not found in the main dialogue of the unit, but rather in a secondary dialogic text, entitled ‘Asking for change’ in English (Chin. 换零钱 *huàn língqián*). Thus, the main purpose of this dialogue is to teach students a specific request, i.e. break a bill, rather than framing 麻烦 *máfan* as part of a regular, common pattern to introduce requests; also, no instruction is provided as to the appropriate contexts of usage for this pattern. In *Hanyu Jiaocheng* (Vol. 3: 146), 麻烦 *máfan* is translated (in the ‘New Words’ section of a learning unit) simply as ‘trouble_v, troublesome’, even though in the main dialogue of that unit we find the only instance of 麻烦 *máfan* within an expression of gratitude. The sentence at issue (i.e. 9) is however also translated as “[t]hank you for taking the time to come here”, but again, as hinted at earlier (3.1.2), the purpose of this annotation is to illustrate the use of the verbal classifier 趟 *tàng* ‘time, occurrence’, rather than 麻烦 *máfan* and its function.

4. DISCUSSION

The data discussed above on polite language in our sample of textbooks confirms many observations made by previous studies, and highlights several more issues with how pragmatics is integrated (or, perhaps, not integrated) in coursebook design. The general impression that we can get from our analysis is that the fundamental design of

textbooks implicitly supports a framework for L2/FL language teaching in which politeness, and pragmatics in general, is seen as a peripheral, secondary component of linguistic competence. The textbooks we examined seem to be particularly lacking in explicit instruction, especially as far as sociopragmatic competence is concerned. The main points of criticism which emerged in our analysis are:

- (a) the presentation of expressions for different functions is clearly unbalanced, with an abundance of Requests, and a scarcity of Farewell and Well-Wishing expressions;
- (b) the relative weight of functions varies between proficiency levels, and also, to a more limited extent, between the two series of textbooks, with a growth of the tokens of polite language for most categories in the intermediate level textbooks, which may be indicative of a stronger focus on developing pragmatic competence;
- (c) a tendency towards strong oversimplification of polite language, with brief or no explanations, very limited variety of politeness formulas, virtually no discussion of their context of use, little or no explicit or implicit evidence of variation between speaker (as e.g. in the conventions typically followed by younger vs. older speakers) and between different types of interaction (e.g. depending on the relationship between speakers, and the actual context of communication);
- (d) use of common polite formulas which, however, are never presented or contextualized as such, and for which often just plain, literal translations are provided, thus ‘concealing’ their real pragmatic function;
- (e) the rather obvious gap between the language presented in dialogues and the actual conventions and habits of native speakers, with the introduction of forms of polite language which may sound outdated (or just more common for older speakers) and/or pragmatically inadequate in many situations, while at the same time failing to mention (or to present adequately) very common polite expressions;
- (f) the lack of proper guidance concerning the multiple functions that the same expressions may have, as e.g. the use of basic questions as a form of greeting, rather than as an actual request for information, including an appropriate contextualization of polite expressions which have no immediate equivalent in other languages (especially, in English and other languages of Europe).

In addition to the above, we may also remark that textbooks dialogues almost never use, and explain, indirect polite forms of expression which are actually very common in interactions between native speakers, as e.g. the use of 我有事 *wǒ yǒu shì* ‘I have something to do’ as a form of rejection of an invitation (which implies that no negotiation is possible, and that there may not be an actual commitment; see [Kasper and Zhang, 1995](#)). If we take the textbook as, again, one of the primary models of the target L2/FL for learners, especially if they are learning Chinese in a foreign country (see [Li, 2018b](#)), we can see that the input they receive from these sources seems inadequate for the development of proper pragmatic competence: if, as mentioned above, instruction (both implicit and explicit) in textbooks that can help learners with their sociopragmatic competence is particularly lacking, the situation is far from ideal also for pragmalinguistic competence. While the fact that polite language is not explicitly discussed is typical also of textbooks for other languages, arguably with the implicit understanding that the learner can acquire the patterns by looking at usage examples (see e.g. [Miłkowska-Samul, 2020](#) on Italian), we highlighted how, in the textbooks we examined, even the indirect instruction which may be gleaned from the polite language used in the texts (particularly, in the dialogues) appears as insufficient for the learner to obtain an adequate picture. This seems to be in line with what previous research on the development of pragmatic competence in L2/FL Chinese, which highlights that learners often fail to produce pragmatically adequate utterances, and to understand the actual function of the utterances they hear (see [Sections 1, 2.1, 2.2](#)); also, even in the absence of ‘bad pragmatics’ ([Kecskes, 2014](#)), the language used by the students has been shown to be limited in the range (and naturalness) of polite expressions, if compared to natives (see [Li, 2018b](#)).

These findings, we believe, are extremely relevant to Chinese L2/FL teaching: as pointed out e.g. in [Li \(2018b: 266\)](#), not only there appears to be a general consensus on the need to teach L2 pragmatics (and, thus, politeness) in the classroom, but, also, the existing research shows that “not only are a wide range of pragmatic features teachable, but also students who receive instruction generally outperform those who do not”, and that, in many studies, explicit teaching produces more benefit than the implicit method (i.e. relying on indirect presentation of politeness strategies). [Li \(2018b: 269\)](#) also adds that the teaching of strictly linguistic (i.e. grammar and vocabulary) and pragmatic aspects “could go hand in hand in classroom practice”, improving the learners’ communicative competence: Li also cites research which provides some support to the practice of incorporating the explicit teaching of pragmatics in the Chinese L2/FL classroom, even in study abroad settings, thus highlighting the key role that overt instruction has for learners.

Thus, we may conclude that there is an evident tendency in popular textbooks for learning Chinese, as highlighted also by previous research, to attach little importance to politeness as a component of communicative competence. In this connection, the unsystematic, inadequate and scattered observations on proper polite language, as well as the notable distance of the models presented in textbooks and actual language use are particularly revealing, and may

explain the difficulties that learners encountered in pragmatically-adequate language production and comprehension demonstrated by the existing empirical research. The fact that studies on politeness in Chinese L2/FL textbooks are still scarce, and limited in scope, further attests to the perception of politeness as a somehow 'additional', non-core component in the development of L2/FL competence.

Therefore, in light of what we said above on the vital importance of communicative skills for language socialization (see [Chang and Haugh, 2017](#)), and on the results of empirical research on Chinese L2/FL learners, we suggest that the 'traditional' principles in the design of textbooks (and curricula) be adjusted to include politeness (and, more generally, pragmatics) as a primary learning target, thereby integrating grammatical, lexical, and pragmatic aspects into a single developmental path. Specifically, based on the shortcomings we identified in the textbooks of our sample, we believe, firstly, that pragmatic functions be introduced together with the means to fulfill them. To give an example, in introducing grammar and vocabulary, an item as 在 *zài* is often introduced first as a verb ('be at'), then as a preposition ('at'), and then also as a marker of progressive aspect: similarly, expressions like the above-discussed 不好意思 *bùhǎoyìsi* or 麻烦 *máfan* could be first introduced with their 'literal' meaning, and then with their pragmatic functions, adding them in learning units based on a consistent, systematic design. Besides introducing them in dialogue texts and providing a rough translation (for textbooks that use also English or other languages, besides Chinese), 'pragmatic notes' should be used just like 'grammatical notes' to explain their function(s), including the above-mentioned 'Chinese cultural logic' which is needed to understand their proper use. Also, needless to say, the polite language introduced in texts should be updated, and should reflect the variation that actually exists for different groups of speakers (e.g. based on age or gender) and for different social contexts: to this end, the language used in textbooks should be based on the usage trends which can be extracted from analyses of corpora of current spoken Chinese, rather than relying solely on the intuition and perception of the writers, or on previously published teaching materials. Indeed, textbooks should ideally aim at developing both the pragmalinguistic and the sociopragmatics competence of learners, since the latter is necessary for a proper application of the former.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The main aim of our paper is to present a comprehensive and methodologically consistent survey of two sets of representative elementary and intermediate level Chinese L2/FL textbooks, providing both a quantitative and a qualitative analysis of polite language use. Our findings are in line with the (limited) previous research on politeness in CSL/CFL teaching, but they also bring to light more systemic issues concerning the way in which this crucial component of language is presented in textbooks. The most relevant aspects of the treatment of politeness in our sample of textbooks are the lack of systematicity in the introduction of polite formulas, the very limited explicit instruction, as well as the distance between dialogues and actual language use, which offers a partial and inaccurate picture even of the most basic communicative functions to students.

In order to address these shortcomings, we thus proposed an approach to integrating politeness into the design of textbooks, which involves a parallel consideration of grammatical/lexical and pragmatic aspects of language, following a developmental trajectory similar to those identified for morphology and syntax. This approach is consistent with most findings from research on CSL/CFL pragmatics, which demonstrate the importance of teaching in the pragmatic development of learners.

Nevertheless, our study suffers from some limitations. For starters, the same methodology could be applied to a broader sample, including more textbook series, ideally also produced outside China and designed specifically for CFL teaching, in order to highlight potential differences in the approach on politeness. Also, the taxonomy of politeness functions we used could be expanded and/or refined to include more categories, as e.g. different subtypes of compliment rejection (see [Gao, 2017](#)). Lastly, the approach we advocate here could be tested empirically by designing one or more sample learning units, employing them in a real language classroom, in order to assess its effectiveness. We leave this for further research.

CREDIT AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

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Data availability

The data for this research comes from copyrighted material (textbooks).

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