

# CHINESE EUPHEMISM ACQUISITION BY L2 LEARNERS IN INDONESIA

PEROLEHAN EUPHEMISME CINA OLEH PEMBELAJAR L2 DI INDONESIA

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**Guan Nan**

Universitas Bunda Mulia  
guannan2012@gmail.com

**Ronald Maraden Parlindungan Silalahi**

Universitas Bunda Mulia  
bomberrose@gmail.com

**Abstract.** *As one of the most widely used communication strategies, euphemism is an important language behaviour in human society. Chinese euphemism has its unique characteristics reflecting the Chinese nation's moderate and harmonious cultural psychology. This feature is particularly prominent in the daily communication applications of Chinese, so that it is often difficult for L2 learners to understand it. This article focuses on the acquisition of Chinese euphemism as the research object, and takes the inter-language pragmatics as the theoretical background, using the questionnaire as the main research method combining with the interview method to investigate the Chinese euphemism acquisition by the intermediate and advanced level students from the Chinese Department in a Jakarta private university. The results show that, in general, students have the awareness of using Chinese euphemism. The language level has positive correlation with euphemism acquisition. The error frequency in conventional euphemism is supreme to that in non-conventional euphemism. The euphemism used by the students has obvious inter-language characteristics in structure and speech strategies. Negative pragmatic transfer constraints students in euphemism acquisition. Insufficient language ability and cultural differences are the crucial obstacles. Some relevant suggestions from the perspectives of teacher-student interaction and textbook design are proposed to improve the euphemism acquisition for L2 learners.*

**Keywords:** Chinese euphemism; L2 acquisition; pragmatic transfer

**Abstrak.** *Sebagai salah satu strategi komunikasi yang paling banyak digunakan, eufemisme merupakan perilaku bahasa yang penting dalam masyarakat manusia. Eufemisme bahasa Mandarin memiliki karakteristik unik yang mencerminkan psikologi budaya bangsa Tionghoa yang moderat dan harmonis. Keunikan ini sangat menonjol dalam aplikasi komunikasi sehari-hari bahasa Mandarin, sehingga seringkali sulit bagi pelajar bahasa kedua untuk memahaminya. Makalah ini memfokus pada pemerolehan eufemisme bahasa Mandarin sebagai obyek penelitian, dan mengambil pragmatik antarbahasa sebagai latar belakang teoritis, dengan menggunakan kuesioner sebagai metode penelitian utama yang dikombinasikan dengan metode wawancara untuk menyelidiki pemerolehan eufemisme bahasa Mandarin mahasiswa tingkat menengah dan lanjutan Program Studi Bahasa Mandarin dari suatu universitas swasta di Jakarta. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa secara umum mahasiswa memiliki kesadaran dalam penggunaan eufemisme bahasa Mandarin. Tingkat kompetensi bahasa memiliki korelasi positif dengan pemerolehan eufemisme. Frekuensi kesalahan dalam eufemisme konvensional lebih tinggi daripada eufemisme non konvensional. Eufemisme yang digunakan oleh mahasiswa memiliki ciri antarbahasa yang jelas*



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*dalam struktur dan strategi tuturannya. Transfer pragmatik negatif membatasi mahasiswa dalam pemerolehan eufemisme. Kemampuan bahasa yang tidak memadai dan perbedaan budaya merupakan kendala utama. Beberapa saran yang relevan dari perspektif interaksi antara dosen dengan mahasiswa dan desain buku teks diusulkan untuk meningkatkan pemerolehan eufemisme bagi pelajar bahasa kedua.*

**Keywords:** eufemisme bahasa Mandarin; pemerolehan bahasa kedua; transfer pragmatik

## 1. INTRODUCTIONS

Language is the most important communication tool for human beings (Silalahi, 2011). Euphemism is a language phenomenon in human language that has social functions such as avoidance, politeness, cover-up and self-protection because of its special constitutional mechanism. As an essential part of a language, euphemistic expressions are needed in communication sometimes to be polite and at others to be formal (Zaid, Batool, Khan, & Mangla, 2018). People use euphemism in the daily communication according to the historical periods, social and economic welfare, as well as the psychological state of the speaker (Arif, 2015). Euphemism expressions are not just language refinements, but also tangible forms of social rules that directly or indirectly refer to language which may or may not be used in society (Mualafina, 2017).

Despite many similarities in Chinese and Indonesian euphemisms, there is difference in the dominance of the linguistic formation and the cultural background in which the euphemism is formed (Kusmiatun & Fu, 2021). The Chinese nation is famous for moderate and harmony. As the reflection, euphemism has an important position in Chinese language. It is not only the carrier of Chinese cultural psychology (Pan, 2013), but also a necessary tool for developing appropriate communication.

The use of foreign languages as a means of communication has a very significant impact (Nurdiana et al., 2022). The ultimate goal of teaching Chinese as a foreign language is to cultivate L2 learners' communicative competence in Chinese. Appropriateness is an indispensable component of verbal communication ability. Therefore, as a symbol of linguistic decentness, the proper use of euphemism is an important indicator to measure the communicative competence of L2 learners. Along with the increasing concern about culture in teaching Chinese as a foreign language, euphemisms as the content of culture also attracted the attention of researchers. In the "Functional Outline for Intermediate and Advanced Stages of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language" (Zhao, 1999) euphemistic marks have been noted to some of the entries.

The function and cultural characteristics of euphemism make it a treasure of a certain language. However, it is quite a challenge for L2 learners (Zaid, Batool, Khan, & Mangla, 2018). Inspired by the teaching practice, we found that students often make pragmatic mistakes in communication, many of which are related to the use of euphemisms (Guan & Marina, 2020). Some common factors have caused students not capable to understand or use euphemism in a proper way. It is necessary to conduct a special and systematic investigation of these factors.

## 2. METHOD

The research is conducted to the second year and above students from Chinese Department in a Jakarta private university in amount of 150 with Chinese proficiency at least Level Three. To find out their acquisition of Chinese euphemism, questionnaire is used as the main research method.

The euphemism expressions are selected from the revised Chinese Proficiency Vocabulary and Chinese Characters Outline and the Outline of the Advanced Stages of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, divided into conventional euphemisms and non-conventional euphemisms (Shu & Xu, 1995). The former includes three categories: physiology, marriage, and situation, with equal amount in the proportion of the topics. The latter contains negative euphemism expressions, including refusal, suggestion, criticism, and request. The questionnaire comprises closed questions (multiple-choice and true or false) and opened questions with words gestalt method in which the respondents answer the questions based on the given scenario.

In addition, in order to further explore the constraints of students in using Chinese euphemism, some respondents were approached by the method of discourse interview.

## 3. RESERCH

The analysis will be conducted in general and different categories.

### 3.1. OVERALL ACQUISITION OF EUPHEMISM

The first three parts of this questionnaire are a comprehensive survey of the students' euphemisms acquisition which is divided into three levels: understanding, judgment, and application. Each part has ten questions, and 10 points for each question with total score 300 points.

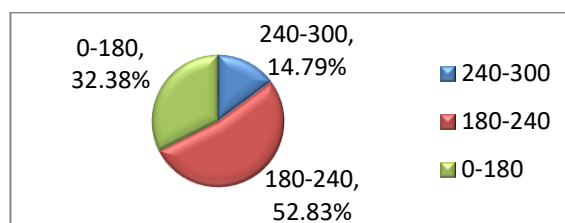


Chart 1 Chinese Euphemism Acquisition Score

The statistical results showed that the average score of the respondents was 195.36, in which 32.38% got less than 180 points, 52.83% between 180 to 240, and 14.79% scored 240 points and above. In general, intermediate and advanced students have a certain understanding of Chinese euphemism, and the acquisition level is characterized by more intermediate. Most of the respondents had the awareness of using Chinese euphemism, but their ability to understand, judge, and apply at various levels was still limited.

The scores of the respondents in the three levels of understanding, judging and application were different. The statistical results showed that the respondents had the highest score in application, followed by the understanding part, and finally the euphemism judging, which is the most difficult for the students to judge between euphemism and non-euphemism.

According to the cognitive process, the acquisition process of euphemism are understood, judged and applied, and the difficulty is assumed to increase. The statistical data showed that the average score at the judgment level was 54.68 points, which was lower than the understanding level of 66.19 points. There may be two reasons for this. One is because in the cognitive order, judgment is based on understanding, which is a deeper cognitive expression than understanding. Correct judgment of euphemism and non-euphemism is based on understanding euphemism. Second, because in the process of judging whether the euphemism is used properly, it also includes the recognition of the euphemism context and the knowledge of the contextual characteristics of a particular euphemism, that is, the judgment level also includes the inspection of appropriate use of euphemism.

### 3.2. EUPHEMISM ACQUISITION IN DIFFERENT CATEGORIES

This paper investigates from conventional/non-conventional category and different semantic categories.

#### A. Acquisition of Conventional and Non-Conventional Euphemisms

The investigation of understanding and judgment level is focused on the conventional euphemism, while the application is more focused on the non-conventional euphemism.

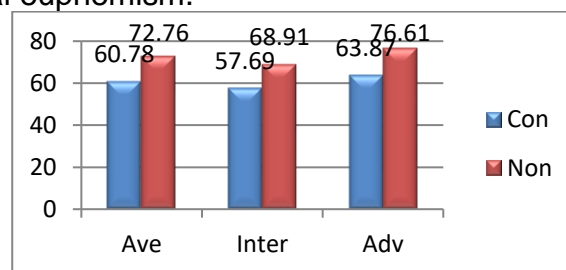


Chart 2 Acquisitions of Conventional and Non- Conventional Euphemisms

The statistical results show that, in general, whether at the intermediate level or the advanced level, students' acquisition of non-conventional euphemism is better than that of conventional euphemism. There are two reasons for this. First, there is insufficient knowledge about the Chinese conventional euphemism; secondly, there is a pragmatic transfer phenomenon in the application process of non-conventional euphemisms. Because euphemism is universal, the questionnaire at the application level also pays attention to the universality of situational setting. Thus, the positive pragmatic transfer happens at this level.

#### B. Euphemism Acquisition in Different Semantic Categories

Euphemism covers a wide range of topics. The corpus from 2 official Outlines is divided into three categories: physiology, marriage and situation. The scores of the three semantic categories are counted separately, as shown in the following chart:

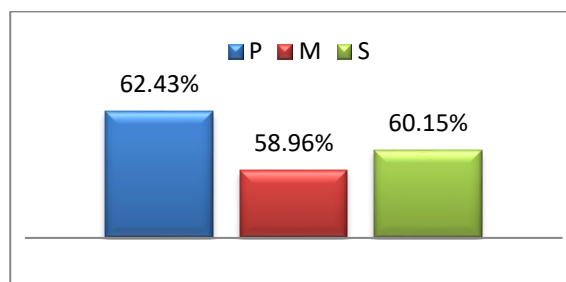


Chart 3 Euphemism Acquisitions in Different Semantic Categories

The data shows that students have a relatively average level of euphemism acquisition in the three semantic categories, and the scores fluctuate around 60%. The possible reason is that the euphemisms of the three semantic categories are universal in various cultures. For example, physiological euphemisms include categories of death, disability, and excretion. The taboo of death exists in various forms in both Chinese culture and Indonesian culture. Euphemisms in marriage include terms such as marriage and love relationships, sexual referential, etc., which are indecent assaults. While situational euphemism referring to money, poverty, and frustration are more or less encountered in many cultures. Secondly, although the euphemisms are semantically general, they are diverse in expression. The language form that can replace the same direct language may be different in the form of Chinese and Indonesian, thus the scoring rate is only at the level of the passing line.

The highest scoring rate among the three semantic categories is the physiological euphemism, followed by the situational euphemism, and finally the euphemism of marriage. This might be because of the circumvention of the physiological content, and the concept of social care for the disabled, the use of polite language for the disabled and the description of related public facilities has become a guideline, such as the use of “有需要的人士” (person in need) instead of specific “瘸子” (cripple) and “聋子” (the deaf). Similar “correct language” actions in different languages foster social people’s sensitivity to physiological euphemism. The difference is the euphemism of marriage. It is more common for sexual taboos. For example, the use of vague “relationship” instead of direct and bare “sexual intercourse”. But it is not common for the alternatives of marriage and love itself, such as the use of “建立关系” (establishing relationships) in Chinese refers to “establishing a relationship of love” and using “对某人有兴趣” (to be interested in someone) instead of straightforward “喜欢某人” (likes someone). These are the manifestations of the Chinese nation’s emotional euphemism. While in Indonesia it is common to express love directly as a symbol of courage. This is completely different from Chinese culture. Therefore, students have made more mistakes in marriage euphemisms.

### C. Influence of Chinese Proficiency on Students’ Euphemism Acquisition

In order to investigate the influence of Chinese proficiency on students’ euphemism acquisition, the students are divided by the HSK test level, which is, the 3-4 level as the intermediate group, and the 5-6 level as the advanced group. The average score of advanced group was 211.49, higher than the average score of intermediate group which was 176.35. This shows that the language level has a certain influence on students’ euphemism acquisition. It is reflected in three aspects, as shown in the following chart:

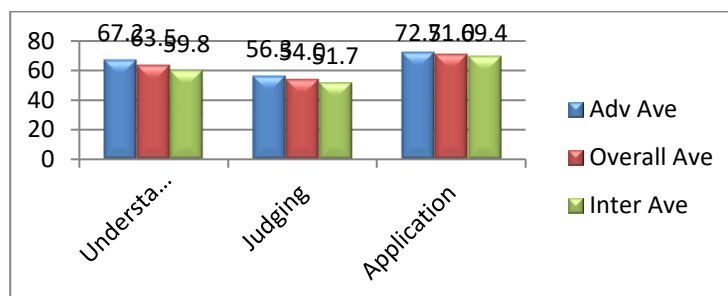


Chart 4: Three Levels of Euphemism Acquisition at Different Language Levels

The language level has a positively correlated impact on the three aspects of the euphemism acquisition. The greatest impact is on understanding, and the minimum is on application. This is because the investigation of the conventional euphemism includes the ability to understand euphemism according to the context, and relies heavily on the ability of language comprehension. However, the application aspect investigates the ability to use euphemism in the specific situation. The respondents are considered as people with certain social communication experience. Their background knowledge or cultural ability plays an important role in this part. Whether understand and recognize Chinese culture or not is the focus of this part. Because the score of application is much higher than the first two parts, it can be inferred that there are cultural transfer phenomena in this part, including positive transfer and negative transfer.

### 3.3. EUPHEMISM USAGE

The third and fourth parts of the questionnaire are focused on the use of euphemism in the implementation of indirect speech acts. The third part is to investigate speech strategies. The fourth part is the comprehensive investigation on students' identification and judgment about euphemistic context, and use of euphemism. This section will analyse the use of euphemism by students from the perspective of indirect speech acts in interlanguage, describe the pragmatic features of euphemism usage, and find out the problems in the process of using euphemism. Four common instructional indirect speech implementations are used to analyse the euphemism usage in the implementation of four types of speech acts: refusal, suggestion, criticism, and request.

#### A. Refusal Speech Act

- Sentence level

It is found that students use the mitigating language such as “对不起”, “不好意思”, and salutation to reduce the degree of refusal. Some advanced students use “真、实在、非常” to show the non-subjective will to reject or unwillingness.

- Discourse level

The refusal speech acts essentially pose a threat to the recipient. Therefore, the speaker intentionally uses pragmatic strategies according to the context to make the speech act euphemistic, thereby reducing the threat level. The following refusal strategies are used by the respondents:

- Direct strategy: 你也有啊, 你用你自己的吧。
- Explanation strategy: 老师, 对不起, 我已经约会了。
- Compensation strategy: 对不起, 我也正在用, 问问别人吧。
- Avoidance strategy: 我有点不太舒服。
- Non-face threatening act: 可以, 但是你什么时候能还我呢?

The most used strategy is explanation strategy, followed by the compensation strategy and the avoidance strategy. The less frequently used is the direct strategy and the non-face threatening act. Because the explanation strategy is a lesser one in the positive manner of courtesy, it can reduce the threat to the recipient and does not affect the negative face of the speaker. Therefore, the respondents tend to choose this strategy. The compensation strategy or the avoidance strategy is slightly more difficult in pragmatics than the explanation strategy. This is because the compensation strategy often involves the negative face of the speaker, so that there is a large difference among the respondents in choosing whether to use the compensation strategy or not. Avoidance strategy is used according to the context. The frequency of the refusal to the teacher's invitation using the compensation strategy and the avoidance strategy was significantly higher than the refusal to the classmates' request, indicating that the respondents showed some sensitivity to the power relationship. A small number of respondents chose to use the direct strategy. Since the direct strategy essentially does not use a euphemistic strategy, it shows that some students cannot understand or identify euphemistic contexts. In addition, a small number of respondents chose not to carry out face threatening act and showed the greatest degree of euphemism. Although they were reluctant but felt embarrassing and unwilling to refuse.

## B. Criticism Speech Act

Criticism speech act poses a threat to the positive face of the recipient and undermines the communicative atmosphere. In order for the communication to proceed smoothly, it is necessary for the speaker to use euphemism.

- Sentence level

Some of the respondents used mitigation, mainly in the form of preface, explanation, apology or compliment. The use of mitigation can reduce the degree of face threat of critical speech acts, which is a common way to create euphemistic effects and politeness. The frequency of using the mitigation is related to the occasion, the power relationship between the two parties, and the social distance. There is a relationship between the superior and the subordinate in the positive power relationship. The upper level criticizes the subordinates for using the mitigation language at a low frequency, and the lower level criticizes the superior for using the mitigation language at a high frequency. In the context of negative power relations, the two sides of the communication are equal, so the polite language is more often used for strangers than friends.

- Discourse level

The main criticism strategies used by respondents are:

- Blame strategy: 怎么回事, 这么不小心?
- Warning strategy: 你如果不改, 你会被炒鱿鱼。

- Command strategy: 用完要收拾好。
- Advising strategy: 刚买的就坏了，怎么办啊？
- Statement strategy: 请注意一下卫生。
- No criticism act. In this situation, some respondents face the boss's misunderstanding and respond with "Ok, I understand what you mean, I will correct it". The reason given is that "the boss is too angry to hear anything. Better talk about this later." Some are based on the consideration of the situation, and believe that there is no need to criticize. For example, the new bought hand phone was broken by a close friend, in this situation some respondents replied that "accidents are inevitable, this is just a hand phone", showing generous and euphemistic. Some are based on understanding the behaviour of the interlocutor. For example, in the situation, the respondent replies "I accept the boss's criticism" because "he will only say these words for work." Some respondents may not criticize based on cultural habits. For example, some of the respondents decided to "do nothing" when faced with the fact that their subordinates obsessed chatting online during business hours.

### C. Suggestion Speech Act

The strategies used in suggestion speech act are as follows:

- Direct strategy: 你应该去看心理医生。
- Pattern strategy: some patterns are often used, such as "小句+怎么样", "是不是可以……", "还是……吧", "小句+吧", "要不/要不然+动词结构小句", etc.
- Mitigation suggestion strategy: 如果你要的话，我可以跟你一起去。
- No suggestion act. Certain acts are regarded as a "taboo" in a specific cultural context and are not publicly mentioned. Therefore, relevant suggestions for such acts may also be deliberately avoided by the speakers. For example, about the suggestions for friends to do psychological counselling, some of the respondents chose not to act.

### D. Request Speech Act

Since one party actually intervenes in the other party's future freedom of action while issuing a "request" to the other party, although the interference is not necessarily successful, it constitutes a face threatening act. Therefore, people often adopt a euphemistic approach when implementing a request speech act to show the courtesy of "not intentionally offending". Common euphemisms include the use of mitigation, salutation, and pragmatic strategies.

- Sentence level
  - Mitigation refers to the internal adjustment language used in the core speech act to reduce the degree of offense or reduction of the request. The commonly used polite expressions are "请", "麻烦", "一点", "一下", and verb reduplication.
  - Reminder refers to the part of the speech act used to draw attention, including the salutation and reminding words. For the salutation, some respondents use "邻居" directly refer to neighbours, which show the lack of understanding about Chinese culture.



- Discourse level
  - The strategies used in request speech act are as follows:
    - Direct strategy: 对不起，声音小一点。
    - Pattern strategy: some patterns are often used, such as “能不能/可不可以……”，“……好不好/行不行”，“能帮我……吗”， etc.
    - Indirect Statement Strategy: 哇，这么晚了。
    - No request act. Say nothing, but show tired expression.
  - All the above strategies are not necessarily used separately, and some respondents with higher language proficiency use two or more strategies to implement related speech acts.

### 3.4. REASONS FOR OBSTACLES IN EUPHEMISM ACQUISITION

We learn the characteristics of interlanguage through the use of euphemism by students, and analyse the obstacles that students encountered in euphemism acquisition.

#### A. Interlanguage Characteristics in Using Euphemism

The Chinese language used by L2 learners inevitably has interlanguage characteristics, which is also evident in euphemisms during the implementation of indirect speech acts. The characteristics can be summarized from three aspects: language structure, speech strategy, and pragmatic transfer.

- Language structure:
  - The euphemism used by students is characterized by lengthy statements, heavy dependence on the expression of the conventional patterns, lack of diversity and flexibility of euphemism, incomplete language format, and misuse of sentence patterns.
- Speech strategy:
  - The frequency of direct strategy and conventional strategy is quite high, while the diversity of indirect strategy use and the frequency and flexibility of non-conventional strategy are low.
- Pragmatic transfer:
  - Because students have not enough relevant cultural background knowledge to understand Chinese context, plus lack of practical contextual experience, they may use pragmatic rules in their native language despite the Chinese contexts.

The interlanguage characteristics of the L2 learners in using Chinese euphemism distinguish it from the authentic euphemism of the native speaker and affect the expression effect. According to the above analysis, the characteristics in language structure and speech strategies are caused by language level, while the pragmatic negative transfer indicates that students have cultural limitations.

#### B. Reasons for Language Obstacles

The language obstacles first come from the limitations of the students' own Chinese proficiency. Because euphemism has the contextual characteristic, the understanding, judgment and application of euphemism are related to the interpretation of context, while the context in the questionnaire is expressed in Chinese. So the understanding of Chinese vocabulary and cultural meaning are required. In addition, the respondents'

answers to opened questions are not quite accurate, concise, or flexible. These show the restriction of language proficiency.

Secondly, the special cognitive rationale of euphemism makes euphemism itself more difficult than direct language cognition. The cognitive rationale for euphemism comes from the analysis of euphemism as a system of linguistic information systems and prototype categories. According to the theory of cognitive linguistics, language is an information system, which needs to complete the exchange of communication activities through coding-decoding. Chinese euphemism as a branch of Chinese language also constitutes a system, but because Chinese euphemism is formed in the social environment by various language means and verbal means, each euphemism contains at least two layers of information, namely surface information and internal information. So the mastery of euphemism, especially the conventional euphemism, has two levels, surface meaning and internal meaning, and the internal meaning changes due to the change of context. Therefore, Chinese euphemism has a deeper level of cognitive difficulty than direct language.

Finally, there are many improper points in textbooks, syllabuses, and teaching methods which affect students' acquisition of euphemism. The official outlines do not clearly mark most of the euphemisms or words and expressions with euphemistic functions, which makes the euphemism teaching in teaching Chinese as a foreign language lack the theoretical basis for reference. Simple translations are given in the textbooks without specific or detailed explanations. In teaching, some teachers do pay attention to the pragmatic issues when they encounter problems related to euphemism. But there are still many teachers do not emphasize the use of euphemisms.

### C. Reasons for Culture Obstacles

The process of pragmatic transfer often occurs in the thinking process of L2 learners who are not familiar with Chinese context. Negative transfer hinders students from using euphemism correctly.

The cultural obstacles first come from the understanding of the generation gap caused by the different cultural backgrounds. As a social linguistic phenomenon, euphemism is both universal and regional, and is a product of specific historical culture. Therefore, it has cultural attributes. For example, Chinese euphemism is a unique product and carrier of the Han nationality, which is full of moderate and hierarchical concept. This national cultural concept may not have or differ in other cultures. People's cultural psychology and value orientation determine whether people use euphemism, and how much euphemism is used.

Chinese euphemism is a reflection of Chinese culture on social and political systems, social life concepts, religions, and literary aesthetics. For example, the hierarchical dignity in the political system is reflected in the euphemism and name of death. The order of harmony in life is very important. Chinese people pay great attention to maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships in communication. They do not like to be straightforward. At the same time, they are modest and cautious, using elegant Chinese. Respecting others is considered to be a good performance of personal cultivation. In language, it is necessary to be euphemistic. The

expression of one's emotions, attitudes, positions, opinions, etc. must be turned around and twisted. While Indonesian culture is greatly influenced by Western culture and religious culture, students have a tradition of "equality" and thus lack of understanding of power relations and social distance. Differences in cultural background create difficulties in understanding.

Cultural obstacles also stem from a lack of relevant knowledge. Due to the differences in background culture between L2 learners and native Chinese, in order to make the Chinese euphemism information system work effectively, the cognitive respondents involved in it need to establish corresponding background knowledge, including the understanding of pragmatic parameters in Chinese culture under the Chinese environment, and the common context used in euphemism. At present, "Chinese Euphemism Dictionary" (Zhang, 1996) and "Practical Euphemism Dictionary" (Wang, 2005) can help Chinese learners to establish a more complete Chinese euphemism pattern. However, the readers of such books are targeted at native speakers of Chinese. The difficulty of reading is quite much for L2 learners, and the context of the non-conventional euphemisms with higher frequency is not explained. Therefore, a dictionary of euphemisms suitable for L2 learners is necessary. This dictionary is both a cultural dictionary and an assistant for students to learn Chinese euphemism.

#### **4. RESULT**

As for the overall situation of Chinese euphemism acquisition by intermediate and advanced students from Chinese Department in a Jakarta private university, the level is at the passing line. Among the three levels of euphemism acquisition, the euphemism application is the best, and pragmatic transfer plays an important role in it. It is difficult for students to distinguish between euphemism and non-euphemism.

The acquisition of conventional euphemism is more difficult than non-conventional euphemism. It is because conventional euphemism has a specific cultural form, and the difficulty of pragmatic transfer in conventional euphemism is higher than that of non-conventional euphemism. The language proficiency level has a certain influence on the students' use of euphemism. L2 learners are subject to certain factors when using euphemism and their expressions are not flexible enough, with a series of interlanguage features. Students have obstacles in both Chinese language and culture in the process of Chinese euphemism acquisition.

Based on the above analysis we suggest increasing the emphasis on euphemism, identifying euphemisms in relevant outlines, syllabuses, and textbooks, and providing more detailed explanations. Teachers can improve the teaching effect by enhancing the input of relevant cultural background knowledge, using Chinese-foreign language comparison, context setting, and other teaching methods for different types of euphemisms.

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